

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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December 5, 2010

Advent 2

Malachi 4

Proverbs 2:6-11

Ephesians 2:13-18

Matthew 1:22-25

Rejoicing Through Advent: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel is probably the oldest Christmas carol still sung today, dating back to the ninth century. It presents the different biblical roles that the church believed Jesus fulfilled. It's remarkable that what began in formal Catholic masses in Latin more than a thousand years ago is now a carol which has been translated into scores of languages and embraced by Christians of every stripe around the world.

The original author is unknown, but was no doubt a monk or priest in the late 800's. He also had to have been a scholar with a rich knowledge of both the Old and New Testaments. Once completed, the hymn was picked up by many European churches and monasteries and became an important part of the church even though it was only sung one week of the year – the last week of Advent leading up to the celebration of Christ's birth.

In its original form, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* was known as a song version of the "Great Antiphons" or the "O Antiphons," written in Latin and presenting in 7 verses, 7 different biblical views of the Messiah. One verse per day was sung or chanted during the last seven days before Christmas. These would have been used daily beginning Dec. 17 at evening prayer to count down the days to Christ's birth. (see below)

The words paint a rich picture of many of the biblical prophecies fulfilled by Christ's birth. So this hymn is really a condensed study of the Bible's view of the Messiah-who he was, what he represented and why he had to come to Earth.

And remember that this is during the Dark Ages in Europe when most people didn't read. Clergy could– the monks, the priests were educated so they could read and conduct mass, and transcribe manuscripts. But the common people were not taught to read.

They learned from what they heard, or visually – from what they saw. That's why stained glass windows were so important, and paintings, and ritual. People learned through their senses. No hymnals, no Bibles, no way of learning about God or Jesus except through the spoken word, or through pictures. And, so, the best way for people to learn about God was in worship – through chanting the psalms, by hearing who Jesus was through songs, by having Bible stories brought into their lives and their circumstances.

This hymn owes its current popularity to John Mason Neale. He was born in England in 1818, and was an Anglican priest educated at Cambridge. He was brilliant – able to write and speak more than

twenty languages. But church leaders thought he was too evangelical, too progressive, and too much of a free-thinker to be allowed to influence the masses.

So rather than get a church in London, Neale was sent by the church to the Madiera Islands off the northwest coast of Africa. He was pushed out of the spotlight and given the position of warden in an all but forgotten place, church officials hoped that he and his ideas would be far from England. But Neale refused to give up on God or his own calling. On a salary of just twenty-seven pounds a year he established the Sisterhood of St. Margaret, an orphanage, a school for girls and a house of refuge for prostitutes.

When he wasn't ministering to those truly were "the least of these," Neale (himself often frail and sickly) studied the Bible and any writings on or about the Bible he could find. It was during these studies that he came across the Latin chant "Veni, Veni, Emmanuel." Inspired by the words he translated it into English. Though he began it, "Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel."

The tune that went with his translation had been used for some years with the Latin words, and was a fifteenth century processional that came from a community of French nuns (Franciscan) living in Portugal. Neale's translation with this tune was first published in the 1850s in England. Within twenty-five years, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" as we know it, had become popular throughout Europe and America.

This hymn gives us the full story of how the New and Old Testament views of the Messiah come together in the birth and life of Jesus. And if we think of it in the context of the Dark Ages of 9th century Europe, we can see how it really brings the story of Christ the Savior to life during a time when people needed to have hope in their lives. Remember, their living conditions were horrible. Plagues, wars, oppression, slavery, murder, looting, poverty, starvation, were all commonplace. People needed something or someone to give them hope.

And so the first verse is a lament – a plea for God to free us from the perils of this world.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

In other words, "come into our lives, God, and set us free." The word "Emmanuel" means "God with us." They're saying "Be with us God, and set your people free from their captivity. We feel like we're in exile, we feel all alone in the world, we feel empty, saddened by the situation around us, the circumstances we find ourselves in. And we'll feel that way until you come among us."

We can feel that way too - that we're held captive by situations we find ourselves in, whether it's our family problems, or our children's issues, a situation at work, or school, or in the world.

O Come Emmanuel were words of hope thousands of years ago when the Israelites were under siege. They were words of hope in the Dark Ages when living conditions were almost unbearable. And they are words of hope to our own fallen and broken world, to a world living in darkness and despair even now.

The next verse begins “O come, thou wisdom from on high” and centers on the source of true wisdom which comes only from God through his Son.

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who orders all things mightily,
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.

