

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

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Date: 26 November 2023

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning. My name is August Fern, and today's scripture reading is several texts from the prophet Isaiah, as printed in the liturgy. I won't read all the numbers.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel.

The people, walking in darkness, have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

[1 : 20] He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his roots a branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him. The spirit of wisdom and of understanding.

The spirit of counsel and of might. The spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord. And he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears.

But with righteousness he will judge the needy. With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.

With the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. In that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples.

[2 : 28] The nations will rally to him and his resting place will be glorious. I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David. What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open.

There the Lord will be our mighty one. For the Lord is our judge. The Lord is our lawgiver. The Lord is our king. It is he who will save us.

From the west people will fear the name of the Lord. And from rising of the sun they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent up flood that the breath of the Lord drives along.

The redeemer will come to Zion. To those in Jacob who repent of their sins declares the Lord. Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down. That the mountains would tremble before you.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Morning Christ Church. I trust that you had a happy Thanksgiving. You all look very satiated and satisfied.

[3 : 30] I want to begin this morning just asking this simple question. How does the church keep time? Or how do Christians mark time?

And very simply the church marks time by nothing else than the life of Jesus Christ. And so after Thanksgiving every year we make this turn to the season of Advent.

Advent is a Latin term that means come to. And we have four Sundays in Advent where we focus our attention on two things.

We focus our attention on the first coming of Christ as our Savior. And we also focus our attention on the second coming of Christ as our Judge. And we are using the season of Advent to prepare our hearts for Christmas.

Christmas is this wonderful, not one day celebration, but 12 day celebration that begins on December 25th. Where we feast and we rejoice in the incarnation.

[4 : 41] God taking on flesh and coming to dwell with us and to save us. And that feast runs all the way from December 25th to Epiphany, which is a celebration of those Gentile kings that came and brought their gifts to Jesus as the King of Kings.

So that's how we keep time in the church. And we could go on and talk about Lent and Easter and Pentecost, but I'll save that for another day. The question is, how are we going to engage this season of Advent to prepare ourselves for Christmas?

Now, last week, Pastor Andrew preached on worship. And he talked about how the Lord inhabits the hallelujahs of His people.

And how He's enthroned on the praises of His people. And he was preaching from a text from the prophet Isaiah just before the text we read today. From Isaiah 6.

And he preached on this great line. And it says, at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the thresholds shook. At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the thresholds shook.

[5 : 51] And when he was talking about that, I was thinking to myself, you know, what if we sang our Christmas carols like that? Where the doorposts and the thresholds of Christ's church shook.

And so, what we're going to do during the season of Advent is we're going to look at these songs that we know the best, but perhaps maybe understand the least. These carols of Christmas. And every year we celebrate the birth of Christ with these beautiful carols.

But how many of us really see the depth of the gospel in the songs that we sing? And what are the truths that we're singing that have made these carols timeless?

And so, as we explore these well-known carols of Christmas that were born from our joy that Christ entered our world, I pray that you'll allow God's truth to be revealed to you in a fresh way, just as it was on that holy night in that little town of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

So, here's the plan. Each Sunday, we're going to look at the biblical foundations behind a familiar Christmas carol. And then we're going to sing that carol together in a way that shakes the doorposts and the thresholds of our church.

[7 : 04] Do you think we can do that? You excited about that? Okay. So, let me just kind of give some background and context for today's Christmas carol. The origin of this anonymous hymnic poem is uncertain, but the dominant theory is that it began as a monastic chant called the O Antiphons, which were based on lines that were sung in Latin in the 8th century.

And so, Christians have been singing these words for 1,200 years and counting. And the first English translation of this carol, some of you will be interested to know that it inspired some of the imagery and the names in Tolkien's saga, the Lord of the Rings.

But I'm sorry to tell you that there are no hobbits, actually, in this song. But you'll notice that each O in O come, O come is followed by a name or a title that's linked to a prophecy about the Messiah, about the Christ, in this Old Testament book of Isaiah.

And each stanza in some ways is a guided tour of a different aspect of the person and the work of the Messiah. And so, this carol takes us into the mind of ancient Israel longing for her coming Messiah.

But it goes beyond that longing by voicing the yearning and the solemn expectancy of the church for our Messiah, Jesus, to come again and to consummate the history of redemption, to establish the kingdom of God on the earth as it is in heaven, to resurrect His people, to put the world right, to wipe all the tears away from our eyes, and to make all things new.

[8 : 50] That's the Christian hope of what's going to happen when Messiah comes again. So, allow me to read today's carol so it's fresh in our minds. And I'm going to start with the stanzas, and then I'll end with this repeated refrain.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

O come, O come, thou Lord of might, who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height in ancient times didst give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

O come, thou root of Jesse, free, Thine own from Satan's tyranny. From depths of hell Thy people save, and give them victory over the grave.

