

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”
Isaiah 7:10-14; Matthew 1:18-25
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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This morning is the first Sunday in Advent, a season on the ecclesiastical calendar when Christians gather to express their excitement at the coming of JESUS CHRIST. In the same way that LENT is a time of inward preparation for the events of Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, so does ADVENT represent a time of inward preparation for the events of the birth of Jesus, the visit of the Magi, and our Lord’s baptism by John the Baptist. The word “Advent” is derived from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning “coming.” Today, we think of it as the prelude to Christmas and the birth of Christ, but that wasn’t ALWAYS the case. Beginning about the 6th century, the “coming” that the church had in mind was NOT regarding his FIRST coming, that is, his birth in the manger in Bethlehem, but rather his SECOND coming- when Jesus returns in the clouds as the judge of this world. It was only after the Middle Ages that Advent was explicitly linked to Christ’s FIRST coming at Christmas time.

Our New Testament reading for this morning informs us that while Mary was betrothed to Joseph, she discovers she is pregnant although she and Joseph had never had sex. As a result, Joseph, feeling he has been betrayed by her, makes up his mind to divorce her quietly. But while he is sleeping, an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and tells him that Mary has always been faithful to him, that the child she shall soon bear is actually from the HOLY SPIRIT and the day will come when he will save his people from their sins. He says that this was to fulfill that which was prophesied by Isaiah some seven hundred years earlier: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us).”

Now, to understand why Advent is such an important period for the Church, we need to FIRST understand this prophecy regarding Emmanuel and the historical context from which it arose. It was during a period of great national crisis. Israel, which was formerly a collection of tribes, had been consolidated into a single nation under the reign of King David around 1000 B.C. But some three hundred years later, she was now divided into two separate kingdoms with Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Assyria, which was at the time the world’s greatest superpower, was preparing to attack the northern kingdom of Israel and Syria, and in order to protect themselves, the kings of those two countries joined forces together.

However, they knew that without the aid and support of the southern kingdom of Judah, they really didn’t stand much of a chance. Therefore, they appealed to Ahaz--the king of Judah--to enlist him into their coalition. But because Ahaz was fearful that such an alliance would only antagonize the Assyrians to invade HIS COUNTRY as well, he did the political thing and chose to remain neutral. Upon hearing this, the rulers of Israel and Syria felt their only chance was to launch a coup to overthrow Ahaz and replace him with someone more supportive of their coalition. But Ahaz learned of their plot and panicked. Therefore, forced with what he felt was the lesser of two evils, he cast his lot with mighty Assyria, thinking that such a move might yet save his throne. To ingratiate himself, he sent tribute to the Assyrian king—Tigath-pileser--pledging with it his complete loyalty, and then appealed for help from him against the growing threat posed by Israel and Syria.

The prophet Isaiah saw this new allegiance with the fierce and bloody Assyrians as a great betrayal against God and he warned Ahaz that there would be disastrous consequences for both him and the country if he proceeded with it. He assured him that Israel and Syria could NEVER overthrow him for God was in control and would never allow such an event to occur; God had promised that only a son of David would ever rule upon that throne. However, if Ahaz REFUSED to trust that promise, believing that Assyria could provide him greater security than God, then he and his people would be punished far more than any of his predecessors ever had.

In a final attempt to change the king's mind, Isaiah gives him a sign from God- the birth of a child. Judah feels under threat by the greatest military power in the ancient world and God's response is NOT to raise up a mightier army from within her own borders, NOR is it to send another country to her aid. Rather, it is the promise that a young girl would give birth to a baby and his name would be Emmanuel or "God is with us." We are told in Isaiah chapter 9 that of this new king, the government would be upon his shoulders; he would bear the titles "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" and his reign would be marked by everlasting peace and righteousness. This promise was reaffirmed two chapters later where this child is described as possessing the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of the knowledge and fear of the Lord. A new age in history would be inaugurated- an era in which oppression and bondage would cease, and where the poor and exploited would be defended- only, the king had to BELIEVE and not surrender to his worst fears.

