



# **“To Us a Child Is Born”: Sermon on Isaiah 9:6**

*Afternoon of Christmas Day  
(December 25, 1531)<sup>1</sup>*

MARTIN LUTHER

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. (Isaiah 9:6; NIV)

[EARLIER]<sup>2</sup> TODAY WE HEARD THE [CHRISTMAS] STORY AND WHAT IT IS ABOUT. Enough of that. Now you will hear how to make use of it. So we take up the words of the prophet. The holy prophet sings this song: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”

You heard yesterday how this child belongs to us and how we are to receive him in order properly to understand this article [of the faith]: “Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of [the Virgin] Mary.” We are always to add, “For us.” For whom was he conceived and born? For whom did he suffer and die? For us, for us, for us! Always add us! That is why the fathers rightly put the word [in the creed]: “And in Jesus Christ, *our* Lord.” We should relate this word to every sentence: conceived for us and born for us, suffered for us and raised for us, ascended for us

<sup>1</sup>The original text for this sermon (in Latin and German) is in WA 34/2:508-514. The translation is by Frederick J. Gaiser. A contemporary German version is available in Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. 3, *Ausgewählte Predigten* (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1935) 54-58.

<sup>2</sup>Words in brackets are not in the original text but are provided for clarity in this English version.

*This is the fourth in a series of sermons by Martin Luther, hitherto unavailable in English, published by Word & World in 1996 to observe the 450th anniversary of the death of the reformer.*

and sitting at the right [hand of God] for us. For [it is no accident that] the words, “I believe in God, [the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth],” [are followed by,] “And in Jesus [Christ his only Son] *our* Lord.”<sup>3</sup> With these words, we seek to take him unto ourselves, to make him *our* Lord, the head of *our* family, *our* father. Everything [in the creed] stands under this “For us.” It is like when I say, “And in Jesus Christ,” and must add in my mind the “I believe.”<sup>4</sup> In the same way, this word “*our* Lord” must be included with all [the following] sentences so they don’t just stand there naked. They are all about us. Christ didn’t need these works. He would have remained a lord quite well without them. Rather, his conception and birth, his suffering and death, his ascension and sitting at the right hand are all for *our* benefit. They belong to us. Note that well!

That is why Isaiah says, “To us a child is born, to us a son is given.” It is like when women [approach a baby’s cradle and] say, “Oh, a baby! What is it?” And I answer, “It’s a boy – and he’s ours!” What an incredible thing to say, that all of us should somehow be the mothers of one whom we have not carried [in our womb]! He is given to us as though he were our own son. How proud and honored we are that he is *our* son, that he belongs to us. But it is not enough that he is “born” to us; he is also “given” to us. What does “given” mean? He is a [pure] gift, a present. There is nothing I have to give or pay in return. Woe to the godless and ungrateful world that disdains this gift.

It says in the Bible: “A virgin shall bear a son.”<sup>5</sup> And he will be mine just as surely as ten guilders someone might give me. How shall we not believe this, when all the prophets have borne witness [to it]? And now we *have* the gift, and we still don’t believe. Shame on you!<sup>6</sup> We are not worthy of hearing one word about him! Consider these two words: “born” and “given.” A son, given; a child, born! And he was born of Mary [the virgin]. That [such] a son would be born was to be a sign – as even the Jews believe.

What will he be called? “The government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” That is too much for one sermon. Moreover, you have it better in the book than I can preach it [now].<sup>7</sup> But that is what he is called; and he is a lord. That is just what the angels said [to the shepherds]: “He is [Christ], the Lord.”<sup>8</sup> And no ordinary lord; for one whom the angels call “Lord” is a genuine Lord – not only over human beings, but even over the angels. The angels get it right: “To *you* is

<sup>3</sup>The original text indicates that words are omitted here. The context strongly suggests the additions made here in English.

<sup>4</sup>Unlike the contemporary English version of the Apostles’ Creed, in which the second article begins with “I believe in Jesus Christ...,” the original wording is simply, “And in Jesus Christ our Lord....”

<sup>5</sup>Isa 7:14.

<sup>6</sup>The German phrase is the strange “*Pfui dich molandt*,” which occurs often in Luther. According to a note in WA 29:713 (to WA 29:547, lines 24-25), it is simply “*Pfui dich mal an!*” which would be something like, “Shame on you now!” or even “Yuck!”

<sup>7</sup>According to the note in *Ausgewählte Predigten* (65), Luther refers here to his sermon on Isa 9:2-7 published in 1526.

