

Names for the Messiah sermon series
Mighty God/Everlasting Father
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One of the things I love about Jesus and that I really don't like about Jesus is that we can never fully know him. There are so many names for Jesus in the Bible that we mortal humans are incapable of knowing him like we can know each other. I've told you before about how I remember knowing Jesus for the first time. I was in college, a bit adrift in my faith, not really sure who I was or what I was supposed to be doing with this one wild and wonderful life I'd been given. Then, while visiting a church, I heard a sermon about Jesus as the good shepherd who guides his wayward sheep down the right path. And I responded with a hardy, "Baa!" which is sheep for "Amen!" I got to know Jesus as the good shepherd.

Since then, I've come to know Jesus in a plethora of other ways. When I've been sick, he's been the Great Physician. When I've been drowning, he's been my savior. When I felt disconnected from my faith and lost in the darkness, he's been the Light that has served as a beacon, helping me avoid the jagged rocks of life and guiding me safely to shore. And yet, I still don't know Jesus as much as I would like.

For this sermon series, we're looking at some other names for Jesus in the Bible as a way to understand – as much as we can – who's coming into this world again on Dec. 25. Last week, Trish talked about the name "Wonderful Counselor." On Dec. 22, I'll spend some time unpacking the provocative "Prince of Peace." Today, we're doing double duty as we look at the names "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father."

First, a disclaimer. The names at which we are looking actually weren't written about Jesus directly, but were a prophecy from Isaiah, who was predicting the coming of a king. This king would embody God's divinity on earth, carrying out God's edicts and mandates as he cared for God's people. So, it's a bit artificial to say that Isaiah was describing Jesus. Isaiah was describing someone who God had promised to God's people, someone who would establish authority, who would rule with justice and righteousness, who would embody the qualities of the names Isaiah gives him. We Christians believe that person is Jesus of Nazareth.

Let's look at the first name, Mighty God. Remember, kings were the supreme authority in those days. That may seem strange to us because the only kings we know are Elvis and Burger King, and while I like the Whopper and "Blue Suede Shoes," I'm not ready to equate either of them with God. But back in those days, it was commonplace to think that the king was the human embodiment of a divine deity. We see this a lot in the Roman empire, where emperors were thought to possess divine qualities. The same is true for other religions that existed around the time that Isaiah would have written this prophecy. So, equating a human king with a divine god was no big deal.

What's intriguing about this title is the adjective "mighty." It is defined as "possessing great and impressive power or strength, especially on account of size." As one of our Sermon Talkback participants said, the word "mighty" makes her think of someone who's eaten their spinach. We use the word today as a way to express something to the extreme degree. "She's mighty nice." "That Whopper was mighty tasty." "This sermon is mighty long." But that's different than what Isaiah meant.

In using "mighty," Isaiah was emphasizing the kind of authority the coming king would exercise over his people. In our highly militarized and weaponized world today, we would

assume that a mighty king would possess a mighty army with mighty weapons and mighty fighters. We picture this king as a divine commander-in-chief who would lead his nation in a crusade of conquest. Might makes right, right?

But that's not necessarily what Isaiah was saying here. Sure, we have evidence in scripture of God commanding the Israelites to go to war with and conquer surrounding nations, but honestly, those passages are more about what the people thought God wanted than what God actually wanted. Back then, if you went to war and won, God must have wanted you to win. And if you went to war and lost, well, you've done something to make God mighty mad at you. There was never any thought given to the fact that God may not have wanted war at all.

But Isaiah and the other prophets paint a different picture of God whom this coming king will embody. The God they show us is a compassionate God who seeks economic fairness toward the poor and needy. This God, as Isaiah says, will rule with justice and righteousness, which has nothing to do with military might and everything to do with making sure the poor are fed and the homeless have a place to live.