O come, Thou dayspring from on high, and cheer us by Thy drawing nigh. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight.

[10:02] O come, 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.

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to Thee, O Israel. Now I want to say a few things about this carol before we sing it.

I want to talk about the names of the Messiah, the prayers of exiles, and the joy of Jesus. I want to talk about the names of Messiah, the prayers of exiles, and the joy of Jesus.

First of all, the names of Messiah. I'm just going to walk you through each stanza. The first stanza says, O come, O come, Emmanuel. And that's linked back to Isaiah chapter 7.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call Him Emmanuel. Emmanuel means God with us. And this prophecy says that through His chosen King, through His anointed Messiah, that will be born of a virgin, God will come to be with His people to save us.

[11:19] The next stanza says, O come, thou Lord of might. And my bad that this wasn't printed here, but if you look at Isaiah 33 verse 21, it says, The Lord will be our mighty one.

The Lord will be our mighty one. And then it says, For the Lord is our judge. The Lord is our lawgiver. The Lord is our king. It is He who will save us. One of the favorite themes of the prophet Isaiah is that when the Messiah comes, He'll bring about a new exodus.

He'll bring about a second exodus, an exodus that's even greater than the first exodus from Egypt. And this stanza is telling us that the same Lord who came in that cloud and majesty and awe at Sinai to show us His power, to give us His word, to reveal His truth.

He's going to send His mighty one. And when the mighty one comes, the mighty one is going to be our judge and our lawgiver and our king.

He's going to be this all-sufficient sovereign and ruler who's going to reign over us. And He's going to come in His reign. He's going to win a victory for us on our behalf and do something for us in our place.

[12:42] And that's how He's going to save us. If you just go and read that text in Isaiah 33, you'll see about the Lord of might. But then the next stanza says, O come thou rod of Jesse.

Isaiah chapter 11 verse 1 says, A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his roots a branch will bear fruit. This stump refers to the long, defunct house of David and his father Jesse. And if you just go back and read the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Kings, you'll learn there that the rulers of God's people, the leaders of God's people, were pretty much miserable failures. Except for a few partial exceptions. And so the prophet is saying that out of this dead stump of the house of Jesse, the house of David, will come a root, will come a branch of Jesse.

And he will rise up and this future king will come and he'll hold the shepherd's staff. He'll hold the ruler's scepter with awesome power and authority.

[13:52] And I just want you to look back at Isaiah 11 that sort of describes the rule of this king, this rod of Jesse for us. It says, The spirit, this is 11.2, The spirit of the Lord will rest on him.

The spirit of wisdom and of understanding. The spirit of counsel and might. The spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord. And he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears.

He won't do anything based on mere appearances. Rather, with righteousness he will judge the needy and with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

And here it is. He will strike the earth with the rod. This is the rod of Jesse. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth. And with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. This king is going to come full of the Holy Spirit. He's going to come with a rod in his mouth.

[14:57] The breath of his lips. The truth of his word. And with that he's going to bring wickedness and oppression to an end. And with the righteousness and justice of God himself he's going to lift up the needy and the poor.

He's going to do what no king has ever done before. Our next stanza says, O come thou dayspring. O come thou dayspring.

And this is a great ancient word. It is expressed in Isaiah chapter 9 verse 2. It says, The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

The dayspring is the sunrise at dawn. The dayspring is that morning light that comes and drives the darkness of night away.

The father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, he talks about this in Luke chapter 1. He says, The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

[16:01] Come thou dayspring is a longing for Messiah to come and to be the light of the world and to drive the dark powers of sin and death out of this world for good.

Last stanza, O come thou key of David. That's from Isaiah chapter 9. Again, it's, he says here in Isaiah 9, 6, For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And if you look down at Isaiah 22, it says, I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David so that what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open.

So what's on the shoulders of this Messiah? It's the government of the kingdom of God himself.

What's on the shoulders of this Messiah are the keys to the kingdom of God.

And what do our keys do? Our keys close and they lock open doors that have been letting all the bad things into our lives.

[17:12] Darkness, death, disconnection, all these things that dominate our lives and destroy us. But keys also can unlock and open doors that are keeping good things out of our lives.

The light and the life and the love of the creator God and what he intended for us. And so, this great prophecy is about the turning of these keys that only one person holds.

These keys to the kingdom of God that can give us the security and the safety and the peace that we cannot secure for ourselves. And that's the O antiphons that Christians have been singing about for 1,200 years now.

It's this great hymn of Advent, this great carol of Christmas that calls us to rejoice in these biblical names of the Messiah. Emmanuel, Lord of Might, Rod of Jesse, Dayspring, Key of David.

And so, when we pray over this next month between now and Christmas, I want to invite you to take these names of the Messiah on your lips and take these scriptures about the Messiah into your heart and let them fill you with new prayers in this next season.

