

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, the world awaits in silence. We wait and hope for the completion of creation with the coming of God-in-Human, the incarnation of all our longings. While we wait, we seek to be your people, to refine ourselves, to be prepared to receive the Christ Child with hearts full of wonder, love, and care for all your blessed creation. As we live fully in the season, guide us to remember that the season is best celebrated when we live into the example of Jesus Christ in living a life of mercy, love and care. Help us to live into that life as we lift up our joys, concerns, and prayers that we have lifted up in word or in our hearts this day. You know all those things we carry with us, God, even when we have a hard time naming them. We pray you would walk with us in our joys, struggles, and growth into stronger people of Christ each day.

Help us, Holy God, to approach the season with reverence, with openness, with recognizing the fullness of time in which the Lord comes. Help us to gain appreciation for every moment, for every opportunity to be your people and grow in ways that glorify you and the Gospel we have pledged to spread when we take on the name of "Christian." Even as we say "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," help us to live in a way that honors the life of Emmanuel by helping all the world to see everyday that God is with us. We pray in the name of the promised one we welcome soon, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

(Long pause) Some things are worth waiting for. This sermon, of course, is one of them; I know you've been on the edge of your seats throughout all of service. Christmas is another one, but most often, no one wants to wait. It's the end of October, and there's already Christmas stuff all over the place. My dear wife knows this makes me grumpy; I see

no reason for us to jump ahead of ourselves, for all things come in their due time and often should not be rushed. We have that luxury because we know when Christmas will come. What if we had no idea when Christmas would come? What if we had to wait months, years, centuries, for all our hopes to become reality? Can you imagine it? We would need to live lives of hope that God would move in God's time. This is the heart of the awaiting spirit; the focus is not on the completion of the hope but on readying ourselves to receive the completion most fully. This is the heart of Advent: faithful waiting and preparation, not for the certainty but for the surprise of Christmas morning when all our hopes come to being in the form of a vulnerable child.

This is the second week of Advent. There are many ways in which we can interpret the weeks, but we know this week as the week of preparation. Indeed, Advent is the season where we recognize preparation for the coming of light into the world. And in many ways, we sing hymns as a sign of our preparation. It's a hopeful thing. I prefer hymns so much instead of contemporary Christian music because of the deep richness of hymns. There is rich theology, there is rich history, there is rich meaning in the words we sing. Let's take this season as a time to look into the richness of some of the hymns we enjoy singing, and through that richness, maybe we can appreciate singing them even more and dig deeper into the meaning of the season. As this is the week where we especially recognize preparation, we recognize a hymn that focuses upon faithful waiting and preparation: "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." This is definitely my favorite Advent hymn; it reveals so much longing and waiting with a history that often we do not recognize. Let us be people of preparation as we look at the historical background of the hymn's theology and see some lessons to integrate into our observation of Advent through the hymn and our scripture.

Time for a little history lesson. Bear with me, but I promise you it's all worth it. To get the full picture, we have to go back a ways...a long ways...to the time of the Kings and the Divided Kingdom. There was the greatest King of Israel's history, David, and his son, Solomon, followed him. Both of them messed up...a lot...along the way, but the biggest mess was to be made after the time of Solomon. Solomon's son Rehoboam, did not follow the advice of his elders but instead did what his friends told him to do. He made a big mistake in trying to oppress the people with great amounts of forced labor after the death of his father, so the people revolted. Put simply, it was the birth of the Divided Kingdom of Israel and Judah. They continued on as individual kingdoms, some Kings followed God, some did not, but both would share the same fate. In 722 BC, Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and exiled. Scripture mostly follows the other Kingdom. The Kingdom of Judah continued, but it was invaded by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and the temple was destroyed. They were sent into exile to Babylon. Back in that day, the common practice was to remove the people from the land, not to take hold of the land with the people in it. The people were without the Promised Land, so they were completely lost. To them, the land was the tangible sign of God's promise and favor, but that was taken away. God seemed against them, they thought. Did God leave them permanently? Were God's promises still true?

There were no Kings anymore, so God's voice became more prominent in the voice and writings of the Prophets. Most Prophets wrote in the time of the Exile. Their writings seem so strange to us because they were speaking to the audience who were around or in the time of the Exile. Nevertheless, in the writings of judgment and destruction come signs of restoration, when Israel would become itself once again. In time, Babylon was conquered by the Persians (in the time were Ruth is set), and the people are allowed to

return to the land. But Israel is still not peaceful, for they are conquered by the Romans. Throughout came hope of the anointed one of God who would restore the Kingdom and the line of the Kings from David in a lasting way. Indeed, “Messiah” means “anointed.” Israel’s feeling of exile never really ended, even up to the time of Christ’s coming. They were strangers in a strange land, always under someone else’s control. They took scriptures like the passage we read from Isaiah to allude to the future restoration coming from the line of David, from the stump of Jesse. Enter Jesus, from the line of David, as the anointed.

