

December 4, 2024 – Isaiah 9:1-7 & Matthew 7:24-29

What does the word “wonderful” mean? Well, in common American English, the word “wonderful” can be used in a lot of different circumstances. I might say, for example, that I had a wonderful dinner before the service tonight. I might describe having taken a wonderful vacation to Disneyworld. I might even say that I am blessed to be the pastor of a wonderful congregation.

In all of these examples, I'm using the word “wonderful” to simply say that something is “really good.” I had a really good meal. I had a really good vacation. I have a really good congregation. And, in American English, that's a perfectly appropriate use of the word.

But, in reality, that's not what the word means. To say that something is wonderful is to say that it is full of wonders. And a “wonder” is quite a bit more significant than something that is just really good. That meal may have been good, but neither its preparation nor its flavor nor its nutritional value was a “wonder”. Disneyworld may claim to be the most magical place on earth, but it does not actually contain real magicians performing real wonders. And, I'm sorry, but as great as you all are, this church does not perform miraculous wonders on a regular basis.

We don't use the word wonderful to mean that something or someone is actually full of wonders. But here's the thing: the Bible does. When the Bible refers to something or someone doing wonders or being wonderful, it's not a figure of speech. It actually means that the thing is miraculous. That the one doing it is capable of divine power.

And so we come to the topic for tonight's sermon. Throughout the four weeks of Advent, we're going to be examining the four names assigned to Jesus in Isaiah chapter 9. These aren't official, legal names. They're more like titles that describe Jesus' work, both his work during his earthly ministry and the work he still does in his church today.

And the first of these titles is “wonderful counselor.” Jesus is a wonderful counselor. And this isn't simply saying that Jesus is a really good counselor. That he's smart and talented and does a good job. It's saying that Jesus is a counselor who does wonders.

The same wonders that God has always done. Because, throughout the Old Testament, the Lord is described as a God of wonders.

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Moses praised God, saying, *“Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”*

When King Darius sees Daniel miraculously saved from the lions, he fully acknowledges God's power by saying, *“He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”*

And when the psalmist cries out to God for help in Psalm 77, he grounds that appeal in the fact that, *“You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.”*

The God of Israel is a God of wonders. And he uses those wonders to save his people. To save them from Pharaoh. To save them from the mouth of lions. To save them from whatever their need, when they cry out to him in prayer.

And so, this God of wonders is also a wonderful counselor to his people. Which is to say, he performs wonders, and on the basis of those wonders, we can trust his counsel. David himself spells that out in Psalm 119:129: *“Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.”* A God who can back up his words with wonders is a God you should listen to and obey.

Which was fundamentally the foolish sin that Adam and Eve fell into in the garden. Here they are standing on a perfect earth with perfect bodies in a perfect garden that has everything they need. They have seen the wonders of God's creative work first hand. Adam has seen the wonder of his wife being formed from his own rib. They have met the God of wonders face to face. They know his testimonies are wonderful.

And yet, who do they listen to? The serpent. The devil. Who has done no wonders. He has no track record with them of any kind. They have no reason to love to him. To trust him. To fear him. They have no reason to listen to him at all.

And yet they do. Why? Because he tells them what they want to hear. He tells something that would be wonderful – that would be full of wonders – if it were true. “Eat this fruit and you will become like God.” That is indeed a wonder... if it happens.

But it doesn't. It's a lie. Like everything the devil says. The devil is not a wonderful counselor. He is a deceitful counselor. He is a shameful counselor. He is a harmful counselor. He is a sorrowful counselor. Because all his words bring us are lies and shame and destruction and sadness.

And yet, we still listen. No different than Adam and Eve. We know the truth, but we listen to the lie. Because it's what we want to hear. And for that disobedience, for that utter foolishness, we deserve death. The God of wonders should do a wonder and wipe us out of existence. Send us all to join the devil and his minions in the prison of hell.

But he doesn't. Instead, he promises Isaiah to send a child who will be a wonderful counselor. A man who will not only provide counsel, but back up that counsel with wonders. Divine wonders. Miracles and signs from the heavens. That only God himself could do.

Jesus tells the crowd in Matthew 7 that everyone who hears his words and does them is like a man who builds his house on the rock. The man who builds his house on the rock has a trustworthy foundation, because he knows the rock has the power to hold the house together, even in the midst of flood and wind.

To build anywhere else is to build on sand. Which is a foolish thing to do, because the sand has no strength to hold the house together. Flood and wind will quickly bring it down.

Adam and Eve built their house on the sand. They built their house on the lies of the devil. And it collapsed on them. It killed them and all their descendants. They were fools to build their house on the lies of the devil. And all of humanity has suffered for it. Great was the fall of their house.

Jesus asks the crowd to build their house on him. For he is a wonderful counselor. Not just smart or talented or good at his job. Not just a really good counselor. A counselor who can do wonders.

And they recognize that fact, at first. The crowds were astonished at his teaching. He taught them as one who had authority, not as their scribes. He taught as one who could back up his words with wonders. He taught as one whose counsel could be trusted. More so than any human scribe's.

Yet, when those same scribes told those crowds a lie that they wanted to hear, they followed the counsel of the scribes, not of Jesus. You see, the lie of Satan was still working on them. Just as it is still working on us, even today.

And so, this wonderful counselor performed yet another wonder. He went to the cross and he died for the very people he was teaching. He died and he took their sin upon himself. He died and he took our sin upon himself. He performed a wonder and forgave us. Washed us clean by his own blood.

And then he did yet another wonder and rose on the third day. Because he truly is a wonderful counselor. And he is immensely trustworthy in his counsel. For the wonders he has done could only be done by God himself.

So we gather this evening and hear his counsel to us once again. For we are foolish people, who listen to lies and chase after whatever our itching ears want to hear. We disobey the God who created us. We sin against the God whose testimonies are wonderful.

We gather this evening and we hear his wonderful counsel. His counsel that God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. His counsel to repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. His counsel that, by his work on the cross, you are forgiven. Amen.