[18:27] Let them fill you with a hope in this Messiah who has come and who surely will come again. That's the names of the Messiah.

But I want to talk about the prayers of exiles. I want to talk a little bit about the prayers of exiles because each stanza calls on the name of the Messiah with what I call the O of longing.

The O of longing. Right? O come, O come. Whoever's singing this song is begging, is begging with a sense of desperation, O, won't you please, please, pretty please, come.

The O here expresses a thirst of deep desire. It's a cry of men and women who know that they've come to the end of their resources.

It's a cry of people who are waiting and who are looking for and who are longing for God and saying, O, come. O, please, come.

[19:37] And each stanza then depicts human needs that the first and second coming of the Messiah might remedy. So, what are some of the human needs in the prophet Isaiah's day 700 years before the coming of the Messiah?

And what are some of the human needs in our day 2,000 years after the Messiah has come? Well, we sing about it in this great line. We sing our need and we say, come and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.

Come and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here. You may know that in Isaiah's day the people of God had been carried off to Babylon as the just judgment for their sins.

So, here they are in exile and captivity longing for someone who will come and free them mourning and lonely because they're far from home and far from God longing for someone who would come and wipe away the tears from their eyes.

Longing for someone who could return them to what they were made to be and to do. And in many ways, Israel in the exile of captivity is a microcosm of all of us and our humanity.

[21:03] That we too are overpowered by our sins. We too have been carried off to a far away place at a great distance from what we were meant to be and meant to do and here we are in this place where we really can't help ourselves.

And the only possible remedy for us is if God Himself would come in His power and with the resources that only He has to, as the song says, ransom us, to buy us back and to bring us home.

And this is what Jesus says about Himself in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verse 45. It's a great verse, one that you should probably memorize.

Jesus says, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

Emmanuel is God with us and the reason He came to be with us is to pay this ransom that only the God-man can pay.

[22 : 14] And the Gospel tells us that on the cross of Jesus Christ that final blood was indeed shed, that debt was paid and forgiveness was purchased and God's wrath was removed and our adoption was secured and redemption was accomplished.

However, redemption has been accomplished but it's not yet been fully applied. The end is not yet and so in many ways we are like Israel and Babylon still mourning in the lonely exile of our captivity because we live in a sin-sick world that's deeply broken and we are in fact sin-sick people that are deeply broken.

We know this in a really personal and painful way that death snatches away. Disease makes us miserable.

Calamity strikes. Satan prowls. The flesh wars against the Spirit. Sin indwells us and it tears our families apart.

It tears churches apart. It tears nations apart and leaves us a bloody and awful mess. We've not yet been fully released from this world of sin and this body of sin and so we mourn in the lonely exile of our captivity to evil and darkness don't we?

[23 : 43] We're not yet fully free. We're not yet finally home and this is why the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 he says we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the redemption of our bodies which has not yet come.

He says in 1 Thessalonians 1 that we wait for God's Son from heaven to rescue us from God's coming wrath which has not yet happened. He says in Galatians 5 that by faith we wait eagerly through the Spirit for the righteousness for which we hope but which we do not yet fully have.

And so as exiles we wait in the not yetness of the gospel. And look at stanza 3 I love this he says the song says O come thou rod of Jesse come this great king with the rod of truth in your mouth come this great king that defeated Satan by your word that conquered hell that won a victory over the grave come thou rod of Jesse and come apply these things to us.

Come and free us from the tyranny of the evil one and his lies in our minds and in our hearts. Come and save us from the hellishness of sin that makes Thanksgiving sometimes miserable with our family doesn't it?

Come and liberate us from the grave in our fear of death. Come and take that redemption that you accomplished for us and come apply that freedom and that salvation and that victory that you won for us to our lives and to our church here and now.

[25 : 29] That's what we're singing when we're praying this great carol of Christmas. So I want to talk finally I've talked about the names of the Messiah and the prayers of people who are in exile but I want to talk finally about the joy of Jesus.

I think I could do this in a few minutes. The joy of Jesus. Now if you know the tune of this carol it's a plaintive mood of longing. We're going to sing it in a moment.

You'll realize very quickly it's not the same as the vigorous and bounding Hark the Herald angels sing Glory to the Newborn King. We're going to do that one next week. It's not the same as the exuberant Joy to the World The Lord Has Come.

We're going to do that the following week. But the tune and the mood of this carol is one of longing one of aching one of yearning and waiting and hoping. The church needs her vigorous and bounding and exuberant songs of praise but she also needs to sing the blues.

Right? She also needs to sing songs of lament for a world that's torn asunder in Israel in Gaza in Ukraine in Darfur in Azerbaijan the persecuted church in North Korea and Somalia and Iran even today are torn apart.

