

“O COME, EMMANUEL!”:

Sermon Manuscripts for A Worship Series Based on the O Antiphons

Fred N. Seay

Please note:

You may use these sermons for your own preparation. If you use portions of them in your own preaching, please acknowledge the source both in your preaching and in your manuscript by including the following copyright: Fred N. Seay © 2023 *Reformed Worship*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

Sermon: “Come Dayspring”

This year’s Advent sermon series is based upon the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” It is often the first carol we sing to begin Advent. The hymn is drawn in turn from a very ancient prayer from around 800 A.D., a litany of call and response known as “The O Antiphons.” Around the ninth century of the Common Era they began to be part of evening prayer in northern Europe in the last week leading to Christmas Day. Allow me to set the stage...

A group of worshipers would gather beginning on December 17, to end the day with evening prayers. The shortest days of the year in the Northern Hemisphere were upon them, and most of the time the darkness would be combined with bitter cold. They would recite together the Magnificat, Mary’s Song (Luke 1:47-55). They would use Mary’s words to praise God, who “has shown strength with his arm...scattered the proud...brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly...filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty... helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy...” Then amid cold darkness pierced by flickering candles, they would go from remembrance of wonders past to present needs and future longings. They would chant what we now know as the O Antiphons. (Robert J. Morgan, *Come Let Us Adore Him: Stories Behind the Most Cherished Christmas Hymns* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas L. Nelson, 2005) pp. 64-65).

The prayer leader would call out a title for Jesus drawn from the Old Testament, and speak to some part of his identity as the Messiah. There are seven Antiphons in the prayer that we now have in the *Book of Common Worship*. Some hymnals keep all seven verses and others trim the verses to five, four, or three. Most versions of the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” have four stanzas.

As we heard in the opening of worship today, “Emmanuel” means “God with us.” AnotherThe second stanza has tThe title for Jesus that we are focusing on this morning is: “Dayspring.” It is taken from the Old English of the King James Version of the Bible and means “Sunrise” or “Dawn.” In the fifth of the O Antiphons, it is rendered “Radiant Dawn.”

Darkness is an Advent theme. Not only (in our hemisphere) do the days grow noticeably shorter and darker in mid to late December. In both Scripture readings for today, times are dark as well. In Malachi, we find some of the last words recorded as proclaimed by a prophet of Yahweh before four hundred years of apparent divine silence. Darkness has fallen over the land. Divine judgment is coming. But for people of faith, even amid deep darkness light can shine. In Malachi’s proclamation, the “Sun of Righteousness” will rise. In parts of the Old Testament, the very light of the sun bears witness to God. It could be a visible sign of the holiness, truth, power, and even vengeance of Yahweh (William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 84-86.).

In the New Testament reading, the first glow of sunrise is on the horizon, discernible to the faithful eyes of the priest Zechariah. He has just regained the power of speech after nine months. Perhaps he is cradling his baby son John, newly circumcised and named, in his arms as praise wells up from deep within. Maybe his voice was husky and rough, unused as it was for so long, as he sang of the coming of the Messiah and the role John would play in preparing the way for God to visit God’s people. As the old King James version renders his words, “. . .the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The Sun of Righteousness of Malachi, the Dayspring of Zechariah, is the Lord Jesus. He is the light that has already come into the world, who could not be smothered by the darkness. He is the Light we are also awaiting still, the one who “disperse the gloomy clouds of night” and bring God’s justice and healing to the world.

Advent is a mix of looking to Christ’s coming in the past, anticipating his return in the future, and remembering that he is present *now*—not least among, in, and through his faithful disciples. How do we see the “Dayspring”, the first rays of the Sun of Righteousness, here and now? While we await his coming, Christ’s light shines *in us*. Our Advent waiting is not passive or withdrawn. We are in the service of our Lord . In our acts of discipleship and service, in the present, the light of Christ shines.

Father Alfred Delp is a figure whose words and witness continue to inspire many. He was a Jesuit priest who opposed Adolph Hitler and the Nazis during World War II. He was arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned, tortured, and finally executed in 1944. His quote from prison, “Light the candles wherever you can, wherever you have them,” re-surfaced a few

Christmases ago and was quoted frequently. Just before his arrest, he gave a sermon in which he spoke of how our lives in Christ are like candles:

“This is a peaceful, reticent, but constant shining. This is giving light at the cost of one’s own substance, so that one is consumed in the process. Anyone who wants to comprehend Christ’s message of light...must comprehend this one thing: the mission, the duty to shine, to draw others, to seek, to heal, to do good, at the cost of one’s own substance” (Alfred Delp, *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings* (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 53).

What can that look like outside of the extreme context of a Gestapo prison? Here is some Advent homework for you.

The first rays of the Dayspring, the Radiant Dawn, shine when we resist being shaped and distorted by evil, especially when evil appears perfectly logical, most convenient, and highly prevalent. This week, “compare and contrast” anything that stirs you to anger and hatred with the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

The first rays of the Sun of Righteousness begin to shine in acts of selfless service and self-giving in Christ’s name. This week, translate that into showing love through an act of service for someone who can do absolutely nothing for you in return.

And as you do these things, pray without ceasing, “Come, Radiant Dawn...come, Dayspring...come, O come, Emmanuel!”