<sup>8</sup>Luke 2:10-11.

born this day a Savior.”<sup>9</sup> “But [*your* Savior],” [they say], “is Lord of *both* you and us.”

Isaiah, however, stays down here [on earth, saying], “He is the kind of lord who takes the government on his shoulder—and thus a genuine lord.” Let whoever can figure out what that means! A unique and wonderful lord, who wears his authority around his neck! This shows how the rule of Christ differs from the kingdoms of the world. For Christ says, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them.”<sup>10</sup> They have to exercise power, to rule strictly, and make use of the law; but they do not need to fleece and flail<sup>11</sup> [people]. [All] secular governments have to rule and punish with severity; but it is [only] the villains and tyrants who fleece and flail [their people]. In the latter case, the subjects have to carry these lords, magistrates, heads of families, etc., on *their* shoulders. And they do *have* to carry them, or the tyrants will be on them with blows and executioners. But we are speaking here of good rulers, not of tyrants. Yet even the good authorities are carried on the shoulders of their subjects. But the rule of that Son who was born to us works the other way around: he carries us! We rest on his shoulders; he is our bearer. See how Isaiah turns everything around, contrary to the customs of the world. Where is Christ’s rule, his land, and his people? Our duke’s rule includes Saxony, Thuringia, and Meissen.<sup>12</sup> But Christ’s rule includes all believers, of whom he is Lord. So *we* are his people and his land. And where is his government? On his shoulder! This is wonderful. Christ’s kingdom is not under his feet, nor is it in Rome or in Babylon; it is on his shoulder.

There is no way I can describe this. If someone asks, “Where is Christ’s rule? Is it in Rome? Compostela?<sup>13</sup> Wittenberg?” [the answer is,] “Of course!” Briefly put, it is on his shoulder! We see artists’ renditions of this, but I would advise the painters to put the church on the child’s shoulders rather than the cross.

We just have to put up with the fact that the godless papists, the rabble, and the peasants<sup>14</sup> all have our word and sacraments. But only those are Christians who are on his shoulder, that is, those who firmly trust him and allow themselves to be carried by him like the lost sheep. To sum up: no one is a Christian who does not rest on the shoulder of Christ. This is what Isaiah said. This means that I believe that he has paid everything for me, that my sins and my death are his cross. Would that I could say this: “I know no other comfort than to rest on the shoulder of this man.” All who are held firmly on his shoulder are Christians. He must pay for us; he must make satisfaction and suffer. He must carry us, not we him. He does not want to be served, but to serve and to carry us. [He says,] “I will give you

<sup>9</sup>Luke 2:11.

<sup>10</sup>Luke 22:25.

<sup>11</sup>The German phrase, which Luther employs often, is “*schinden und schlagen*” (to skin and to rasp).

<sup>12</sup>As Elector of Saxony, Johann der Beständige (John the Constant) was Luther’s secular ruler from 1525-1532.

<sup>13</sup>S. Jago di Compostela was a well-known pilgrimage spot in Spain.

<sup>14</sup>The note in *Ausgewählte Predigten* (66) suggests that Luther sees the same rejection of the grace of Christ, which alone justifies, at work among the followers of the papacy, in the sectarian movements, and in the rebellious peasants.

everything; all your guilt will be on my shoulder." All the saints, whatever their names—Isaiah, Peter, Paul—from the greatest to the least, they are all on his shoulder. That is his government. Those who are not on his shoulder are not under his rule.

Thus, here you see the very definition of the Son, the one who carries his subjects on his shoulder. And we are those subjects! If the foolish followers of the pope who want to kill us only believed this, they would rethink their plan. They want to carry Christ themselves, back and forth; they carry him with their works and their merits. But he will prove too heavy for them. The sheep must say [instead], "Dear Shepherd, you carry me, not I you!" It would be some crazy sheep that wanted to carry him! Would it ever get something to carry! But Christ says, "Hop on! I will carry you well—and all your sins are forgiven." And the world persecutes this treasure of the kingdom [of Christ]! Isaiah says, "You have the Son." So, hop on! We should gladly and confidently run to him, believing that he will answer for us and pay for us.

This message goes forth into the world, but I have no idea about our gratitude [for it]. "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Now, by adding these six names, [the prophet] explains how the carrying takes place. When I have time and am healthy, I will preach about that.<sup>15</sup> If not, someone else will do it, since it is written in the books as well as I can preach it [here].<sup>16</sup> ⊕

<sup>15</sup>Luther preached three sermons on these six names in the next two days.

<sup>16</sup>See note 7.