

## **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

November 28, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Luke 21:25-36**

Happy Advent, everybody!

Quick show of hands: How many of you have set up your Christmas decorations?

Nice. Now, another show of hands: How many of you have had your Christmas decorations set up for a few weeks already?

Awesome. Now...let's see how many of you out there are like me: How many of you aren't entirely sure where you have your Christmas decorations stored, and you think you *might* manage to find them and get them set up before December 25 this year...but no promises?

Yay. You are my people.

It seems like around here, people haven't been going totally crazy getting all decked out for Christmas *too* early this year...but that's not the case everywhere.

I had to laugh – a police department in North Ridgeville, Ohio made a tongue-in-cheek Facebook post on Halloween this year that threatened residents with disorderly conduct charges if they dared to put up Christmas decorations in November – and aggravated riot charges if whole streets got together to decorate early. That post was picked up by news outlets as serious and evidently caused a lot of trouble for that local police department.

But then, on the other side of the coin, psychologists have said that despite what North Ridgeville police chief Ebenezer Scrooge might say, decorating early might actually make you happier. Christmas decorations trigger a release of dopamine – the feel-good hormone in our brains that lifts our spirits.

So, just so that you all know, I am breaking just about every single one of my own personal rules this year.

I am one of those really annoying, infuriating pastors who dutifully refuses every single year to play any Christmas music until *at least* the third Sunday of Advent. In my own home, our Christmas tree and decorations usually don't go up until about a week or so before Christmas. I push it off as long as I can.

And there is a good reason for that. And no, it is not procrastination. Okay, maybe it is procrastination. But there's also a good liturgical reason. Christmas hasn't started yet. In the church, the Christmas season does not start the day after Thanksgiving. And it

certainly doesn't start the day after Halloween. In fact, Christmas doesn't start until Christmas Day, and then, it lasts all the way until January 6, the day of Epiphany when we celebrate the gifts of the wise men.

What we have instead, between now and Christmas, is a completely different season: the season of Advent. And the way we celebrate it now, it's basically become a season of getting ready for Christmas. It's the time when we deck the halls and wrap the gifts and cook the food and make our travel arrangements. And everywhere we go, Christmas music is blaring over radio stations and loudspeakers.

And it's easy to see why. Christmas is pretty fabulous. Show me a kid whose favorite holiday is something other than Christmas. Show me a grown-up who doesn't have at least some feelings of nostalgia around this season, even if those feelings may be messy and complicated sometimes. Personally, I *love* Christmas goodies, and vegging out to feel-good Hallmark Christmas movies, and I love winter, and snow, and snuggling up underneath a blanket with a good book and a mug of peppermint hot cocoa.

I love pulling out my collection of nativity sets, and as I look at the different pieces, imagining what that night might have been like, more than 2000 years ago – that night when an unmarried teenage girl went into labor and had her baby in a barn miles and miles away from home, and a star appeared in the sky, and the angels sang, and hope came into the world.

And who among us isn't looking for signs of hope? Especially this year. With everything that is going on in the world, we as a people are desperately searching for good news. For a little bit more hope and love and joy and peace in our lives. For any sign that we can find, that Emmanuel – God with us – is still with us. Is still in control, when life itself feels so out-of-control.

And so, my friends, even though it goes against every fiber of my being, this year I am giving you an early Christmas present: We are going to be singing Christmas music every single week, all the way through Advent. You're welcome.

And not only are we going to be singing Christmas music, but we are going to be talking about it, too. In our new series "Sing We Now of Christmas," where we will be looking at a different Christmas song each week, that goes with the Advent theme for that week.

So this week, we are actually starting with one of the oldest hymns in the hymnal: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

When some of you talk about loving the "old hymns," I'm pretty sure you are not talking about hymns *this* old.

Some sources say that this hymn dates back as much as *fifteen centuries*, to the 500s A.D.

It was originally written as a seven-stanza antiphon. What is that, you say?

Well, go ahead and pull out your hymnal for a moment, and turn to, let's say, page 754. Or really, any page around there. (Those of you watching this at home, I'll put up that page on the screen for you to see). This is the part of the hymnal that we call the "Psalter." Where we have pieces of many of the psalms printed, for us to read together as a congregation in worship. Up above the text are a few lines of music – sung responses. And then if you look down in the Psalm itself, there are a couple of red Rs printed there – indicating that that is when you are supposed to sing the response.

Those sung responses are what are known as antiphons.

So, way back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and continuing all the way up into the present day, there was this collection of seven sung responses – seven antiphons, called the "O Antiphons" – because each one started with the letter O. Each one of these antiphons was basically a sung (or chanted) prayer, using a word from the Old Testament describing Christ, and each one of them praying for Christ to come and put things right with the world.

So, for the seven days leading up to Christmas, in monasteries all across the world, they would use a different one of these antiphons each night during their evening prayers as their sung response to the scripture reading for that day.

As time went on, these antiphons were translated from Latin into other languages – including English – and in the 1800s the text was set to the tune that we know and love today.

