

Advent 4: Desire of the Nations

By
R. Larry Snow
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What is it that everyone wants – that all the people of the world desire? That's the question this morning. This morning we're going to conclude our Advent sermon series built around the Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It's a special song that uses a different title for the Messiah in each verse; Emmanuel, Day Spring, Wisdom. This morning we're looking at verse 4 in which we find the Messiah referred to as the "Desire of Nations." This may be the most challenging sermon in the series.

The phrase "Desire of Nations" is not found often in the Bible. The word in Hebrew is *hemdaf*. It is translated into English as both "desire" and "beloved." In 1st Samuel 9:20, Saul is referred to as "the desire of Israel." **"²⁰As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, give no further thought to them, for they have been found. And on whom is all Israel's desire fixed, if not on you and on all your ancestral house?** In Daniel 10:13, the prophet is referred to as "beloved," **"¹⁸Again one in human form touched me and strengthened me. ¹⁹He said, "Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!"**

I found it completely frustrating for the "Worship Leaders Companion" to the "Chalice Hymnal" to direct me to Jeremiah 10:7, **"⁷Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For that is your due; among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is no one like you."** In that verse who is beloved? What is desired? I have looked at perhaps 20 version of the Bible and can't figure out the connection between Jeremiah 10:7 and "Desire of the Nations." Perhaps this is a demonstration of the difficulty of translating the Bible into English from an ancient language. It may also be a demonstration of the difficulty in translating the words of a hymn from 8th century Latin into English.

The place where the phrase is found most clearly is in the King James Version of Haggai 2:7 which reads, **"And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.** Biblical commentators are split over exactly to what or who the prophet was referring. It could be that he is referring to the Messiah who, it was believed, would come at some time in the future. Or, it could be that the prophet was referring to the 2nd Jewish Temple in Jerusalem which was being rebuilt at the time. After all that is the historical context of the book of Haggai. However I think the author of the words to "Veni Emmanuel" decided on the first option; that the prophet was talking about the Messiah who was to come. He believed that all of humanity desired the coming of the Messiah.

That raises the question; was he right? Do all the nations of the world desire a Messiah? It seems to be human nature that we dream of a Messiah who will come and fix our problems. It seems to be human nature that we are all hoping for someone to solve all the problems of humanity. Plato has Socrates saying: "We must of necessity wait, till someone from Him who cares for us, shall come and instruct us how we ought to behave toward the gods and man." Again: "This law-giver must be more than man; that he may teach us the things man cannot know by his own nature"

And what is it that the nations desire a messiah to actually do? That's easy. We could all easily make a list of the things wrong with the world that we want fixed. We all want peace, unity, justice, harmony, love and prosperity. We want to see an end to war. We want all humanity to be able to work together. Yes, we can all list the problems of the world to be fixed. And we want it all to be fixed immediately, magically, without us actually having to change or do anything. But if that is not possible we desire a Messiah that will teach us how to achieve those things ourselves. To quote Plato, we want a teacher that will show us how to live. But wait! Didn't Jesus do that? Didn't Jesus tell us how to live? Didn't Jesus teach us how to achieve the world which we all desire?

³"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

³⁸"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.(Matthew 5:38-41)

²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, [£] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult [£] a brother or sister, [£] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell [£] of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister [£] has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, [£] and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:21-24)

²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28)

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:43)

¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:16)•

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-39)

No, it looks like Jesus – the Messiah -- has already given us the wisdom we need for the world to be different, to be like the world we dream of. It looks to me like Jesus has already answered our prayers for a Messiah. So what's the problem? Why are we stuck in the most polarized society in a generation? Why are we still at war in the Middle East? Why can't the Jews and Palestinians agree to peace? Why are so many people hungry? Why are there 45 million refugees in the world? Why do the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Why can't we fix the infrastructure of Puerto Rico? Why have so many women been assaulted or harassed?