In exchange for Ahaz's unconditional loyalty, Tiglath-pileser and his Assyrian army arrived just in time to subdue both Israel and Syria and put both their kings to death. In gratitude Ahaz presented him with the sacred vessels used in Temple worship as tribute. He tore down the bronze altar used in the worship of Jehovah and instead set up a NEW altar dedicated to the gods of Syria and Assyria. He then sealed up the Temple and proceeded to erect heathen altars in every corner of the city. His apostasy was now complete.

Ahaz's sin was that he opted for the security of a powerful yet spiritually bankrupt nation rather than trusted the GREATER security offered by the One who CONTROLLED all history. He was more concerned with the "ARMIES OF MEN" than he was in the "arm of the Lord"; more interested in his OWN survival than faithfulness to the one who had endowed him with that authority in the FIRST place. Yet, IN SPITE OF HER FAITHLESSNESS AND DISOBEDIENCE, Judah was given a NEW promise- one which included the inauguration of a new king and a new era of peace and prosperity for God's people. God's covenant oath to David would NOT be broken; his royal tree would NEVER be terminated, even when as a CONSEQUENCE of Ahaz's sin, JUDAH HERSELF would fall a century and a half later to the THEN mightiest army of the world- BABYLON.

However, because of God's promise to her, what would befall Judah would nowhere be as total or final as the northern kingdom of Israel's was. Where the northern kingdom disappeared altogether, Judah's fate was merely intended to chastise and discipline her in order that a faithful remnant might arise from out of her. As a result of her punishment, a righteous few who truly loved God and delighted in serving Him would emerge. It would be THESE--the TRUE Israel, the REAL people of God--who would trust that promise, who would preserve the line of David until that day when Immanuel should be born. In fact, Isaiah was so certain of this promise that he even named his OWN son "Shear-jashub," a name meaning "A Remnant Shall Return."

This promise remained a light for the Jews even during her darkest nights. For centuries afterwards, Israel was conquered by one civilization after another- first by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then came the Persians who were followed by the Romans. Over a thousand years of Jewish history with all its glories and successes were eventually brought to a close. Yet, despite their bondage, they never stopped watching for that child. The expectation was SO great that hundreds often believed that THEY were the Promised One. Mothers all over Israel named their first-born sons Jesus or "Savior" in the hope that perhaps THEIR son just may be the long-awaited babe. It was a simple sign given by Isaiah to the king of Judah on the eve of her greatest national crisis and yet that one sign, MORE THAN ANY OTHER, galvanized Judah's hopes and faith for the next seven hundred years- the sign of a baby's birth, their future Deliverer.

We inaugurate our new series on the "Great Hymns of Christmas" by looking at one which powerfully evokes this hope rooted in God's promise- "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It is probably the oldest Christmas carol still sung today. Written possibly as early as the 8th century, it served as a processional hymn to be sung during Vespers in the last week of the Advent season. It isn't celebratory like most Christmas songs but soft and contemplative. Sin and sorrow, failure and suffering have seemed to put great distance between God and God's people, and the cry is for a Redeemer who will ransom his captive people and restore them to the status of children. We don't know who wrote it although he was no doubt a monk or priest for it had to have been a scholar with a rich knowledge of both the Old and New Testaments.

In its original form, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" was known as a song of the "Great Antiphons" or "Great O's," an antiphon being a verse usually from Scripture that is sung responsively before and after a psalm or devotional hymn as part of the liturgy. There were seven verses to this hymn and one verse per day was sung or chanted during the last seven days before Christmas. The different verses refer to various biblical prophecies that were realized in the birth of Christ. So "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" really unfolds the story of the Messiah as he was foretold in the Old Testament and then fulfilled in the New.