End the history lesson. Now, I invite you to turn to page 169 in our Brown Hymnal to look at the hymn itself. The first line sets the tone: “O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and Ransom Captive Israel, that Mourns in Lowly Exile here.” We see a bit of Israel’s historical feeling of emptiness, lacking their King, while calling for completeness. This hymn is about anticipation, the deep longing and pains of waiting. While it was written long after the despair of exile, it captures some of the sentiment we can only imagine those people felt. They wanted the completeness of the Kingdom and the Promised Land restored, and that could only come from God and God’s anointed. We have no idea what exile is or feels like; we have no idea what it feels like to be ripped from the very centers of our meaning. We do not question that God will be with us, but when we look at this historical context and try to respect it, we understand a new mentality of preparation and what it means to truly wait.

This hymn speaks of preparation, as the people open their hearts to receive the coming of Emmanuel, which means “God with Us.” It dissolved notions that God was gone. We think of preparing for the coming of Emmanuel in simple ways, in practical ways, like cleaning the house and getting everything ready to receive guests for the celebration of Christmas, but this preparation is deeper and more life-changing. It calls the people to

open their hearts to the coming of Emmanuel. But what does mean? I think we see some of this when we look at our scripture from Matthew. John the Baptist was a harsh man, quite frankly. His message was not popular; it was a shocking one. Nevertheless, it was a legitimate one. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume or say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from the stones to raise up children to Abraham." It's not about our name but our lives. In our day, we do not rest on our name as Christians but live more fully in his image. We bear fruit of love, kindness, and care for to the world Emmanuel came to care for, we best welcome Emmanuel into the world. John simply calls us talk the talk and walk the walk, for that is the way to prepare.

As we learn how to live out the meaning of this hymn more fully, we reflect upon one word repeated in our discussion time and again: waiting. Who likes waiting? (Pause) Do you? No one does; if that was the case, the DMV would be a pretty happening place. Indeed, we tend to be a people of instant gratification, of "we need it five minutes ago." The stores of course prepare for Christmas before the end of Halloween, for they choose to have no notion of waiting. This song does not bear that out. It calls us to a special kind of waiting, a holy kind of waiting. There is anticipation, but that anticipation is grounded elsewhere than the all too often refrain of "it's what I want."

The message instead is rooted in the restoration and growth of Israel and an eternal hope in God. Can we say the same thing these days? Often, it does not feel so. When we go after what we want, then we short circuit God. God moves in God's own time, and that's a hard reality to plug into. On the same token, we have a really bad notion of what it means to wait. It seems to me, to quote my dear wife's late Grandmother, that all we do when we wait is "sitting around with our teeth in our mouths." That's never the feeling I get from

what I understand from the scriptures. Indeed, there are callings for patience throughout scripture, but it means we be active as God's people. We do not wait silently and quietly, but we prepare in action. We pave the way for Emmanuel. As we discussed in the past, the Kingdom of God doesn't come all at once. It comes slowly, with our loving actions in Christ's name. I saw a profound quote about "Keeping Christ in Christmas." One person pegged it down very well, because it's not our words but our actions that matter. It was Steve Maraboli that said, "Want to keep Christ in Christmas? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, forgive the guilty, welcome the unwanted, care for the ill, love your enemies, and do unto others as you would have done unto you." I can think of nothing better to recognize this time of Advent, for we pave the way for Christ in a way he wants us to live. This is faithful waiting, for we prepare utilizing God's purposes and anticipate that God will bring all to fullness. That is the hope when we say, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," for God changes everything when he comes; he calls us to recognize this every day in how we live.

We are entering the middle of Advent; can you believe it? But the preparation doesn't end. We enter a season of hope, of peace, of growth. The Jews of long ago were an exiled people who had to wait for their redemption, and, indeed, we still wait for the Kingdom to fully come but in a new way. Nevertheless, they girded themselves with hopefulness and prepared for their hope to become tangible. In the coming weeks, we will discuss what made Emmanuel truly "God with us." Next week, let's look at the topic of the third Sunday of Advent, as we add another tool to our preparation toolbox: joy. Until that time, let our lives be inspiring holy waiting, for we do not control God and God's purposes, but we trust they will come to completeness in the fullness of time. We continue to say, with our ancestors of the faith, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Amen and Amen.