

The Heart of God

1. Warm-up Question: People are fascinating. They often surprise us. On Sunday, Jeff talked about how he often finds himself wondering what it would be like to be someone else – to feel what they feel, to see as they see – for just ten minutes. If God allowed you to do that, who would you choose to become for ten minutes?
2. People are complex and mysterious, and so is God. Most of us want to know what God is really like. Much of the Bible is devoted to that question. Right now we're in the midst of a sermon series based on a famous Christmas prophecy where the Prophet Isaiah describes Jesus the Messiah using four key descriptors. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called ***Wonderful Counselor, Might God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.***" Isaiah 9:6. These four descriptors are what historians call "throne names." When an ancient king ascended to the throne, he was assigned various titles, i.e., throne names, meant to capture the essence of who he was.
 - a. This past Sunday we focused on Jesus' third throne name – Everlasting Father. We're used to thinking of Jesus as the Son, not the Father. But Jesus said,

"If you know me, you will know my Father also." John 14:7.

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." John 14:9.

"The Father and I are one." John 10:30.

What do you think these verses mean? How are the Son and the Father the same?

- b. When Isaiah calls the Messiah "Everlasting Father," he seems to be saying that, if we really want to know what God (and thus Jesus) are like, we have to realize that they have the heart of a good, good Father. The point, Jeff suggested, is not that God is somehow more male than female. Elsewhere Isaiah uses Mother imagery for God. In Isaiah 66:13, God says, "As a mother comforts a child, so will I comfort you." So the point is not about gender. The point is that God is like an ideal Father or Mother. In your own way of thinking about God, do you tend to see God as being more male than female? Does it matter?
3. If Jesus and God are like an ideal Father, as Isaiah 9:6 affirms, we then have to ask, "What does that tell us about who God is and what God is like?" Jeff offered three suggestions. ***First, Good Fathers – and Mothers – have to make important decisions for us that we often do not understand, yet still we trust them.***
 - a. Can you think of a time when your father or mother made a difficult decision for you that you could not understand? Tell us about it.
 - b. The Bible repeatedly calls us "children of God." By definition, there are lots of things children do not and cannot understand. On a scale of 1 to 10, how comfortable are you with the idea that there will be many things that God allows

to happen that you will not and cannot understand. Tell us your number and explain why you picked that number.

- c. Jeff told about a time he had to decide to euthanize his beloved dog named Mercy. He described how heavy that decision felt, yet he knew it was his sacred “parental” responsibility to make the decision in Mercy’s best interest, even if she could never understand. He said he sensed that Mercy trusted him, even in that moment, because throughout her life she had experienced so much good from him. Tell us about a time when God seems to have done something in your life that you do not and cannot understand. Do you trust what God did? Why?
4. ***Second, Good Fathers – and Mothers – delight in watching us grow, stepping back to give us space to come into our own.*** In other words, a good parent is not a helicopter parent. Our Gospel lesson provides an excellent example. Read Luke 1:16-38, as printed on p. 3.
- a. God deliberately thrust Mary into a very difficult situation, rather than shielding her from it. Why did God do that? When all was said and done, do you think Mary was glad God didn’t shield her from such a challenging life? Why?
 - b. Tell us about a time your parents let you spread your wings and fly, despite the risk you would crash and burn.
 - c. If a good Father or Mother has to resist the urge to constantly intervene to save their child from pain, setbacks, and challenges, do you think the same is true of God? How do you feel about that? Do you wish God was a helicopter parent?
 - d. Describe a great hardship you’ve faced in life and how that helped you grow and develop.
5. **Third, good Fathers – and Mothers – never, ever give up on us, even when we’re at our worst.** According to Interpreters Bible Commentary, when Isaiah refers to God and Jesus as being “Everlasting God,” the point is not about God’s eternal nature, but rather about God’s eternal commitment to his children that “neither time nor death can destroy.” The Commentary suggests a more precise translation would be “Forever Father.”
- a. Good parents offer unconditional love no matter what a child does. To illustrate, Jeff gave the example of the Unabomber’s Mom who, even after he was convicted of multiple murders, wrote to him in prison and said, “No matter what happens, my love for you will be there for a lifetime.” Did your parents offer that to you? How did it feel? Do you sense that God loves you in the same way? How does that feel?
 - b. Jeff suggested that God’s forever love genuinely means forever. Based on verses like I Peter 3:19, I Peter 4:6, and Ephesians 4:7, he suggested that Jesus will keep

returning to hell until everyone finally chooses to leave, never giving up on anyone. What do you think of that? How do you see it?

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.