And over the years, it has been sung and arranged and recorded in many different styles – from Latin chant, to a cappella arrangements, pop, and even punk rock. It is a classic Advent hymn, but it is included on Christmas albums everywhere.

And that's really interesting, because as an Advent hymn, it doesn't have...really...*any* of the things you might think of in a Christmas song. No holly, or ivy...no Mary and Joseph...no deck the halls or joy to the world or angels singing or stars in the sky. And in fact, it's not really a happy song at all.

It's a song of longing. It's a prayer. A plea, almost, for God to come. For hope to come into the world and put things right again.

Take the first verse, for example:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel,*

*that mourns in lonely exile here.*

So right off the bat we have a picture of Israel – or Judah – in exile. Not the happiest time in Israel's history. Praying for God to come and be with us and break us free. To set free all of those in captivity who have started to lose hope.

The second verse is a little happier...but not much:

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,  
and order all things far and nigh.*

The implication being, that things as they stand are disordered. Chaotic. A mess. So please come, O God, and put things back where they should be.

*O come, O come, great Lord of might,  
who to thy tribes on Sinai's height  
in ancient times once gave the law  
in cloud and majesty and awe.*

So...let's remember *that* story. When Moses was up on the mountain receiving the law from God, the Israelites were down at the base of the mountain building a golden calf to worship. Which just underscored our human need for God to give us boundaries. "Do this, and don't do this," because when left to our own devices we will make a royal mess of things. "Come, O Lord, and show us what we need to do, especially when life feels so upside-down."

But then, we finish each verse with a refrain that gets to the heart of what this song is all about. In the midst of exile and sin and pain and chaos and brokenness, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

It is a word of hope. Hope that when the worst is upon us; hope that when we are not living at our best; hope that when the world seems upside-down; hope that when disaster seems to lurk around every corner, God is near. Christ is coming. We are not alone. And, in the words of our scripture reading today, the kingdom of God is near.

Today's scripture is, in a lot of ways, very much like this hymn. It is not a pleasant one to read. It's not a happy one to preach. There's a lot of doom and gloom and disaster and pain. Like the story from Mark's gospel that we read a couple of weeks ago, foretelling the destruction of the second temple, today's reading is looking ahead toward deep unpleasantness that is to come. Confusion and foreboding.

- Distress among nations.
- Roaring of the sea and the waves – hurricanes and tsunamis.
- People fainting from fear – and here, the Greek word for "faint" actually means an inability to breathe. People who can't catch their breath because the fear over the state of the world is so crippling. Panic attacks, in essence.

“When you see these signs,” Luke tells us; when the world is as messy and confusing as you have ever seen it; when whole countries are ripped apart; when natural disasters lurk everywhere; when the news is so bad that it causes panic attacks and mental health crises, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”  
“When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

When all seems lost, Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”  
When hope seems gone, Rejoice! For even during earth-rending moments, God is near.

Friends, I started today by telling you that my Christmas present to you is that we get to sing Christmas carols early this year. But the truth is, it’s my Christmas present to myself, too. I might also put up my Christmas tree early, and set up my nativity scenes early for a change. (And, by early, I mean...when normal people do it.)

Because while it is true: Christmas is not here yet. It’s still Advent. Jesus is still firmly planted in Mary’s belly and isn’t due to be born for another 4 weeks, and there is no amount of eating watermelon and spicy foods and riding on the back of a donkey that is going to change that. But nevertheless there are just some years that we need an early reminder that hope is not lost. And this is one of those years. Which is, I think, why so many people were seen putting out Christmas lights as early as November 1 – much to the dismay of a certain Ohio police department.

It’s because, in years like the year we’ve just had, we need an antiphon – a song in our hearts that stands as a recurring response to the chaotic turmoil of life. We need a song to sing that will light our way to Bethlehem when our path grows dark.

We need a refrain that will remind us over and over and over again that when life gets messy and overwhelming and sad and scary; when the nations are distressed and the waves roar and the people faint with fear, God is with us and the kingdom of God is not far off.

We need songs that tell us that there is hope to be had. That remind us of the promise: Emmanuel shall come to thee. For love came down at Christmas. God has brought joy to the world. So with the herald angels we can sing: “Peace on earth, and mercy mild: God and sinners reconciled.”

Because the truth is, without this recurring song inside of us, we will look at the news and begin to think that that is all there is. Stock markets crashing; a new strain of COVID making its way through Africa; contents of store shelves sitting on ships and not going anywhere; political arguments taking over Thanksgiving dinner table conversations.

Nation dividing against nation; wind and waves swirling; panic ensuing.

But then, into the middle of all of that – the middle of the messiness and the confusion – that’s when a star lit the night sky and the sound of the angels singing pierced the darkness. And the song of God’s hope continues to light our darkness today.

So this Advent, let us sing our Christmas carols early and loudly and often, as a resounding refrain; an answer to the turmoil of life; a constant reminder that God is here. Christ is coming. And the kingdom of God is at hand.