

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Matthew 24:36-44

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Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Matthew 24:36-44

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

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

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and put death's dark shadows to flight.

O come thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh; to us the path of knowledge show, and cause us in her ways to go.

O come, Desire of nations, bind all people on one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and quarrels cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace. ⁱ

This beloved hymn which has its roots in the 9th century is also a prayer for the first and the second coming of Christ. We go back to our faith ancestors in ancient Israel who longed, prayed and cried for the first coming of the Messiah, just as we join the yearning chorus of the Christian church for the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to complete the history of redemption at an unexpected hour.

In the four weeks of Advent we walk with the exiled Israelites as they heard the prophets warnings about faithful living and calls for repentance as well as God's promises of hope, restoration and redemption. We hear the frustrated lament that the psalmist spoke for the

oppressed people enduring imperial conquest, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We wonder with the pregnant Israelite women who would speculate whether or not the child in her womb was a son, and if a son, if he might indeed be the Messiah. We celebrate with Elizabeth and Zechariah, who like Sara and Abraham, rejoiced at the birth of very special sons in their old age. We are with Mary and Joseph as they receive heavenly and extraordinary, unbelievable news. We are with John the Baptist as he prepares the way for Emmanuel, for God with us. We wait for the Messiah, the One, who will bind all people on one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and quarrels cease and fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.

But we know that when that day does come, when Christmas morning dawns with angels’ Alleluias and a radiant Bethlehem star, our waiting will not be over.

When Emmanuel arrives as God with us — when the Day-spring is cradled in Mary’s arms — when Wisdom cries in his manger—when the Desire of nations is visited by awed shepherds--we will be reminded that redemption has only just begun. It is of course, a tremendous, glorious ‘only’ as God incarnate, the Messiah, has begun the life, the ministry, the welcoming, the teaching, the healing as well as his journey to the cross and beyond. Our joy is great at this first coming of Christ as we rejoice in the ‘already’ we do not lose sight, nor hope, that we are still in the ‘not yet.’

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” is an anthem, a plea, of deep, intense longing. In somber words, a mournful tone, and a plaintive tune, we sing of the world before Jesus came at all and also, before Christ comes yet again. We still need Emmanuel to ransom and rescue us from all that holds us captive.

We live in the midst of a dire present, uncertain of the future, now, just as those who waited for the first coming of Christ, for the coming of Emmanuel. Our faith journey stands us in the rejoicing of the “already” redeemed as it also calls us to reach for the “not-yet” redeemed. We are as Paul says, ”as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.”ⁱⁱ

We live amid “gloomy clouds of night” and, even more ominously, in the face of ‘death’s deep shadows’ as our world is immersed in disease, poverty, oppression, violence, discrimination, injustice, climate abuse, natural disaster, greed, dangerous powers, conflict, terrorism and war. Our personal lives all know times of disorder and chaos with ‘envy, strife, and quarrels.’

In the midst of the joyful, happy and exuberant carols we will sing during Advent and Christmas, it is good news that there are hymns written for our real world of sorrowful joy, as well as the real world of overwhelming joy. We hear that in every verse, in every name for Emmanuel, as every name for the Messiah, for Jesus, is full of hope,

As Emmanuel--“God with us”--he will pay the ransom that only the Son of God can pay.

As the Day-spring--the dawn of God’s kingdom--he is the light of the world, and will forever banish the hopelessness of darkness.

As the Wisdom from on high he will teach us his ways that we may walk in his paths.

And as the Desire of nations he will gather the ransomed from every people and make us a kingdom of peace, and of blessing, where swords will not be raised against one another and we shall not learn war anymore.

This is who Jesus is. This is what he has already achieved and what he will complete. With each verse a prayer for Emmanuel, we sing with melancholy just as we also rejoice that Emmanuel shall come to us yet again.

In this time of already/not yet, as only God knows the day and the hour, we live as those in the days before the flood as we eat, drink and marry. We must be awake, we are to be out in

the fields continuing to do all that Jesus taught us to do, commanded us to do, living as we were created to live, so that we are ready for the unexpected hour. We must be awake, grinding away together at the inequities and injustices of the world just as Jesus showed us the way, so that we are ready for the unexpected hour.

In this time of already/not yet, we rejoice not only in anticipation of the healing of the world and the redemption of all, but also in all the ways the church, the body of Christ, continues to break into the places of the world that are captive, lonely and gloomy.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee. Amen.

ⁱ *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, #154 Worship & Rejoice hymnal

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 6:10a