

“Everlasting Father”**Isaiah 9:6****The Rev. Dr. Rob Joy****Grace Church****Columbiana, Ohio****December 23, 2018****4th Sunday of Advent**

What royal and majestic phrases these four are: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” How familiar they are to us! We see them on Advent and Christmas banners, and Hallmark has made profitable use of them on Christmas cards. What we might not know, and what Hallmark Corporation probably doesn’t know is that these words were often used ceremonially when a new king came to power in the Middle East long ago. The words were likely used when King Hezekiah became king and even longer ago when pharaohs became rulers. It was meant to be the highest praise anyone could give, and express the hopes of the kingdom for what would happen during the rule of the new king. We all want someone who is a “Wonderful Counselor,” that is a ruler who would be wise and insightful, who would know just what to do. We want an earthly representative of our “Mighty God” in the flesh, that this person is so close to God as to know the mind of God and exercise the highest earthly power. We want a ruler who is like a loving Father to his subjects. We want a Prince of Peace who will make for the things of peace in the kingdom.

The third phrase, “Everlasting Father,” seems one of the hardest to fit onto the personhood of Jesus. What was the early Church thinking when they read this passage written 700 years before Jesus arrived on the scene? What they were thinking was these royal titles applied to Jesus, the Son of God, the rightful king of Israel, who was so mighty nature obeyed him, even death could not hold him. But “Everlasting Father” seems a stretch for us, doesn’t it?

We have such a difficult time making “Everlasting Father” fit Jesus because we have such a strong foundation in the Trinity. The Apostle’s Creed, and the Nicene Creed and others reinforce this notion that “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” are three separate and distinct persons, yet perfectly co-equal in power and authority. While that is absolutely true, I believe, when it comes to Jesus and his Heavenly Father, “the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.” And that is what his early followers saw in the life of Jesus. He was so like his Father it was easy to apply. Ever meet a son that people said about him, “He’s a chip off the old block.” That was how they felt about Jesus. Jesus himself said, “If you have seen the son, you have seen the Father.”

In Israel, it was always attributed to the responsibility of the king to administrate justice, to defend the cause of the poor (because no one else would),

deliver those in need and crush the oppressor. That's all in Psalm 72. Psalm 82 asks God to do the same thing. So, there is an almost perfect parallel in the responsibilities of the earthly king and the heavenly God. This "Everlasting Father," in Jesus, is earthly and divine, and guarantees the safety and prosperity of the clan, family, and nation. The king over Israel was to be a "shepherd king" to the people who were as helpless as sheep, like little children. Psalm 23 reminds us of God's care over us as a shepherd king. And we look to that psalm when we feel most in need and most vulnerable.

God also, in Psalm 68, takes care of the orphan as a loving Father would. To parallel this in the New Testament, John 14:18 tells us that Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." And Jesus in several places calls his followers his children. So Jesus clearly picks up the task of God in being a Father.

But some might say, "But Pastor Rob, what about the Trinity? Doesn't that define the persons of the Trinity as separate?" Of course, it does, but that does not mean absolutely all the tasks and abilities of the persons of the Trinity don't overlap sometimes. They can share some functions, indeed they do and each one expresses God's love, grace, redemption, and forgiveness among other functions. The Greek term is "perichoresis" and comes from the ancient term describing the cooperation of all involved in a ring dance, which was kind of a folk dance. All held hands and danced around in a circle. No one leads. All take part. All share. All are equal. We can see the Trinity in the perichoretic relationship. But what is amazing is that God invites us to join in this dance as well, even though we aren't equal to God in any way. God's love involves us all and wants all of us to take part in the great plan of redemption for the world and the entire cosmos. I think that is very cool that God thinks enough of us wee humans to invite us to participate in what God is doing. What a privilege. Seems like something a loving Father would do, doesn't it?

Jesus, as our Everlasting Father says he will never abandon us. In Matthew 28 he tells his followers, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." So, live in peace and confidence and let your life reflect that you are part of this divine dance with God in reforming, redeeming, saving this universe, humanity, the animals, the plants, and all of Creation. It has all fallen. It is all decaying. It all needs redeemed. It is all redeemed in Jesus.

Sometimes I see folks who, if they ever knew that Jesus is our "Everlasting Father" seem to have apparently forgotten it entirely. What does that look like when we forget Jesus is our Everlasting Father? I can best only talk about what men look like who are *not* realizing God's grace is given to them. Let me tell you about two of them I encountered the other day; two grumpy old men. I'm not picking on grumpy old men. I confess I am half a step away from that, and sometimes, I'm there. Man, am I there!

