

Christmas Playlist: O Come O Come Emmanuel

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 00] We switched microphones. Can you hear me? Last week I had a fun experience. We recorded the sermon. I went home, went to process the file, and it was garbage.

It's all distorted and staticky. And I thought, well, maybe I could do this. Nope. Maybe I could do this. Nope. So I re-recorded the whole thing from scratch at home.

So if you tune in and listen to last week's sermon, that is recorded on my home gear. So it's certainly clear, but yeah.

Nothing like preaching twice within a couple of hours, which is what I'm doing today. So it's good. My name is Kent Dixon, and it is my joy to be the pastor here. It's good to see some people here that were away and haven't been here in a while.

And that's all good. I'm just joyful to have people here. The other thing, too, is that as you look around, you'll see, oh, where's so-and-so and so-and-so and so-and-so? Lots of Christmas vacations right now.

[1 : 02] So people are away. People are traveling. And so, again, it's good to see you in person. And we also recognize that people listen to the sermon online, tune in to the phone line and things like that.

So lots of ways that people tune in. And so welcome to people, however they're joining us this morning or listening to the service. So just a quick pastoral announcement.

Michelle and I will be away for the next two weeks on vacation. And Paul will be preaching on December 31st. Oh, there was a woo-hoo. And January 7th. Oh, thankfully, the pastor is finally away and we get the good guy.

And the 7th will also be a communion Sunday. So I, Sherwin and I arm wrestled because I said, oh, I want to postpone it until I come back. I want to officiate communion.

And he said, well, so we decided not to. So I'm sad, but you will be blessed by it. So my friends, from our family to yours, best wishes for a very merry Christmas and a great start to 2024.

[2 : 06] Yeah. If you're not able to be here for a Christmas Eve service later this afternoon, so if you have no plans, we will see you next year.

And I've been saying that to lots of people that I know I won't see until January is, see you next year. It feels so strange, but it is so true. On each Sunday of the Advent season, we've been lighting candles to recognize one of the four virtues that Jesus brings us.

Hope, peace, joy, and love. And this morning, as we continue in this season of Advent, we're almost to the finish line. We're lighting our first candle again, which represents hope.

Our second candle, which represents peace. Our third candle, which represents joy.

And our final candle, penultimate, I guess, almost final, which represents love. Today, like the shepherds, we watch for signs of the Messiah's birth.

[3 : 16] We celebrate the good news that was proclaimed for all people, saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace to those on whom his favor rests.

We reflect on the wonder of the manger, which represents God's rescue mission to come and save us, his beloved children. So this morning, we're wrapping our Advent, pun intended, wrapping our Advent sermon series Christmas playlist.

And it's been a slightly unconventional Christmas series because we've incorporated several of our favorite, some of our favorite, Christmas songs of the season and carols.

So we're ending with a real classic this morning, at least, in my opinion. And that is, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. And it's always been one of my personal favorites.

So as you know, you may know, hopefully, that Emmanuel is a name given to Jesus in Scripture, which means God with us.

[4 : 18] So we celebrate the fact that we serve a God who did not see us in our sin and move in the opposite direction, leaving us to fend for ourselves, leaving us alone, leaving us for dead.

Instead, he came close to the person of Jesus Christ. And this is called the incarnation, the theological word, which means the word made flesh.

It is, as C.S. Lewis, the great Christian author, says, the central miracle asserted by Christians. That is to say that God became a man, C.S. Lewis says.

This is good news that should lead us to great joy, as we've talked about throughout this series.

Today, as we wrap things up, I want to share with you what this miracle means for us.

That God decided to come near to us through the person of Jesus Christ. I was talking to Wendy last Sunday after the service, and I said, you know, I've been a pastor only almost five years, but I said, I'm already starting to feel like, how do I tell the same stories that people know, that they've known all their lives in different ways?

[5 : 35] And she said, honestly, Kent, she said, you could preach a series from your first year, and we would still enjoy it. And I said, well, I'm not ready to do that quite yet, but I have attended churches where Michelle and I have said, ooh, I've heard this reference before, or I've heard this quote before.

And so it's the reality is that there's nothing new that has been said about these things. So I do reflect on that, though. What does this mean to me in this time of my life?

What does it mean to you? What can it mean to you? So Matthew 1, verse 23 says, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Is anyone here a hugger? Now, no judgment either way. Okay, I see a couple of hands. Oh, ten, oh! Hands gradually going up over time.

So no judgment either way. If you're a hugger, if you're not a hugger, that's totally fine. For me, if I have a close connection with someone and them with me, sometimes only a hug can best express the depth of relationship and affection that we share.