[26 : 54] And so we must sing songs like this. Stanza number four tells us that we're living under gloomy clouds of night. It says that we're living under the dark shadows of death and so in this miserable terrible situation that we find ourselves in what should the church pray?

The church should pray O come thou dayspring O come thou dayspring and rise up like the sun come and disperse our gloom with your joy come and put the shadows of our despair to flight with

your light come thou sunshine of God and illumine us with your radiant glory come thou light of the world and warm us with your presence and your power come dayspring we pray and cheer us up come and cheer us on come dayspring we need you we need you it's a prayer for the joy of Jesus to come and flood into our lives to flood into the church and to flood out into the streets of our city and into our world stanza five talks about someone who could come and we're praying for this someone to come and quote unquote close the path to misery wouldn't you love for someone to do this?

none of our technology and none of our science has fully closed closed the path to misery yet has it? wouldn't we love for someone who could come and open wide the doors of heaven someone who could open up paradise to us so that we could enter back into Eden which is our true home for which God created us isn't this what our hearts and our world is longing for?

what if someone could come and do this? what if someone could come and meet us down here in this valley of the shadow of death in which we live and they could as the song says make safe the way that leads on high someone who could take us up to that highest of heights up to God himself what if someone could do that?

friends the breaking news of Christianity and the earth shattering news of the gospel is that this key of David that we're going to sing about this key of David saw us imprisoned behind an iron gate of misery he saw us locked up behind iron bars of condemnation he saw us shut out and cut off and separated from our home our true home with God and so this key of David his heart went out to us and not just his heart but he himself came down to us to open the door of life the key of David came to lead us through that door to our heavenly home with God and to not just lead us to God but to close that door and to close that path of misery not just temporarily but forever friends only Jesus holds those keys only Jesus holds the keys of life and death because only he has passed through death and gone out the other side and so only he can give us the safety and the security and the peace and the home that we're longing for and this world is never going to give to us and finally [30 : 35] I just want you to notice that each prayer each stanza is a prayer but each refrain is really an answer to that prayer so every time we pray a prayer we kind of say what the answer to the prayer is when we sing rejoice rejoice Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel and notice we sing that rejoice not with a period but with an exclamation mark and we sing that rejoice not just one time but two times what God's people longed for after century after century of waiting we now know and we now celebrate that Emmanuel God with us has come to us and he has lived among us and he died for us and he's risen from the grave and he's made a way for all of us who trust him to be saved from our sin and reconciled to God so that we can be home with him forever amen amen Jesus came that he might make eternal joy possible a joy that supersedes our temporary circumstances a joy that transcends our terrible suffering he came to give us a joy that nothing in this world can ever take away from us and so what I want to tell you as we begin into this season of Advent is that you can rejoice no matter what you're going through you can rejoice because you know that Jesus came and as we sing in just a moment he surely shall come he shall come to thee oh Israel so even as we pray with aching hearts and with longing even as we sing the blues and cry out our laments to God the ground note of our prayers the ground note of our songs is always joy because we know how the story ends

Jesus is coming back to finish what he started it's why the apostle says that when we grieve we grieve with hope it's why he says that we're sorrowful yet we're always rejoicing the carol proclaims the first advent of the Messiah even as it's stoking our longing and our desire for the second advent of the Messiah which is going to be so much different because when he first came he came silently and subtly he came incognito and undercover but he's not going to come like that the second time the prophet says in Isaiah 59 that the redeemer will come to Zion like a pent up flood the prophet says in Isaiah 64 that oh that you would rend the heavens that you would tear the heavens apart and come down that the mountains would tremble at your presence that's what's going to happen when Messiah comes again it's going to be this mighty irresistible cataclysmic unmistakable force and the prophet tells us what is going to happen to Messiah's people when he comes in all of his glory in Isaiah 35 says those the Lord has rescued will return they will enter Zion with singing in fact the Hebrew says they'll enter Zion with loud singing they'll enter Zion with shouts of joy everlasting joy will crown their heads gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away we sing rejoice rejoice because when Messiah comes he's going to give us this unbroken unbreakable joy that's our expectant hope that's the hope that we have to offer to this world that is

without hope that Christ is going to come to judge the living and the dead that he's going to come and establish the kingdom of God on the earth as it is in heaven that he's going to resurrect our bodies that he's going to put this world right that he's going to wipe away all the tears from every eye and that he's going to make all things new and so friends let us enter into this season of Advent looking back to our Emmanuel who has come but also looking right now to Jesus who is God with us in this moment and also looking forward to the Messiah who will come finally and fully on that future glorious day to give us his eternal and everlasting joy you ready to rejoice so we're just going to have a quiet moment as our musicians come and prepare to lead us in song and then we'll stand and sing together and we just offer this carol of Christmas up in the Holy Spirit
Amen