

First Sunday in Advent – December 3, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

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Isaiah 9:6 (NIV)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ;

We often use the term "Wonderful" to talk about something that is really enjoyable – after a pleasing musical selection Lawrence Welk would say, "Wonderful, Wonderful." But Isaiah means something far greater than that when he calls the Lord by this name. To appreciate what it means that Jesus is called "Wonderful," we must understand two important facets of the term.

First, a wonder is, by definition, a miracle. If something is full of wonder, it is beyond human ability; it is something supernatural, miraculous. If something is wonderful, it is beyond what we are able to do. Therefore, the Lord is Wonderful because He, the Son of God, accomplishing miracles that only He can do. Second: If something is full of wonder, it is beyond human reasoning-it may well be so wonderful and godly that we cannot sense it or see it, but can only trust that it is true. So, something is wonderful because it is beyond what we are able to sense.

We must keep these two meanings of "wonderful" in mind: Beyond our ability to do and beyond our ability to sense. The Lord is Wonderful not because He always appears to be wonderful or sensible, but because of who He is and what He does.

I. The Wonder of Isaiah 9:6

Our text describes the wonder of our Lord in this way: "And the government will be on His shoulders." Our Savior is a King unlike any other. A king rules by keeping all things under his feet. He holds the authority and then directs others to do the labor. He commands the treasurer to make the payments. He commands his citizens to keep the laws, while he may consider himself above the law. He commands his soldiers to keep the country safe, even if they must pay for it with their own lives. That is the duty of the people, to die for the life of the king. The king keeps all things under His feet.

Not our Savior King: the government is on His shoulders. He is the One who makes the payment for us. He is the One who keeps God's Laws for us because we could not. He is the One who keeps us safe by laying down His life for us: This King dies for His citizens. He does so because it must be this way. We cannot conquer sin, death and the devil; if we marched out against it as one united front, we would still fail. But our King can defeat these foes: So rather than keep Himself above the fray and our problems beneath Him, He puts our sin upon His shoulders and bears it to the cross. He lifts us out of the mire of our sin and carries us as a shepherd bears an injured sheep. This is why the King is Wonderful: He carries His kingdom upon His shoulders for the good of His people.

II. The Wonder of Luke 1:26-38

Luke 1:26-38 describes more about the wonderful one. Most likely, you know this story well:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27) to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28) The angel went to

her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29) Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30) But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31) You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32) He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33) and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." 34) "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35) The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36) Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37) For nothing is impossible with God." 38) "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

This story is wonderful in both ways: A great miracle takes place in this text, but one so wonderful that it lies not just beyond our ability, but beyond our sight and understanding.

Behold the wonderful miracle! Gabriel announces the Word of God to Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus, the Savior; and Jesus is conceived in Mary by the Holy Ghost. The miracles here are so astounding that we easily dismiss them because we do not understand them. A virgin has conceived, and that is a miracle in itself; but far more miraculous is the Baby in her womb. That Child, no more than a few microscopic cells at the moment, is the Son of God. The life just begun in Mary is Mary's Creator from eternity; and though He will die, He will reign forever and ever.

But how? How can this be? It is far too wonderful-it is far too beyond natural happenings!

How can this be? The angel tells us: "With God nothing will be impossible."

Oh, this text is full of wonder in the other way as well: It's far beyond our understanding to see this taking place, and so the natural mind begins to raise all kinds of doubts, "It can't be true because it doesn't make sense! A young virgin girl in Nazareth is far too insignificant for such a great privilege and responsibility. Furthermore, it looks so scandalous-an unwed mother conceiving the Christ-child!"

Yes, it looks and appears nonsensical to us, but not because it isn't true. It is so hard to believe because it is far too wonderful for sinners like us to comprehend. He is far too Wonderful for us to believe in Him.

At least, we cannot believe in Him without His help. But look at Mary's wonderful response: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." This is not a statement of reason, but of faith. Mary does not reject the scenario because of her virginity, nor does she opt out because of the difficult months and years that certainly lie ahead. Rather than look at such reasonable things, she trusts in the Word that the angel declares; for as the Lord announces to Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus, by His Word He gives her the faith to believe it.

III. The Wonder of Calvary

If it is hard to believe that something Wonderful is happening when Gabriel appears to Mary, it is even more so to see any wonder at Calvary. The wondrous miracle on that hill is hidden beneath layer upon layer of shame and humiliation. To all appearances, the One on the cross is a beaten, bloodied criminal, one more casualty to the brutality of Roman rule. There is no triumph or glory to be seen, just a horrible death to behold.

But the One on the cross is called Wonderful, and His death has a miraculous purpose. As He bears the government upon His shoulders, He bears our sin upon Himself and dies with it there. He redeems the world

that day, for He pays the price for sin-a wonder far beyond our ability to do. He conquers death, too, for the grave cannot hold Him in the ground. Thus the devil is likewise defeated and stripped of his weapons. This is the wonder of Calvary, for that terrible day is the day of victory over sin and death. We cannot see it, and our rational minds want to dismiss it as the untimely death of a virtuous teacher. But by faith we know: The crucifixion is full of wonder. The Wonderful One redeems us there, despite all appearances.