This is what Jesus came to show us. People were disappointed that he didn't swoop down from heaven and conquer the Romans, but that's not the king we have been promised. Jesus brought with him the kind of might that lifted up the lowly, that loosened the shackles of the oppressed, that told those on the margins that they matter, too. He subverted the might of the Roman empire, not by conquering it, but exposing it for what it was: an attempt by government leaders to go against God's commandments of justice and righteousness for everyone. Jesus' authority as didn't come from the end of a gun or a cannon; he didn't exercise his might in coercive or violent ways. Instead, he loved with a mighty love, he showed his mighty power to heal, he reached out with mighty compassion.

Walter Brueggemann, who wrote the book on which this series is based, said that Jesus exercised his might against the agents of death, both human and spiritual. He stilled raging storms, he drove out demons from people's bodies, he healed diseases, he stood up to corrupt government leaders. In essence, he came to speak a mighty word to what Brueggemann calls "the agents of uncreation," which seek to undo God's creative work in this world. God didn't create this world so that people could starve and be told they don't belong and be treated unfairly because of their differences. The might Jesus will bring to us again this Christmas reminds us that we have been called to be mighty in the ways we live out what Jesus taught us. In essence, we are called to be co-creators of God's new kingdom, which will not be marked by military might, but by the mighty power of God's radical, sacrificial love shown to us through Jesus Christ.

In light of this, the question we need to ask ourselves is, "Are we participating in God's re-creation, or in this world's efforts toward uncreation?" In other words, do our actions and decisions seek to undo God's creation, which is marked by harmony and respect and justice and righteousness, or do they lend to God's ongoing creation? This is evident in how we treat each other, the causes we support, and how we put our resources to work. We can do some mighty damage or we can make a mighty difference.

I'm gonna say this right up front about our second title today, "Everlasting Father." It's problematic. Remember, this wasn't written directly about Jesus, but was a prophecy which people believe Jesus has fulfilled. But how can Jesus be the father when Jesus is the son? There's a very deep rabbit hole here around the issue of the Trinity and the relationship between father and son that I'm going to refuse to jump into this morning, or else we might be here until next

Sunday. But I want to name that with this title, we have to do some mental gymnastics to get it to fit Jesus.

“Everlasting Father” actually fits with our first title. Just as the king is the human embodiment of God for the kingdom, so the father is the human embodiment of the king for the family. I readily acknowledge the discomfort of the patriarchal language here and to explicit name the fact that any human description of God falls woefully short. There are many maternal images for God in scripture, because I believe God contains as many feminine qualities as masculine. But in this example, the father was the ruler of the household and was expected to conduct himself in the same way the king ruled in the kingdom, which was supposed to be modeled after how God ruled over God’s people.

That model is not one of an iron-fisted dictatorship. Instead, it’s the role of protector, of nurturer, of provider. One of the best images I can think of for God in the Bible is that of a potter. Several places in scripture God is likened to a potter who shapes and molds Israel into the people God wants them to be. Likewise, when fathers are true to their parental calling, they are shaping their children and those under their care to be faithful followers.

I can think of many ways my father and my grandfathers have shaped me and influenced the person I am today, and it was always by example. Case in point: When I would go to work with my dad on Saturdays, he always stopped to talk with the security guard at the front gate. He didn’t have to do that; he could have driven his car right on through with just a wave. But I learned from his example that everyone deserves to be treated with respect.

Jesus has set the example for us, as well. It’s an example that is timeless, everlasting, because the needs of the people back then are the same as the needs of people now: to be seen, to be heard, to be loved, to be taken care of. This doesn’t just apply to our nuclear or biological family. Jesus extends this divine provision to everyone who’s a part of our family of faith, those in this sanctuary and those across the world. We are to share parental love with each other, making sure that each has what they need to participate in God’s ongoing creativity.

I hope you learned a new name for Jesus today, or maybe had a familiar name reinforced. Remember, these are just two of many, many names that we have for Jesus. But, in the end, here’s where I find my source of hope. I may never know all the names for Jesus, but he knows my name. And that’s enough.