

Sermon #1,176: Isaiah 9:6-7, St. Luke 2:19-20
12-25-15, Christmas Day, Bethany-Princeton MN
(Pulpit Hymn: ELH #150, "In This Our Happy Christmastide")

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT: PONDER-PRAY-PRAISE

The Text: Isaiah 9:6-7, St. Luke 2:19-20. For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Grace be unto you, and peace in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the name above all names. Amen.

In the Bible's accounts of what we call the Christmas Story, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the name.

Mary and Joseph are to name Him JESUS. They shall call His name Immanuel, the prophet says; and the meaning of this name is God With Us. He is Christ the Lord, Christ "the Christ" being the same as Messiah. He will be called the Son of the Highest. He will be called the Son of God. Simeon recognizes Him to be the Lord's Christ.

We even hear from the prophet Isaiah, who lived 700 years before Christ, other names that belong to the Messiah: "**Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.**" He does not say they are many names for Him, but he introduces all these titles with: "**His name,**" singular, "**shall be called ...**" All these names are summed up in one the one name, Jesus. The prophet Isaiah tells us why there is all this emphasis on the name: In order to call upon Him.

When it comes to the Christmas story, we sort of forget this part. We are focused on how weak, helpless and vulnerable the Babe was. We

think of all that Mary had to do for Him, all that Joseph had to do, all that could go wrong, from contagious diseases present in a Bethlehem overcrowded with travelers from who-knows-where, to a teen-age mother learning how to nurse, to King Herod's trained soldiers seeking to kill Him. This Child is the one in need of prayers! He needs to be prayed for, more than being called upon for help, isn't that the position He is in?

Well, we're going to leave this question hanging right now, we're going to leave the Christ Child there in His weakness and helplessness.

This business of calling upon the name of the Lord is the theme of the second commandment. The commandments are directed to you. What are you doing? So in the second commandment, which is obviously about the name of God and how you use it, God is asking you: How do you use the name of the Lord? Do you call upon His name? Do you call upon Him with confidence? Do you praise Him and give glory to Him?

With the second commandment you can certainly focus on the things that Martin Luther's catechism explanation says that God forbids, such as sinful swearing, being careless or thoughtless in your use of the name of God, practicing witchcraft or satanic arts (which includes psychics, the horoscope and the zodiac, etc.), and being led astray in worship by those who *"lie and deceive by His name."* These things are important to avoid. Where the second commandment is written in the Bible, Exodus 20, God adds to this commandment the threat, ***"for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain,"*** to emphasize that although the world wants to persuade you that these are small sins, they are actually very serious sins in the eyes of God.

But the point is not to make you nervous about everything you say. In the Old Testament they understood that God's name is holy, but then they became afraid to use it. But now He has revealed His true nature in Jesus, even in the name of Jesus! ***"There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we [shall] be saved" (Ac 4:12).***

God has revealed His name for you to call upon Him. The commandment is asking: How are your prayers? Are you calling upon Him?

We find ourselves answering that are our prayer life isn't wonderful. We don't often call upon His name, and when we do it isn't with a

great deal of confidence. Not because we aren't confident in what God can do, but perhaps it's because we aren't sure God wants to hear us and to help us. Having a bad conscience has a lot to do with this. If you have burned a friend in the past, you are reluctant to go to him for help; why would he help you? You know that your history with God has a lot of baggage to it. You haven't done what you said you would. You haven't been loyal to Him like you promised. You've been a disappointment to God, if He was expecting you to live like His child, you've burned Him.

It isn't only in our specific prayers, though. When it comes to the subject of praise and giving thanks, most people would say their life is lacking in praise. You go around oppressed with a spirit of heaviness, carrying a burden. You want to be thankful, full of thanks, but mostly you're full of worry. The thanks dies on your lips – adding to your guilt.

So let us return to the weak and helpless Christ Child. Instead of having His name called upon for help, wasn't He in need of prayers? This is the great mystery of the Incarnation, as we sing in the Christmas hymns: ***“the Word becomes incarnate and yet remains on high,”*** and ***“within the manger doth He lie who reigns eternally on high.”*** Undoubtedly Mary prayed, even just for help with this Child. She had learned from the Psalms, the prayer-book of the Bible, that ***“the LORD will hear when I call to Him” (Ps 4:3)***, and: ***“the LORD is near to all those who call upon Him” (Ps 145:18)***.

But now there is something new in her prayer life. She had received a visit from the shepherds who told what the angel host said. ***“Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.”*** What was she pondering? Everything about Her Son, the God-Man, the Savior. As a baby He was in need from her, yet in so doing He was giving everything to her, redeeming her body and soul, being her Salvation.

So where does praise begin? It begins with this pondering what has been revealed. The shepherds told her ***“what the Lord hath made known unto us.”*** This is where prayer begins: not with what you say to God, but with pondering what He says to you. It is hearing from Him.

When you listen to the Law it tells you what to pray for, what should be the first thing you ask Him for: forgiveness and help to do better. The Law prepares you for the Gospel, and this should be most of

what you ponder and dwell on: that God loves you so much that He has given you His Son. This brings us back to Isaiah 9. All these names for Christ, which are summed up in the one name Jesus, are there to help unfold to you the fullness of grace:

- That He is “**Wonderful**” for you. Nothing more wonderful than having your sins taken away so that you are beautiful to God again.
- That He is your “**Counselor,**” the one who consoles and comforts you best of all, and gives you a good conscience.
- That He is “**the Mighty God**” – stronger than the devil and death, not by power but by His suffering and dying for you.
- That he is “**the Everlasting Father,**” loving you as His child forever and ever.
- That He is “**the Prince of Peace,**” making your peace with God for you Himself, giving you true peace on earth, peace that the world can’t give.

The secret to a life of prayer and praise begins with contemplating all of this, reflecting upon His gifts, receiving His gifts and enjoying them. The devil wants to turn people – especially men and especially “busy” people – away from this contemplation and reflection, this pondering, persuading you it is a waste of time, not getting things done, not practical. But the devil is turning you away from hearing God’s love, hearing that He forgives you, being cleansed in your conscience, receiving His strength. Without this everything goes wrong!

Just look at the shepherds, and you will see what follows the pondering: praising and giving Him thanks. “**And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.**”

This is not some virtue that was typical of shepherds. This ability to praise was a gift; it was given to them. It is a fruit of faith, which began with the Gospel being told unto them. Praise is simply speaking back to God the things He first speaks to you. It comes from God to you first. So this is a gift from Him, that you praise Him.

So when you are going around with a spirit of heaviness, God gives you praise in its place. When you are full of worry, then God gives you to be full of thanks in spite of all the anxiety you might feel. It isn't that He magically or mysteriously gives you this feeling. He directs you to His Word, to ponder on its truths and His wonderful works for you. Through His Word, He works the praise and thanks that you offer Him.

His Name is His Word, where He reveals your salvation in Jesus Christ. Call upon His name – the name of Jesus – just as His virgin mother did. Do not be too proud to kneel before Him, as the wizened old shepherds did. This is praise that the angels are in awe of.

Prayer: Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory. (Psalm 115:1) Amen!