

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL  
(Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25)

I hope you were paying attention when we sang our opening carol, because that's what I'm going to talk about this morning. We ordinarily wouldn't sing seven verses of a carol, and most hymnals only have three or four verses of *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* anyway. So this is one time I'm thankful for the New Century Hymnal.

Let's start with a bit of history.

*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* is quite old. It goes all the way back to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century and was composed as a processional hymn to be sung during evening Vespers in the last week of Advent. Vespers, of course, is a solemn service, and that's why the tone is quiet and contemplative. The refrain is a bit more upbeat, but that's a later addition. Originally, one verse was sung each night of the week leading up to Christmas, which is why there are seven.

The first verse, "O come, O come, Emmanuel" was originally the last one, the one sung on December 23. The second verse, "O come, O Wisdom" was the first. Each verse represents a different biblical attribute or title of Christ:

- Wisdom
- Lord
- Root of Jesse
- Key of David
- Morning Star
- King of Nations
- Emmanuel

The hymn was written in Latin, of course, and if you read the first letters of the Latin titles starting with the last one, they form an acrostic: *Ero Cras*, which means "tomorrow I come." Whoever wrote the hymn must have had a sense of humor. Unfortunately, it doesn't work in English; you get unpronounceable gibberish.

In musical terms, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* is an antiphon. That means there were probably two choirs sitting opposite each other in the chancel behind the altar, singing the lines alternately.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, someone threw out two of the verses, changed the order of the remaining five, and added the refrain "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." John Mason Neale translated that Latin version in 1851. In 1916 Henry Sloane Coffin translated the two verses that had been discarded by Neale.

So much for the history. What about the hymn the way we sing it today.

We start off "O come, O come, Emmanuel." In Medieval times, that's what all the other verses led up to: the coming of Emmanuel. So either way, whether it's first or last, the plea "O come, O come, Emmanuel" is precisely where the emphasis belongs and goes.

*Emmanuel*, you'll remember, is a Hebrew word that means "God is with us." It's a word we hear mostly around Christmas – obviously in today's hymn, but also in carols like *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. (Now don't go running through the words in your head. "Emmanuel" is kind of hidden in those carols, but trust me, it's there.) The word's familiar, so I checked to see how many times it's actually used in the Bible. Anyone want to take a guess? Only three. I would have guessed a lot more. It's used twice in Isaiah – once in the passage we heard this morning and once in chapter 8 – and once in Matthew – the passage we heard, which simply quotes Isaiah.

Isaiah and Matthew both tell us to look for a child who will be called Emmanuel. Actually, Isaiah tells us to look for the child and Matthew tells us the child is actually here. Matthew reads Isaiah's promise through a Christian lens. He sees in Jesus the child promised by Isaiah 700 years earlier.

It's safe to say, though, that Isaiah wasn't looking that far ahead. He was trying to stiffen King Ahaz's spine. The child he spoke about would be a sign for Ahaz, not the savior of the world. A young mother, someone Ahaz knew, probably someone in the royal court, was already pregnant. The child would be born soon and by the time he was two or three years old, Isaiah said, the Assyrian threat would be gone.

Matthew takes Isaiah's prophecy and reinterprets for his own time, reinterprets it in light of Jesus.

Both of them, though – Isaiah and Matthew – both of them speak to our eternal longing to be in the presence of God, to have God with us. Isaiah felt it; Matthew felt it 800 years later. The hymn writer felt it seven centuries after him. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* speaks to a universal longing. It speaks of captivity and exile, which are good metaphors for life removed from God.

There are millions of people in exile today: people fleeing from war or famine, refugees living in squalid camps in the Middle East and Africa, women and children fleeing from domestic violence, homeless people living in shelters or on the streets, immigrants hoping to make a new start in this country. Literal exile is very real.

But exile is also a state of mind that has nothing to do with geography. We can be in exile no matter where we are. We can be in exile because we're cut off from our neighbors because we envy their newer car or bigger house or better job. We can be in exile because our family has fallen on hard times and we don't know where to turn or whom to trust. We can be in exile because we're estranged from family members. We can be in exile right here in church – singing the hymns but not being moved by them, reciting the prayers but not believing them, listening to the sermon but not hearing it.

When we're in exile, something's missing – and we know it feel it. Life in exile is sad and lonely. The movie *E.T.* captured that feeling of what it's like to be in exile when the little brown extraterrestrial points to the sky and says in a haunting voice filled with yearning, "Home." That simple image and single word say it all. That's one reason the movie was so popular: because we've all been in exile to some degree at some time in our lives.

What's ultimately missing, the hymn reminds us, is God in our lives. We're separated from God. We're in exile and don't know the way back. We're in exile, and can't find the way back ourselves. We're in exile, and doubt whether God is there to see us through. We're in exile, and we need help.

- We need God to come to us to show us the way and lead us back. "O come, O Wisdom from on high...to us the path of knowledge show and help us in that way to go."
- We need to be freed from bondage to the powers of sin and death. "O come, O shoot of Jesse, free your own from Satan's tyranny, from depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o'er the grave."
- We need light to dispel our gloom. "O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here...death's own shadows put to flight."
- We need a ruler who can set things right again. "O come, Desire of Nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; make envy, strife, and quarrels cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace."

We need, in other words, God in our world and in our lives. Poet and songwriter Michael Card puts it this way: "[God's] image becomes that of Jesus, who wept and laughed, who fasted and feasted, and who above all, was fully present to those he loved. He was there with them. He is here with us."

The Christmas message can be summed up in one word: Emmanuel – God is with us. God has come to us and will never forsake us, even when we experience the difficulties of life. God has come to us to free us and lead us back home from exile. God has come to us and we will never be alone again. O come, O come, Emmanuel.