[6 : 48] That can be it. And hugging obviously means being close enough with the person, right? If you hug someone who's not a hugger and they rigidly respond without moving their arms, you've made a bad decision.

That's why I usually ask, are you a hugger? Because I am. But it means being close enough in both proximity, closeness, and relationship to receive that in the way that it's given.

We have to draw near and be close, and that's exactly what God did with us through Jesus. But what does it mean for us? What's the result of God being near and God coming close to us?

What does it mean? Well, first, these are all the results that we'll hear. Because God is close, we receive his love. And there's some references there for you.

Pastors often assume or presume that everyone who listens to a sermon understands every concept. It happens a lot. Or that someone who's listening may be further along the road in their relationship with Jesus than they might actually be.

[7 : 58] So I do my best to try not to do that. Not to do that. But to introduce people to or remind people of things that are important. Because no matter how long you've followed Jesus Christ in your life, whether it's been a day or a thousand days or longer, we need to be reminded of important things.

So if you're here or you're listening at some point and you're new to this whole Jesus thing, hopefully you've already been told that he is loving.

That is his character. And God's love for us comes in many forms. But when we read through Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, we can see so many different ways that God has shown his deep love for humanity.

And I'd also suggest that throughout history, as you look through Scripture, as time passes in Scripture, we can actually see God coming closer and closer to his people over time in a sinful world.

I think we can see that. So let's explore that a bit by starting at the very beginning, Genesis.

Genesis chapter 3, 23 and 24 says, So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.

[9 : 19] Speaking of Adam, of course. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

So for me, this is one of the most tragic passages in the entire Bible. Because humanity decides to disobey and sin against God.

And then God banishes them from this perfect, harmonious relationship they, we, had with him in the Garden. We had it all. People went from being in close relationship with and immediate proximity to God to being completely separated because of the curse of sin.

But throughout the Old Testament, we still see God's grace on display. Caring for his people, Israel, by communicating with certain leaders, by communicating through prophets to deliver messages to his people.

For example, Genesis 12, verses 1 to 3 says, The Lord had said to Abram, Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

[10:34] I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse.

And all the peoples on the earth will be blessed through you. So we referenced this verse earlier in this series as God speaks with Abram, Abraham, and makes powerful promises about the future to him.

And so this is the beginning of God's plan of redemption that continues throughout biblical history. Did you realize it started that early? The passage from Matthew then that we're looking at today is actually a reference to an Old Testament quotation from Isaiah chapter 7.

Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14 says, Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Emmanuel.

God is promising that there will come a day when he, becoming incarnated, putting on flesh, will again be with his people in an up-close and personal way once again.

[11:56] And so God comes even closer to walk and talk with his people through the person and ministry of Jesus. And that's the miracle that C.S. Lewis was describing in that quote we heard earlier.

The true miracle at the center of Christianity. But then what does Jesus say when he nears the end of his time on earth? John chapter 16, verses 7 and 8 says, Jesus quoting here, But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I'm going away.

Unless I go away, the advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.

Holy Spirit coming when Jesus left to restore perspective to human life. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to live inside anyone who chooses to follow the ways of Jesus here on earth.

I don't know about you, but I would say that's another way God is getting pretty close, right? He lives within you. So when the Holy Spirit lives within us, we are convicted about sin in our lives.

[13:17] Do you ever feel convicted? I'm not talking about guilty. That's different. We're led into a righteous and holy life by the Holy Spirit living within us, just as Jesus modeled for us.

So as we talked about last week, if you look at Jesus' life and say, oh, there's no chance I can attain that level, that degree of holiness or righteousness, God is not asking you to do it on your own strength.

That's the good news. With the Holy Spirit living within us, we have the same power, you've heard this before, the same power that raised Christ from the dead living within us.

Do you live with that kind of perspective? Do you live with that kind of power within you? Do you have a sense of that power? I hope you do.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible can be found in the last book, Revelation. So John is given a vision from God of what is to come.

[14:22] And this is what the end of the book has to say in chapter 21. Revelation 21, verses 3 and 4. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away, wipe every tear from their eyes.

There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. The Bible makes it very clear that a day is coming when God will complete his plan of redemption, complete his plan of restoration.

And when that time comes, all the sin that we see on earth and we see it all around us, even in our own lives, will cease to exist.

What a day that will be. So why am I reminding us of this today? Well, it's to help us recognize that God shows his love in drawing close to people who ultimately don't deserve it.

