



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Wonderful Counselor

SCRIPTURE:
Isaiah 9:2-7

Dec. 3, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

It was cold. Bitterly cold. And just for record, I tend to run warm so if I am cold, most everybody has to be cold. I was in Alaska outside of Anchorage and it was February. I was there speaking to a group of high-school students from the presbytery of the Yukon, the Presbyterian churches in the upper part of Alaska. We were there for a weekend retreat that started Friday night and ended with worship on Sunday. The leaders had put me in a cabin by myself with a sleeping bag. The cabin had a small electric heater and even though I had it on full power, the little heater could not warm up the cabin. That first night, Friday, I slept in my clothes and my jacket in the sleeping bag which was one of those mummy-type bags with just my face showing and sure enough, I could see my breath—inside the cabin!

The young people and adults at the retreat were delightful and I was so honored to be there. On the second and final night of the weekend, I was determined to try to be warmer so I left the small space heater on all day. That night when I got to the cabin, it felt warmer but still not warm, so I went to sleep once again with my clothes and jacket on inside the mummy bag. I had finally fallen asleep when I heard a knock on my cabin door.

“Rodger, Rodger!” The young voice was urgent. “Is everything all right?” I asked. “Yes,” she said, “but you have to come out here.” “Now?” I asked. “Yes! You have to see this. Everyone is out here.” “Outside?” I asked. “Yes,” the young voice said even more urgently. “Hurry. You have to see this!” And I remember unzipping the sleeping bag and immediately feeling the cold in the cabin. I opened the door and there were two high-school girls standing there and they said,

“You have to come down to the lake! We’re all there!” And of course, I asked, “Why?” And they said, “Hurry. You’ll see!” So I followed, walking in their footsteps on the snow- and ice-packed trail, making my way down to the lake, keeping my head down watching where I was stepping in the middle of the night in February in Alaska.

The lake had long since frozen over and I walked out on the lake following my two teenage guides and sure enough, there in the middle of the lake was the whole conference—about 150 of us—young people and adults all together. They were huddled together trying to keep warm and I joined them and then one of the young women looked at me and smiled and said, “See?!” And I said, “See, what?!” And they said, “Look up!” And I did. I had been looking down the entire time.

I saw the most awesome sight. It was the Northern Lights, the aurora borealis. I had seen the Northern Lights before but never like this. It was as if a giant curtain was draped across the entire black sky and the curtain was moving and dancing and every once in a while, it was as if God would grab the edge of the curtain and shake it and with each ripple in the sky, the curtain would turn bright fluorescent green, yellow, blue and purple. Everyone was looking up. There were ‘ooohs’ and ‘aaahs.’ Most of them were native Alaskans. They told me later they had never seen the Northern Lights like this. During one moment, the curtain of lights seemed to move even more dramatically—violently even—and one young man shouted, “You go, God!” and we broke out into cheers. It was an awe-some moment. It was a wonder-full moment.

So as we embark this Advent, this time of expectation and anticipation and waiting for Jesus to be born, we read a description from the

prophet Isaiah about a king who is to be born. Now to be sure, the prophet is not thinking about Jesus Christ. He is describing the coming of a new King for Judah. The Jewish people are in darkness—suffering under the rule of the Assyrians—and Isaiah says a new day is dawning for a child will be born to us. We Christians read Isaiah’s words and we see Jesus, God in human form, coming to us. Isaiah has four names, four descriptions, for this new king. The first one: wonderful counselor.

The child will be wonderful. Wonder full. Full of wonder. Throughout his life, Jesus will inspire. Through him, wonders and signs will be done. We have stories in the gospels of Jesus preaching and teaching and healing and doing signs and wonders. Wonder full.

Counselor. Think less about our therapeutic notion of counselor and more about one who governs. Bible scholar and friend Walter Brueggemann says the term “counselor” here refers more to the exercise of government—the capacity to administer, to plan, and to rule with justice and righteousness. Think of “counselor” more in a political sense.

Remember that “political” which comes from the Greek language, literally means the “affairs of the people.” Political describes how people live with one another. How resources are shared among each other. How decisions are made together for the good of the people. For many of us, “political” carries negative connotations but that is not what Isaiah means. For Isaiah, wonderful counselor means one who governs, who leads with wonder.

So it follows that if the first name for Jesus is “wonderful counselor,” then we who follow Jesus should embody the same. We should care about how those whom we elect govern and lead conduct themselves.

When founding father Thomas Jefferson first used the phrase, “separation of church and state,” in 1802 in a letter to a group of Baptists in Connecticut who were discriminated against because they were the religious minority, Jefferson was clear that the government had no business favoring one particular religion over an-

other. He never said that people of faith should not be involved in governance. If we understand “political” to mean the “affairs of the people” then we have an obligation to be involved in how our nation is governed to be sure that all peoples are treated with fairness and justice and righteousness.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus himself describes his mission in this way. He quotes from Isaiah and says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19, quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2).

Good news to the poor. Release to the captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. Set the oppressed free. That’s all about the affairs of the people. That’s all political. As followers of Jesus the wonderful counselor, we are political because Jesus was political.

In a few moments, we will be welcomed to the Lord’s table to celebrate communion. The fact that Jesus invites all people to his table is a political act. Tomorrow morning when we open our Village Church Food Pantry and Clothes Closet, that is a political act. When we invite children and families to come to our preschools at our Mission and Antioch campuses and our child care at our 99th Street campus, that is political because we are caring for others.

What we must not be is partisan. That’s different. To be partisan is to favor a particular party or candidate or ideology. The church of Jesus Christ has no business being partisan. I know there are some churches across the United States who have no problem telling their members that to be a follower of Jesus you have to be a member of the Republican party or the Democratic party or to vote for a particular person. You will not hear that from this pulpit or from your leadership. But you will hear our invitation to be political because as followers of Jesus we are called to care about and for all of God’s children by Jesus who himself is Wonderful Counselor.

We stood out there on the frozen lake for a

good two and a half hours. What I realized after a few minutes is that the group, all 150 of us, acted like an amoeba of sorts. We were all huddled together not wanting to miss this incredible display and at the same time, trying to stay warm. To care for each other, the whole group would act like one body. The people in the middle of the group were warm and toasty and the people on the outside of the group were freezing

cold. After a few minutes, those on the outside would be absorbed into the middle and those on the inside would move to the outside. All the while looking up and oohing and aaahing. That's what the people of Jesus do because we are called to follow one who is Wonderful Counselor. You go, God!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.