

“Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall Come to Thee”

**A sermon in the Advent sermon series
“*Tidings of Comfort & Joy—God’s Incarnation
Expressed in Beloved Christmas Carols*”**

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- Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 (Good News Translation) “Comfort my people,” says our God. “Comfort them!
² Encourage the people of Jerusalem. Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven. I have punished them in full for all their sins.” ³ A voice cries out, “Prepare in the wilderness a road for the LORD! Clear the way in the desert for our God! ⁴ Fill every valley; level every mountain. The hills will become a plain, and the rough country will be made smooth. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it. The LORD himself has promised this....”
⁹ Jerusalem, go up on a high mountain and proclaim the good news! Call out with a loud voice, Zion; announce the good news! Speak out and do not be afraid. Tell the towns of Judah that their God is coming! ¹⁰ The Sovereign LORD is coming to rule with power, bringing with him the people he has rescued. ¹¹ He will take care of his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs together and carry them in his arms; he will gently lead their mothers.
- Ephesians 2:1-10 (Good News Translation) In the past you were spiritually dead because of your disobedience and sins. ² At that time you followed the world's evil way; you obeyed the ruler of the spiritual powers in space, the spirit who now controls the people who disobey God. ³ Actually all of us were like them and lived according to our natural desires, doing whatever suited the wishes of our own bodies and minds. In our natural condition we, like everyone else, were destined to suffer God's anger. ⁴ But God's mercy is so abundant, and his love for us is so great, ⁵ that while we were spiritually dead in our disobedience he brought us to life with Christ. It is by God's grace that you have been saved. ⁶ In our union with Christ Jesus he raised us up with him to rule with him in the heavenly world. ⁷ He did this to demonstrate for all time to come the extraordinary greatness of his grace in the love he showed us in Christ Jesus. ⁸⁻⁹ For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it. ¹⁰ God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: When we realize that we cannot save ourselves from ourselves, we discover that God comes to us as Savior in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Christmas Season is already three days old, from what I see and hear in broadcast and print and social media. From the church’s perspective, the Christmas season hasn’t even started yet. (And since the church has pretty good connections with the originator of Christmas, I think our claim on Christmas stands on pretty solid ground.) So if it’s not Christmas yet, what *is* happening? The answer, of course, is “Advent.”

“Advent” is a term that has special meaning in the Christian tradition but is rarely used in the secular world. (When my wife submitted the first draft of her Master’s thesis entitled “The Advent of Baton Conducting in Choral Music,” her advisor crossed out the word “Advent” on the cover page with this scribbled note of explanation: “sounds too religious.”) When the word “advent” is *not* capitalized it

simply refers to an arrival or coming. Capitalized, Advent is the name of a pre-Christmas season of spiritual preparation encompassing the four Sundays before Christmas Day.

Although some aspects of Advent have changed over time, Christians have been observing Advent since the fourth century. Today many but not all Christian traditions observe the weeks leading to Christmas as the season of Advent.

Strict observers of Advent would insist that you start celebrating the Christmas season (the “twelve days of Christmas”) on Christmas Day and not before! But like most churches nowadays, during Advent at this church we strike a balance: embracing Advent’s focus on our need to wait expectantly and with joyful hope, but also acknowledging the reality that Christmas is swiftly approaching. This is reflected in our practice of adding a bit more decoration to the church during each week of Advent, and by selecting a mixture of Advent hymns and Christmas carols to sing.

What do we wait for in Advent? Not merely for the presents under the tree; we wait for God’s plan to come to fruition. As we often say it, we await God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We wait expectantly because God advanced that divine plan by entering our world in human flesh in the birth of the Christ child.

So then, in what I’ll call the “Advent/Christmas season,” what is your favorite aspect of the season?

- The festive decorations in the home and up and down the street?
- Maybe it’s special foods you enjoy at this time, be that Christmas cookies or Christmas ale or roasted chestnuts or some other delicacy?
- Beloved holiday traditions, like
 - seeing a certain movie like “It’s a Wonderful Life” or “Elf,”
 - or attending a certain theatrical production like “A Christmas Carol” or “The Nutcracker,”
 - or going to hear the holiday concerts by Cleveland Orchestra & Chorus,
 - or watching “A Charlie Brown Christmas” on TV,
 - or riding the Polar Express,
 - or visiting some other special holiday attraction,
 - or maybe even traditions here like our Christmas Eve candlelight services or our festive, casual “Family Room Worship” in Fellowship Hall on the Sunday after Christmas?
- Maybe you love getting just the right gift for the people on your list, going out amongst the crowds in the stores, or sitting at home “picking and clicking” and waiting for delivery? And then taking special care to wrap the gifts “just so”?

What’s your favorite aspect of the season?