[15 : 42] Can you recognize that as well? friends, we can know all the verses that represent and explain the gospel. We can still not understand it.

Why? Well, because the key component to the gospel is not just our role as sinners, but God's role as a savior. If it wasn't for Jesus dwelling with us, as Matthew 1.23 reminds us, we would simply have no hope.

We would be lost without hope. But this Christmas season, if you've been searching for hope, he is here.

He is a lamp unto your feet. So the second point this morning, because God is close, we have light. light. All four of the gospel accounts in the Bible relate the events of God coming close through the birth of Jesus Christ. All four relate it.

[16 : 50] But one of the most unique is the apostle of John in the book of John. In the opening chapter, we hear the word light attached to the person of Jesus.

And this concept is important for us to understand as people who are living in a dark world. Do you feel darkness in our world? John 1 verses 5 to 9 says, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light so that through him all might believe.

He himself was not the light. he came only as a witness to the light. That true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

The light only shines in our lives if we recognize it and let it in. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus is light in this dark world.

[18 : 00] But if we don't welcome him into our lives, we'll never experience that light for ourselves. So maybe you're here today, maybe you're listening, and you've known about Jesus for so long.

You can quote all the verses, you're at church nearly mostly every week, and you're even giving to God's work here in this place. And those things are all important and they are significant and they are not to be dismissed.

But maybe throughout listening to this series, you felt that there's still a void in your heart that needs to be filled somehow. So seeing the light of Christ is only the first step.

The next step in the process is inviting the light to illuminate your life too. And it's the most important decision you'll ever make in your life. And as you're hearing me say this, if you reflect back, reflect light, unintentional, but if you can reflect back on when you accepted Christ, take a moment to do that in your head.

Because it's the whole reason, your relationship with Jesus, is the whole reason that God came close to his people in that way. So that he could be in personal relationship with each one of us.

[19 : 26] Our third point this morning, because God is close to us, we can be close to him and to others. Because God has come close to us and shows us love, because God has come close to us and is the true source of light, it means we also have the opportunity to be close to both him and others.

God coming close to us is meant to inspire us to be close to other people. So maybe as you've been listening today, you've felt God bring someone to your mind, someone to your heart who is far from him.

Maybe it's someone who has known him in the past and has drifted away. Maybe it's someone who desperately needs the hope that Jesus can bring to their life and has never seen it for themselves. And maybe it's someone you've been praying for for some time now. a person by name. And now maybe God is calling you to step out of your comfort zone and get close enough to them so that they can experience the love of God through you.

Obedying and taking a step like that can be much easier said than done at times, but it is worth it in the end. My friends, we are called to share the good news with others, to reflect that light of Christ in our lives to a tired and weary world.

[21 : 04] Feel the world, the world groaning? So much conflict, so much struggle, so much distrust and hate and anger and frustration and hopelessness in our world.

Matthew 5 verses 14 to 16 says, you are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.

Instead, they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. So not only is Jesus the true light that came into this world, but he calls us to get close to other people and share that light to reflect his presence to people who don't know him.

So we want to go and be light in the world. That means we go into the darkest parts of the world to bring illumination. This means we reach out in Bible language to the least of these.

[22 : 24] This means we get involved in ministries that are far out of our comfort zone for the sake of light being spread to all people. We get close to others just as Christ has come close to us because he is Emmanuel, God with us, forever and always.

So let's take a moment just to focus on that last point that God is with us. Consider for a moment that he is not a God that is way out there somewhere, distant and removed just looking at us once in a while.

Not a God that keeps us an arm's length or further away but is right here with us. Every moment of our lives from the moment we welcome him in.

I took a classical mythology course in university. I've always been fascinated by Greek, Roman, Egyptian mythology. And you can recognize a consistent theme in all of those cultural groups that have multiple deities.

There is distance there. So the Greeks and Romans of the early church would have said what God would ever come close to his people.

[23 : 47] God doesn't condescend to his people. They worship him. They serve him. Our God came near. Our God drew close to us like no God ever would have been seen to do before.

As we discussed earlier, the process of closeness has unfolded literally over centuries. God has continued to move towards humanity, not away from us.

So with that in mind, consider how close you feel he is to you in your circumstances right now. For those of you who feel he's maybe forgotten you or moved on, for those of you who feel he wouldn't want anything to do with you because of what you've done, for those of you who have let their light dim over the years, we sang and we boldly declare today, we will sing, O come, O come, Emmanuel, God with us.

This Christmas, next Christmas, forever and always. my friends, may be filled with joy, hope and comfort as you consider the unfailing, unrelenting love of God for you.

Amen.