

Advent 1; Emmanuel!

By

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This Sunday is the first in our series of Advent sermons. This year we're doing something that is a real challenge for us preachers. We are basing our sermons on the best-known Advent hymn; "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We'll do one sermon each week. It's on page 119 if you'd like to look at it.

I've been singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" since I was a child. I'm pretty sure that I can sing all the words with my eyes shut. But understand that there is something truly wonderful about this hymn that I had never noticed before. In each verse Jesus is given a different title – all of them Biblical: Emmanuel, Dayspring, Wisdom, Desire of Nations; and all of these titles look at Jesus in a different way. Certainly there is enough here for a series of sermons.

This hymn is ancient. The words of this hymn can be traced back to 12th century Rome. Originally the hymn had 7 stanzas – one to be said each day, the week before Christmas. All of the stanzas can be found in the Chalice Hymnal on page 120, directly across from the shortened musical version. This hymn was written in the 12th century – 900 years ago – give or take. The church has been using and appreciating these words for a very long time.

The tune comes from 15th century France where a group of Franciscan nuns used it as a setting for a funeral devotional. In the 19th century John Mason Neale, discovered this tune and matched it with the words from what was then known as "Veni Emmanuel." Neale was a master at combining ancient texts and tunes to create new hymns for the church. 8 of his hymns can be found in our Chalice Hymnal.

Before I begin talking about this hymn allow me to address the elephant in the room. In the larger world it's Christmas Time! At Home Depot the Christmas trees have been up since September. At the mall you can hear Christmas Carol after Christmas Carol. You've all been out (or online) shopping for Christmas presents. The Grotto is open for its Christmas celebration. The Boy Scouts are selling Christmas trees. In the larger world it's Christmas Time, but not in the church.

Here in the church it's Advent. Christmas isn't for another 3 weeks. The church calendar announces that Christmas begins on December 25 and ends with Epiphany on January 8. It's not yet Christmas; it's Advent. It's not time to sing Christmas Carols. It's not time to light all the candles. It is time to sing Advent hymns and get ourselves ready for Christmas. I think I'm right in saying that no one likes Advent; not really. I will bet that given a magic wand and told you could do anything to the Christian year that most of you would erase Advent from the calendar.

Advent gets in the way of Christmas. Advent is about waiting. It's about anticipation. It's about the unfulfilled promises of God. Advent is about hanging on to hope by our fingernails. We'd all rather get past Advent – expectant waiting – and get to Christmas where we can celebrate the birth of Jesus – something that has already happened – something that God has already done.

But from where I look, this year we really need Advent. More than years past, I think we really need to take these four weeks seriously because I believe they have some gifts to offer us. I believe that if we'll pay attention to the words of Advent that we'll be glad we did.

Look at the first verse, **"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear."** It's in a minor key that sounds mournful. Do you hear the mood of these words? These words are pleading with God to do something – because the world is in an awful predicament.

Have you heard? The top 1% of the world's richest people now own more than 50% of all the wealth in the world – while the pay for the middle and lower classes has declined. Have you heard? We've now had troops in the Middle East for 15 years. Every day we spend there costs us \$216 million dollars. Have you heard? Our political leaders are bogged down by accusations about their morals – especially their sexual morals. It turns out that the people who represent us have often treated women very badly. Have you heard? Climate change is real. Storms are becoming more violent. Sea levels are rising. Coral reefs are dying. Have you heard? We've got White Supremacists marching in the streets? NeoNazis are coming out of their closets to proclaim admiration for Adolf Hitler. Have you heard? The people of South Sudan are starving to death. They are joined by the people still living in Syria. Have you heard? Addiction to opioids is killing Americans right and left. What was originally a good medicine has become an instrument of death.



There is a lot wrong with the world – we are in pain because of all the suffering in the world. We are suffering because we can imagine how the world could be – just, prosperous, loving, and generous. We can see how the world could be but we can't touch it. That better world – the Kingdom of God? – seems to always be just beyond our grasp. We suffer for all the suffering in the world and wonder why God doesn't do something. We suffer and wonder when God is going to make good on all those promises about people will "beat swords into plowshares." When will God act and the "lamb will lay down with the lion?" We yearn for the world to be healed.