The hymn owes its modern popularity to a man named John Mason Neale, an Anglican priest. In 1851, he translated it from the original Latin and joined it with the tune of a 15th century processional song called "Veni Emmanuel" that originated in a community of French Franciscan nuns living in Lisbon, Portugal. Neale's translation of the lyrics coupled with "Veni Emmanuel" was first published in the 1850s in England but within twenty-five years, was cut from the original seven verses to five and called "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It has remained a Christmas favorite ever since.

It begins by pleading for Immanuel, "God Is With Us," the promised Messiah, to come and deliver his people, the Jews, from their lonely exile. It could be a plea made by the Hebrews in Egypt, or possibly those taken captive to Assyria, or even still to Babylon in the sixth century B.C. The refrain instructs them to REJOICE, that indeed Immanuel SHALL come to them as was promised by God. The second verse pleads for this "rod of Jesse" to free us from Satan's tyranny, to save us from the depths of hell and grant us victory over the grave- a point reaffirmed again in the third and fourth verses.

Reaching the fifth and final verse, it looks BEYOND Christ's FIRST Advent to his SECOND as it pleads for Christ--the "Desire of nations"--to bind all the peoples in one heart and mind; that envy, strife and quarrel cease; and that all the world be filled with heaven's peace.

Then comes the familiar refrain: "Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!" This great hymn looks back to the people of God in bondage and exile and recalls the faithful character of God. Then it looks to the promise of God's long-awaited son and the deliverance he brought with him. Finally, it looks to the future and the hope that the Messiah shall return a SECOND time and establish God's kingdom of peace throughout the world FOREVER!

Now as I BEGAN my sermon with a history lesson, I wish to end it with one more. In a week and a half—December 7th--we will once again commemorate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor eighty-one years ago. The very next day, President Roosevelt addressed a joint session of Congress to ask for a declaration of war against that nation- the war in Europe was now being broadened to include the entire South Pacific. The day after their attack on our NAVAL BASE at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Air Force attacked our AIR BASE in the Philippines. They destroyed nearly 50% of the American warplanes at Clark Field, most of which were still on the ground. By the following month, the Japanese had driven the Allied forces onto the Bataan Peninsula. Gen. MacArthur, who was then in charge of U.S. forces in that country, was forced to move his headquarters to the island fortress of Corregidor. However, fearing that he would be taken prisoner or possibly even KILLED, President Roosevelt ordered the General, his family, and his staff to abandon it. Under the cover of night, they relocated to Australia, and when the plane touched down in Melbourne, General MacArthur gave the following announcement:

“When I landed on your soil, I said to the people of Philippines whence I came, ‘I SHALL RETURN.’ Tonight, I REPEAT those words: I SHALL RETURN. Nothing is more certain than the ultimate reconquest and liberation from the enemy of those and adjacent lands.”

MacArthur later wrote: “‘I shall return’ seemed a promise of magic to the Filipinos. It lit a flame that became a symbol which focused the nation’s indomitable will and at whose shrine it finally attained victory and, once again, found freedom. It was scraped in the sands of the beaches, it was daubed on the walls of the barrios, it was stamped on the mail, it was whispered in the cloisters of the church. It became the BATTLE CRY of a great underground swell that no Japanese bayonet could still.” Just when it seemed their spirits had reached their nadir and the situation couldn’t get any worse, one man’s brash promise--a single word of hope—BEGAN TO STIR AND COME ALIVE within their breasts. This was because the Filipinos KNEW and TRUSTED MacArthur, and they firmly believed he COULD bring to pass precisely what he SAID he would.

However, the year 1942 proved to be a very dark time for the Allies, with Nazi forces sweeping across Europe and Russia, the Japanese Navy in control of most of the Western Pacific, and the British Empire under siege. American and British forces experienced the humiliating surrender of Corregidor and that was followed by the brutal Bataan Death March. Because President Roosevelt considered the war in Europe to be his immediate priority, the Filipino people were not at all confident that America would come through for them. President Roosevelt subsequently promoted Gen. MacArthur to the post of Supreme Commander of the Southwest Pacific Forces and at once began preparing for his return to the Philippines.