I dare say that for many, one of the favorite parts of their Advent/Christmas season is the music—the music we hear and the music we sing. Once we might have had a special collection of Christmas vinyl records, or cassette tapes or audio CDs that we’d pull off the shelf to listen to for the season. Now our computer or our mobile phone or our voice-controlled smart speaker can play the holiday songs or artists of our choice. And here in church is one of the few places where we get to sing beloved holiday songs. The songs evoke memories. They stir special feelings. But their purpose is to convey a message. What messages do some of our most beloved Christmas carols contain?

Each Sunday of Advent and on Christmas Eve we’ll take a look at a different beloved Christmas carol. We’ll look beyond their familiarity to find their message about why the birth of Jesus changes our lives and gives us life.

The selection for this first week in the series is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Technically, it’s an Advent hymn rather than a Christmas carol. And it’s, well, mysterious. Creepy, maybe. Tonally, it’s in a minor mode, so while it offers a message of hope, the tune is not particularly cheerful or bouncy.

The song has quite a history because it’s one of the oldest Christian hymns we know about, dating back to the 9th century. Originally the text was a series of seven short responses. They were sung in response to readings from either the Psalms or from the passage in Luke’s gospel known as the *Magnificat*—Mary’s joyful praise of God for blessing her with this special pregnancy.

Sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth century someone reworked those seven short sung responses. They rearranged the order, combined some of them so they went from seven to five verses, rephrased them so the phrases had the same pattern of spoken syllables or “beats,” and added a refrain making it easier to sing. This resulted in the hymn we know today. Our hymnal includes three of those five verses.

This familiar Advent hymn includes unfamiliar images that sound mysterious or exotic: “Emmanuel” is Hebrew for “God-is-with-us” or simply “God-with-us.” “Dayspring” is another term for sunrise, suggesting that with the birth of Jesus a new day is dawning for believers. The text pleads for Emmanuel to “ransom” captive Israel. This refers to that time six centuries before Christ when the nation of Israel was captured by the armies of Babylon. Many of Israel’s elite—the movers-and-shakers of Jerusalem—were taken hostage. They had to endure living in distant, foreign Babylon—far from the comfort and familiarity of their social and religious institutions. They prayed that God would send someone to save them from their plight, in effect to “pay the ransom” that would allow for their release from captivity, that would allow them to worship God freely, generously, peacefully.

The hymn captures the promise expressed in the Old Testament reading from the fortieth chapter of the prophecies of Isaiah who envisioned God assuring the captive Israelites, *“Comfort my people...”* Though they were in exile far from home, feeling lost and in the middle of nowhere, a prophetic voice directs them, *“Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord.... The Sovereign Lord is coming to rule with power, bringing with him the people he has rescued.”* God has not forgotten them in their troubles; God desires to ransom them, to rescue them, to heal wounded spirits and restore strength and vitality. God saves those who know and call on the Lord.

Today’s New Testament reading from Ephesians describes a different kind of captivity: how we sometimes put ourselves in captivity to our self-centered desires and selfish motives. How do we do that? For instance, by an unrelenting pursuit of acquiring money and wealth, or fixating on physical appearance and youthfulness, or seeking to smother emotional pain with alcohol, medications, street drugs. Those primal instincts to think only of ourselves can hurt our ability to maintain healthy relationships: healthy relationships with our families, friends and co-workers, neighbors, fellow church members, and with God. We may protest that we’re not like that, and probably most of us aren’t to an *extreme* degree.... But in our innermost heart we know our pitfalls, our shortcomings. That’s why we know that “the shoe fits” when Ephesians declares, “Actually all of us were [disobedient to God] and lived according to our natural desires, doing whatever suited the wishes of our own bodies and minds.”

And this is where I think we subconsciously connect with this mysterious hymn of the Advent season. We have something in common with those ancient Israelites who felt cut off and longed for the familiarity and comfort of home. We have something in common with the Christians in Ephesus who, when they took a good, hard look at themselves, had to admit that there are times in everyone’s life when we choose to live according to our natural desires, doing whatever suits the wishes of our own bodies and minds to the detriment of the people in our lives. On our own, we’re powerless to save us from ourselves. If you’re treading water, you can’t pluck yourself out of the waves and place yourself on solid ground. We need one who will save us.

And so we pray, and we sing, *“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Come into our lives, God-who-long-to-be-with-us. As you ransomed the captives of Israel, help us see what we need to be saved from in our lives, and give us a spirit of acceptance to welcome your grace and mercy into our lives.”* Rejoice, friends! Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to you! God elected to come to us entering our world as we do, coming in our form and flesh, in Jesus of Nazareth. Emmanuel has come to us in Jesus. God *is* with us, to save us, to lead us, to care for us like a shepherd cares for his precious flock.