I am afraid that the answer is right in front of us. I'm afraid the answer is us. It isn't that we lack the wisdom to create a better world – it is that we don't really trust the wisdom of Jesus to really create a better world. We don't trust that the wisdom of Jesus is really wisdom. We humans would rather live in a broken world we know rather than trust that Jesus was trying to set us free to live and to love. We

revere Jesus. We pray to Jesus. We claim to be his followers. But we aren't really sure about loving our neighbor as ourselves. We aren't really sure about loving God with all our being – after all there are a lot of other things that vie for our love that demand much less. Maybe the poor deserve to be poor. All that love and Kingdom of God business was fine for Jesus – but look at where it got him. No, we do not trust the way of Jesus. It was newspaperman G. K. Chesterton who put it succinctly, “It is not that the way of Jesus has been tried and found wanting; it is that the way of Jesus has not been tried.”

I remember teaching an adult Sunday School class on the life of Jesus when J. T. Shipman raised his hand. His question was, “well all this stuff was fine for Jesus – but wasn't he being idealistic? We can't really live like him, can we?” It's a really good question – that lots of people have asked – because we really want to follow Jesus -- from a distance. We wouldn't want to follow too closely or our lives would be ruined. We really don't trust the way of Jesus. But what we forget is that following Jesus is how we get to the world we dream of. It is by loving, forgiving, caring, being generous, not being judgmental, by living sacrificially, that we can build that better world.

Which causes me to wonder, when the world will begin to trust the wisdom of Jesus? When will Paul Ryan believe that the poor are “blessed?” When will President Trump begin to trust the wisdom of Jesus and find ways to love our enemies? When will Vladimir Putin trust the wisdom of Jesus and learn how to “turn the other cheek?” When will our elected officials trust the wisdom of Jesus and not look on women with lust? When will our leaders begin to trust the wisdom of Jesus and begin to really make the world a better place?

It's interesting that Jesus didn't have much interest in Governors, Kings, Scribes or the Temple bureaucracy. His only comments about them were words of judgement. No, the ministry of Jesus had little to do with leaders. He didn't seem to think that there was not much hope for them. I think Jesus believed that the power structure of the day had too much invested in keeping things the way they were. I think Jesus believed the rich and powerful would do everything they could to keep things from changing – even if those changes were what all of humanity yearned for.

And maybe not much has changed. Maybe we shouldn't spend too much time wondering when the world's leaders are going to trust the wisdom of Jesus. Maybe we shouldn't spend too much time wondering when they will begin to believe that we are all objects of God's love. They all have too much invested in holding onto power and keeping things the way they are.

Maybe it's up to us. If the “Desire of the Nations” is really for a better world maybe it's up to us to change the world. Maybe we need to understand that our leaders are not interested in the world really changing. Maybe, if we want a world of peace, justice, unity then maybe we need to trust that Jesus really was the Messiah – the one sent by God – to tell us how to live – to show us how to live. Maybe we need to trust that Jesus knew what he was talking about and that we need to live lives of love, justice and reconciliation. Maybe we need to trust that the way of Jesus is the way of hope and freedom. Maybe the changes we desire in the world begin with us changing the world in which we live – in Beaverton – in Murray Hills – in Murray Hills Christian Church. Maybe the changes we desire begin with our decision to trust the wisdom of Jesus. Which causes me ask these questions; what kind of world do you really want to live in? What is your greatest desire for the world? Do you trust that the way of Jesus is the way for that world to be built? Do you trust that the way of Jesus is the way to freedom and life? What is your greatest fear about following Jesus?

Of course you recognize the truth. God believes in us. God believes that in God's power we can change the world. God believes that in the wisdom of the spirit we can affect the world in which we live. God believes that we are enough. The Desire of Nations has come and continues to work in the world through us.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lowly exile here, until the Son of God appear.

Chorus:

Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel

O come thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's deep shadows put to flight.

O come thou Wisdom from on high and order all things far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show and cause us in her ways to go.

O come Desire of Nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy strife and quarrels cease, fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