That's exactly what this hymn is about; yearning. That's what this hymn is about; suffering. That's what this hymn is about; crying out to God for relief. That's what Advent is about and if you haven't felt that yearning, you have not been paying attention. To use the words of Paul in Romans 8 – the world is crying out like a woman in the midst of childbirth.

But the hymn is also about faith. As we sing this hymn we are confessing we believe that one day God will act. One day the world will be healed. One day the suffering will stop. It's about believing that one day humanity will grab hold of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

So there we are, caught between crying out to God and believing that God will act. It's a painful place to be. None of us like being caught in this tension but it is where we are. Yes, the world is in a mess and Yes, God will act. It is hard to believe that both statements are true – but we believe they are. That is Advent.

I need to point out a couple of interesting words in this verse. First is the word "ransom." The "Ransom Doctrine of Atonement" holds that before Jesus, the world was held captive by Satan and that Jesus' death on the cross paid Satan the ransom for our release. I doubt the choice of words in this hymn

is that intentional. I believe that when we sing it we are crying out to God to release us from our bondage of suffering. If I stop and reflect – that’s exactly where I am this Advent.

The second word I want to point out is “exile.” Speaking Biblically, “exile” is a loaded word. It speaks of people ripped from their homes and marched as slaves to a foreign country. It speaks of people who have been driven from their homes and families.



“Exile” is a loaded word for me also. I feel like an exile – especially at Christmas. I do not fit in and yet I cannot escape. I am a captive to the society in which I live. I find all the Christmas ads to be ridiculous and evil. I believe that evil has turned the celebration of the birth of Jesus into an orgy of consumerism.

When are we going to figure out that giving your spouse a diamond or a Lexus isn’t going to make them happier? Being with family can make you happier. Reflecting on the gift of a baby in a manger can make you happier. Finding beauty even in an Oregon winter landscape can make you happy. But even a new iPhone is just a “thing” that will eventually wear out or get broken. I feel like an exile because I believe things that are rejected by the world in which I live. Exile.

Of course the real “star” of the verse is “Emmanuel.” That’s the title in this verse given to Jesus. “Emmanuel.” What’s interesting about Emmanuel is that it is only found in two places in the Bible. The first is in Isaiah 7 in which the prophet is told the king that one day soon an extraordinary child was going to be born.



¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman^a is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.^a ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. (Isaiah 7:14-16, NRSV)

Yes, you read that right. The prophecy was about a child that would be born during the reign of King Ahaz. The prophet was not talking about a child to be born 600 years later. This was about a baby to be born soon, in the 6th century B.C. We have no idea who that baby was or if the baby was ever really born.

The church decided in the 1st century that this prophecy described Jesus. They believed that Isaiah’s prophecy was correct it’s just that his timing was off. You’ll have to decide if that’s a valid process. But Matthew believed it was. He used this prophecy to prove that Jesus was indeed the one to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy.

²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:22-25, NRSV)

Matthew believed that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy because he represented the truth that God is with us always. And maybe that’s what we need to remember at this moment. Yes, there is incredible

suffering in the world. There is incredible injustice and cruelty. There is incredible grasping for power and position. But in the midst of it all, God is with us. God is with all the world. God is with the world and God loves the world.

I don't get it. Maybe someday I'll understand how God can tolerate the suffering in the world and not put a stop to it. Maybe someday I'll figure out why God doesn't just fix what's broken in the world. But I'm pretty sure that "someday" won't be today or tomorrow. I know that I can't understand God – but I can understand "love" and "presence."

One of the implications of "God with Us" is that God rejoices with us when we succeed and God suffers when we are in pain. It means that what happens in the world – happens to God. The love and presence of God means that when someone suffers, it is God who sheds the first tear. It is the love and presence of God which reminds me that God is just as present to those who are suffering.

And in the midst of a world filled with suffering it is the love and presence of God that keeps me going. It is the love and presence of God that gives me hope for tomorrow. It is the love and presence of God that forces me to look closely at the world to see the places where God is at work – even those places filled with hunger, sickness and death. The reality of which Advent reminds us is that no matter how bad things get, we still believe in God's future. It forces me to look at my own life to see the places where God is at work in my own life – even as I live in exile. Emmanuel; God is with us.

**"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice, Rejoice,
Emmanuel shall come to thee,
O Israel."**