IV. It's a Wonderful Life

Therefore, dear friends, you have a wonderful life, because the One called Wonderful has added you to His kingdom. He has made you a part of His wonderful kingdom by His work in Holy Baptism; there He has joined you to His death and carried you through His tomb on His shoulders. He speaks to you His Word-the same powerful Word that created the heavens and the earth, that healed the sick and raised the dead; and He says to you with His Word, "I forgive you all of your sins." This King who rules by serving His servants invites you to His table and feeds you His Supper, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. This is your Savior, and this is what He does for you.

Therefore as Christians we have a wonderful life. Ah, but here's the rub. Our life often seems anything but wonderful. For one thing, we've got to live with ourselves. We know what the Lord expects of us through his word. And we also know that our obedience doesn't exactly qualify as wondrous. There's the tendency to gossip about other people, or the inclination to judge people and assume the worst about them. There's the sin of covetousness that makes you wish for more than you have, and selfishness which makes you resist the thought of giving more to help others. There's laziness and lust and resentment and pride and all sorts of sins that find their way into our daily routine. Even though they may not be real troubling to our conscience anymore they still bother us a bit. And that makes our life less than wonderful.

And then of course our daily routine can seem far from wonderful, because daily routines are so, well, routine. There's the commute to work with the sun in your eyes and the crazy driver cutting you off. There's the pile of papers to push around the desk. There's the load of laundry and the pile of dishes. There are those story problems in Algebra 2 that you know you're never going to have to use in real life. Even when life produces few complaints, it can also produce a feeling of insignificance-as if you're not really doing anything that has any sort of impact in life, as if you could disappear and no one would notice. You might have a lot of adjectives to describe your life, but "wonderful" may not be one of them.

And even our worship may appear to be less than a wonderful experience. A sleepy 9:00 a.m. service or a less-than-packed Wednesday evening in Advent may leave us feeling disappointed that the service was somehow lacking, far from wondrous.

And what about our lives in general? Life often produces a few complaints along the way. Rarely are you free from worry and anxiety-either for yourself or for others. There's the threat of accident and crime. There's the bothersome influenza or far more terrible diseases. There's always trouble to be had. And since we're conditioned to believe that "wonderful" is the same as being "care-free," the anxieties and troubles preach to us that life isn't wonderful at all.

But, dear Christians, you know better than this. We don't let appearances define what is really true. We let the Lord do so in His Word. Remember that Christ is called Wonderful, and remember what that means: Beyond our understanding and often beyond our sight, our Lord Jesus is at work for our salvation.

This was certainly true for Mary. Once the angel left her, to all appearances she was still a young girl who lived in Nazareth-hardly wonderful in appearance. But she had the Word of God, the Lord's own promise

that she was now the mother of the Savior. It was beyond her sight and beyond her understanding, but she had the Word.

This was certainly true at Calvary. To the eye, the death of Jesus was completely devoid of glory, so much so that the disciples fled and hid. But despite all appearances, the promise of the Lord remained: Beyond human sight and understanding, this death was the victory over sin and death. The disciples would have the privilege of seeing the risen Christ just three days later; as you wait to see Him, do not miss the Lord's precious benediction, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Therefore, dear friends, often beyond your sight and understanding, your life is wonderful. Why? Because the One called Wonderful has won your salvation, and He is here for your good. Like Mary, you have His Word to trust despite all appearances; and His Word declares wonderful things.

Christ is here with His Word for you. He adds it to water in Holy Baptism and washes your sins away. He declares in the Absolution that you are forgiven for all of your sins. He attaches His Word to bread and wine, to give you His body and blood for forgiveness. You cannot see Him here, and His work is quite beyond our understanding. But, like Mary, you have His Word; and by His Word He declares you forgiven. Although you see all too well your sinfulness and failings, God looks upon you and sees only righteousness and holiness. Wonderful righteousness and holiness.

True, the daily routine seems far from wonderful because it seems far from glamorous. And it may be true as well that our efforts in daily life have little effect upon the course of this world. But that is no matter: We are not here to have our works judged significant by the world, but to do what God has given us to do. And because your Wonderful Savior has taken away your sin and clothed you in His righteousness, the Lord looks upon you with favor. He sees the commute, the stack of papers, the loads of laundry and the story problems; but He does not call them humdrum or insignificant. He calls them holy and righteous works, precious in His sight, because Christ has made you His holy and righteous people.

It is true as well that worship may not always seem all that lively and wonderful-especially in those dark winter months or when attendance is smaller than it should be. But the wonder here is not based on appearance, but presence. The Lord is here, present in His Word and Sacraments to forgive your sins. He is here, giving you eternal life. He makes this service full of life indeed; He makes this worship wonderful.

And it is true that the cares and troubles of this world make life seem far from wonderful, but you know this trick of the devil. He uses troubles and afflictions that you can see and feel in order to distract you from the grace and faith that you cannot see. But in such afflictions, you have the Word of God. You know that your Savior is called Wonderful. You know that He has borne your sins upon His shoulder to the cross. You know that He bears you in His arms even now and declares, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). Situations will change and afflictions will come and go. But the Lord is with you: You have His Word on it.

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful. This Advent and Christmas, take some time to peer into the manger scene. You will see figurines of shepherds, Mary, Joseph, animals and the Babe. Except possibly for an angel, it will look very earthly and nothing more. But despite all appearances, that Child is the Son of God. Despite all appearances, He wins your salvation on the cross. Far beyond what you see, He is present performing miraculous wonders, giving you forgiveness and faith and salvation. It's no wonder Isaiah calls him Wonderful. And that's why we can call him wonderful too. Amen.