Grumpy old man #1 encounter was in Home Depot. I was just buying a paintbrush. This fellow was at the lone checkout that had a cashier. That alone can make you grumpy. He had a rolling cart that had one piece of pipe on it. I could see the receipt beside the pipe. “Are you returning that?” the friendly cashier asked. “Yeah.” “Please, you’ll have to go to the service desk at . . .” “I ain’t goin’ ta no blankety-blank service desk! You handle this thing right here!” “Sir, I can’t return it here. I’m not set up for that. You have to go over to . . .” “I told ya I ain’t going over ta no service desk!” He glared at her, as if she was the one being rude. His face was bright red and contorted. He looked like an orc from *The Lord of the Rings*. It was clear an impasse had been established. She looked at me. “I just have this paint brush,” I said and I paid for it. She asked if I wanted a bag. I said “No. I’m easy,” and walked past the guy as I smiled. As I left I heard him say, “I wanna see the manager over here right now!” as his hands were clenched in rage. “I agree! You need to see the manager right now!” she said and paged the manager. I hope it got resolved. The guy was giving all the indicators showing he was ready to go physical with his rage. Not a good thing.

Grumpy old man #2 was at Marc’s. There were a boatload of shoppers and three checkouts open. We were all jockeying our shopping carts for position. No, they aren’t buggies! Buggies have a top and are pulled by ponies. We were all desperately seeking a checkout line with the fewest customers: this we call “fun.” One cashier jumped into a closed line and opened it but left the “closed” sign pulled across the opening. She said to the guy in front of me, “You and the gentleman behind you (me) can go, but don’t open the line and then I’m done.” An older man pulled up behind me, grumbled as he slid the “closed” sign over and moved in behind me. “Please sir, don’t push the sign over . . .” she said. “Why the blazes (he used a different word than blazes) can’t I be in this line? They’re in line!” he snarled and stared at the cashier. “It’s OK sir, you can go, but don’t let anyone behind you. I’m closed after you.” He was very quick to point out to those behind him that this line was now closed and they’d have to go somewhere else! I thought, “Wow! Just Wow! I guess you got your’s.”

Both of these guys, were very angry. Why? They were afraid. They were afraid they weren’t going to be taken care of. They weren’t going to get what they needed.

I believe most anger can be tracked to being afraid. The problem is you start believing what the world says. The world says, “You’re not safe. You’re not provided for. You don’t have what you need and won’t get it. No one cares about you. You’re not important. You’re no good. You are not valued. You are not loved. And if you’re a child, or even an adult, you might hear this message inside your head: “Jimmy’s got more toys than you!”

But is that reality? Not if you're a Christian. If you live in faith not fear, you live in the realization that "You are safe. You are provided for. You have what you need and will always get what you need. God cares about you and so do others. You are important. You are good. You are valued. You are loved. Jimmy and you will have what you need.

Let's make this more personal. When you're out there in the world and it's frustrating and you find yourself getting angry, whether in the shopping line or in a line of traffic, ask yourself "Wait a minute. What am I afraid of?" No guy will ever admit to being afraid when he is angry, and he'll always try to act like his anger is some kind of a righteous crusade, but bottom line, it almost always is not. He's afraid for himself or someone else. Remember, Jesus said as our Everlasting Father: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Ever, ever, ever. So let's make this personal and repeat after me, if you would.

I am safe.

I am provided for.

I have what I need

or

I will be able

to get what I need.

I am not alone.

I am loved.

I am valued.

I am treasured.

God treasures *me*.

All is well.

I am blessed.

Do you think you're not treasured by God? Not a person of value? That God doesn't love you? Really? Do you think God, in Jesus, would come to earth and die on the cross for someone God did not treasure? No way. That did not happen. Jesus came and went willingly to the cross to save his treasure, to pay the price to redeem his treasure, to buy back his treasure. What is this treasure? It is you and me and everyone else, the entire world. That's how valuable you are! And nothing you can do changes that. So just relax. Take a deep breath. Enjoy the long lines this time of year. Think of it as an opportunity to make new friends. Ok, that might be pushing it. But pray, certainly pray for the cashiers. Please know God is standing in line with you, wherever you are. Stop being afraid and live in confidence of God as our Everlasting Father. Amen.