It took almost two years but on Oct. 20th, 1944, MacArthur DID return. Landing in Palo, Leyte, he launched America’s campaign for the recapture and liberation of the Philippines from Japanese occupation. Wading ashore on Leyte Island, he stood before waiting cameras and microphones and broadcast to the world that he was now FULFILLING his promise to them:

“People of the Philippines: I HAVE RETURNED. By the grace of Almighty God our forces stand again on Philippine soil—soil consecrated in the blood of our two peoples. We have come dedicated and committed to the task of destroying every vestige of enemy control over your daily lives, and of restoring upon a foundation of indestructible strength, the liberties of your people.”

ALSO on that beach that day, and standing close enough to hear every word uttered by the General himself, was a 27-year-old member of the Army Corps of Engineers from Iselin, New Jersey. That eyewitness to history was my father, Sgt. Howard L. Wood. He related to me many times how proud he was of our nation and ESPECIALLY its military as he listened to that speech, and though many months of intense fighting still lay before them, he and his men were never more confident of VICTORY than they were on that day.

In January 1945, MacArthur’s forces invaded the main Philippine island of Luzon. In February, Japanese forces at Bataan were cut off, and Corregidor was captured. Manila, the Philippine capital, fell in March, and in June, MacArthur announced his offensive operations on Luzon to be at an end; although scattered resistance continued until the war ended in August. Only a third of the men MacArthur left behind in March of 1942 survived to see his return. “I’m a little late,” he told them, “but we finally came.” Almost one year from the date of his promise, victory was sealed on Sept, 2, 1945 when MacArthur accepted the Japanese terms of surrender aboard the USS Missouri, thus bringing an end to the most violent chapter in world history.

As MacArthur’s promise to return sustained the Filipinos’ faith and loyalty through her DARKEST HOURS, so does God’s promise to US that he will never leave or forsake US, that his love is from everlasting to everlasting and will sustain US even through the DARKEST OF NIGHTS. By extending his promise to redeem the Jews when they LEAST DESERVED it, God displayed an unconditional love for all the world to see. Then by fulfilling this promise with the birth of his son Jesus some seven hundred years later, God demonstrated how HIS WORD is HIS BOND, that when Jehovah SPEAKS, God CAN be trusted to fulfill his vows.

In the SAME way, WE are assured that God will be just as faithful and compassionate and long-suffering towards US--even when WE don't deserve it. Thus, as EMMANUEL, "GOD WITH US," THE BIRTH OF JESUS becomes the greatest sign of God's faithfulness to his people- THE JEWS, it NO LESS becomes the greatest testament of God’s love FOR YOU AND FOR ME. As that child became God’s sign of hope to a people in the midst of their greatest national crisis, so does it become God’s answer for US in the midst of our OWN personal crises. Two thousand years before MacArthur said those famous words, “I shall return,” another person uttered that VERY SAME promise when he told his disciples, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I WILL COME AGAIN and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:3)

Hence, Advent remains our GUARANTEE that regardless of how hard times may be or how difficult our lives may become, there is ALWAYS reason to hope for God has PLEDGED himself to us. We are assured that he will ALWAYS be there for us, that he will NEVER forsake or abandon us- EVER! And so now you know why the name Emmanuel remains so precious to us after all these years and why we STILL sing of that name TODAY. It is a way of reminding ourselves how God’s prescription for US--as it was for those Israelites--is EVER THE SAME. It REMAINS Emmanuel- “God WITH us," "God FOR us." Let us pray...

Gracious God, in this season of Advent, may we remember that with the birth of your Son Jesus Christ, the long-promised Immanuel, you birthed hope for the world when without him there was none. The unconditional love we have received by being forgiven our sins and then given the promise of your abiding presence has more than equipped us to overcome whatever would beat us down and rob us of your peace and joy. Help us to remember what a gift your Son has been to us and to trust that he will indeed help us through each trial and every difficulty. Amen.