Through the Savior, this wisdom can reach around the world and bring peace and understanding to all people. And in this way, Christ's teachings and examples fulfilled all Old Testament prophecies.

The third verse continues to show us who God is and what God can do. The words are right out of the story of Exodus, where God gives the Ten Commandments to Moses:

O Come, O Come, great Lord of might,
Who to your tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times once gave the law
In cloud, and majesty and awe.

There's a pattern here – he starts with a plea – “save us Lord – Come, Emmanuel and set us free.” And then he responds to that plea by telling the people their prayers will be answered when the Son of God appears, just like their prayers were answered when God appeared on Mt. Sinai. God gave them the law, God gave them direction, saved them from self-destruction.

Then the fourth verse again tells us how God frees His people from the evil of this world – “Set us free from Satan's tyranny.” We don't want to be held captive to temptation, to the forces of evil, to the power of death. And through these words, we're assured, that this Messiah, this “Branch of Jesse,” will set us free from Satan, evil, and the power of death, and bring eternal life to all who follow him.

O Come, strong Branch of Jesse free
Your own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell your people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

You can begin to see signs of salvation in the words of these verses.

Verse five (Key of David) tells us that Jesus the Messiah holds the key to the heavenly kingdom. And if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, he will lead you on the path to that kingdom.

O come, thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

These words and thoughts are right out of the book of Isaiah – “I will give him the key to the house of David, the highest position in the royal court. He will open doors, and no one will be able to shut them; he will close doors and no one will be able to open them.” (22:22)

The assurance we have when we put our trust in the Lord, is that he will *make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery.*

That's the promise of salvation, the promise that we will not be stuck in this world or in a world of emptiness and despair for all of eternity.

Verse six says, O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer,
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Dayspring is not a very common word these days. The NIV Bible translates it as “the rising sun which comes to us from heaven.” Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says, “Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God’s sunrise will break in upon us.”

Picture that! “God’s sunrise will break in upon us.” The whole idea of this verse is that this “dayspring,” this “sunrise,” this Jesus, is coming to lift our spirits, to bring us out of our gloom and despair.

Yes we have friends who we turn to for support; we have families who will be there for us when the going gets tough. When we need help beyond family and friends we have therapists we can turn to. But even all of these cannot bring lasting cheer to our spirits the way that Jesus can.

When we sing, “Oh come, blest Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by your advent here...” we know that Jesus will do that for us. Perhaps not always in the way we expect, or on our timeline; but in his own time and his own way. That we can depend on.

The coming Savior will bring justice, honesty, and truth. He will enlighten and cast out darkness as “The sun of righteousness will rise with healing in His wings.”

You can hear how the verses are becoming more hopeful as we arrive at the last verse, *Desire of Nations*, when we sing of the unity which is possible across any barriers and divisions when Jesus is our King of Peace.

O come, Desire of nations, bind,
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of peace.

And at the end of each verse, we sing the words, “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel. Shall come to you, O Israel.” In other words, “Lift up your hearts with praise. Be happy – rejoice! Emmanuel, God’s chosen one is with us.” With us. God’s chosen one is coming to us. To you and me and everyone in the world. And that is something to rejoice about.

So, as we sing this hymn this morning, remember the promises that God has given us – the promise of salvation through his Son, Jesus; the promise that we will be delivered from this fallen and broken world, from sin and despair, emptiness and hopelessness.

Remember the promise of God’s faithfulness – the promise that God will never leave you.

And remember the promise of eternal life – that God will make safe the way that leads on high and open wide the doors of our heavenly home.

And that is certainly reason to rejoice.

Let’s stand and sing together, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*.

The O Antiphons

O WISDOM, who came from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: COME, and teach us the way of prudence. Amen.

O LORD AND RULER of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the flame of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: COME, and redeem us with outstretched arms. Amen.

O ROOT OF JESSE, that stands for an ensign of the people, before whom the kings keep silence and unto whom the Gentiles shall make supplication: COME, to deliver us, and tarry not. Amen.

O KEY OF DAVID, and Scepter of the House of Israel, who opens and no man shuts, who shuts and no man opens: COME, and bring forth the captive from his prison, he who sits in darkness and in the shadow of death. Amen

O DAWN OF THE EAST, brightness of light eternal, and Sun of Justice: COME, and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Amen.

O KING OF THE GENTILES and their desired One, the Cornerstone that makes both one: COME, and deliver man, whom you formed out of the dust of the earth. Amen.

O EMMANUEL, God with us, Our King and Lawgiver, the expected of the nations and their Savior: COME to save us, O Lord our God. Amen.