Semon: “Come Wisdom”

The prayer from which “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is drawn is very, very old. It probably began to be used in its final form during evening prayers for the last week of Advent by the 800s A.D. It was not written down fully in Latin until around 1710. In the mid-1800s the manuscript was found by an Anglican priest, the Reverend John Mason Neale. He could not abide the “new wave sound” of the hymns of composers such as Isaac Watts, and Charles Wesley, that were gaining great popularity. (These are among the hymns some consider very old-fashioned today,. Rev. Neale longed to help the Church of his time return to the beauty and wisdom embodied in long-established traditions in worship. He translated the O Antiphons into 19th century English. The hymn we just sang before the Prayer for Illumination, the carol upon which this year’s Advent sermon series is based, was published in 1851 (Gordon Giles, *O Come Emmanuel: A Musical Tour of Daily Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2006), p. 67).

The story of its origin offers us some profound advice for worship through music and hymns in late 2021. There is an exhortation that occurs several times in the Bible, “Sing a new song to the Lord.” We need not fear every new hymn, praise song, musical instrument, or use of

technology in worship if they help us glorify God, feed and mold and strengthen our faith, and even draw others to God. But neither should we fail to note that the admonition to sing a new song is embedded in texts that were “Spirit-breathed” millennia ago.

We have lived about a decade crammed into two years- and amid all that has been frightening and unwelcome, it has also been an exciting age. Space has opened up for anyone with the money to buy the ride, and 90- year- old William Shatner has joined the ranks of amateur astronauts. In an age of rapid change in technology and society and culture, how do we live as a people who are conscious that we belong to God in life and in death? With the generations that prayed and sang before us, we too can appeal fervently,

“Come, O 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...”

This time of year, many of us dig into the treasure chests of Christmases past. Some of the decorations we put out are visible reminders of loved ones and the experiences we shared with them, and the lessons they passed on to us. Our daughter, who is 23, recently discovered the joys of vinyl records. We put some of those on as we decorated our house after Thanksgiving, and heard scratchy, distant but beautiful songs that were recorded in the distant 1950s and 1960s. There is another voice that comes to us out of the even more distant past, that of Wisdom at the start of Proverbs 8:6—“Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my mouth will come what is right.”

There is a beautiful portrait of Wisdom in that chapter of Proverbs. Wisdom is far more than the body and sum of knowledge, of all the facts which human beings can learn. Wisdom is deeply personal. In both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, Wisdom is a feminine gender noun. In Proverbs 8, Wisdom sounds like an excited child, thrilled to accompany the Creator as the creation is called and spun into being.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul is beginning a pastoral intervention with the Church in Corinth. Some of the members had no problem with low self-esteem, especially in considering themselves highly gifted and intelligent. Paul reminds them that the personification of the divine Wisdom is Jesus Christ—and crucified, at that. He *is* the Wisdom of God. He is not a subject to be studied and mastered, a body of knowledge to be committed to memory, debated over, or used for personal advancement, but a living Person.

Jesus, the Wisdom of God, is part of the past—as far past as the prayerful chanting of medieval worshipers on the last six cold, dark December nights leading up the Christmas Eve. As far back as Reverend Neale, seeking to lead the Church of his time and place back to tried and true spiritual treasure. As far back as his disciples who have strived to open the eyes of the Church to his presence among the poor and shunned around them.

He is also living and present—as close as bread that can be torn apart and tasted, or a cup of sweet juice that can be savored. Christ embodies and contains all the Wisdom of heaven, and will share what we need for our daily lives and struggles. When we are bound to him by faith, he will be fully part of us, ready to give us wisdom for the living of our days. For the Wisdom from on High knows what our lives are like. There is a prayer for Christmas Day that has been in the Church of Scotland:

“Today, O God, the soles of your feet have touched the earth. Today, the back street, the forgotten place has been lit up with significance. Today, the households of Earth welcome the King of heaven. For you have become one of us... (Howard L. Rice and Lamar Williamson, Eds., *A Book of Reformed Prayers* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), p. 210).

How do we live in hope and confidence as 2021 fades into 2022? There is another hymn—old for us, for it was written in 1930, but it would have appalled Reverend Neale with its newness. In “God of Grace and God of Glory”, a plea to God recurs in all the verses: “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of this hour...for the facing of this hour...for the living of these days...lest we kiss Thy kingdom’s goal...that we fail not ‘man’ nor Thee.”

As we come to the Lord’s Table, and receive the bread and cup of Communion, may we remember that the Wisdom from on high offers us access to him. He knows the mysteries of highest heavens, and the grittiest realities of life on this earth. And he will help us with the living of these days, in this time and this place.

Sermon: “Come, Desire of Nations”

Our Old Testament reading is set in a time of disappointment. Haggai was called to preach during the years soon after the people of Judah’s return from decades of exile in Babylon. Coming home had been a dream and longing for 70 years. Reality was a hardscrabble life in a wrecked Jerusalem with a ruined temple, set in a ravaged landscape. They believed in God, and knew the stories of miracles and wonders from the days of Moses and the Exodus. But they wondered where the roof over their heads, and their meals, would come from. Rebuilding the Temple was a worthy goal but would simply have to wait until better, easier times. The resources for such a grand undertaking simply were not there. That is the setting for Haggai’s ministry and message. God calls them to rebuild the Temple, and makes several promises.

God will SHAKE THE NATIONS. If we are standing up in a moving vehicle—say, a Houston city bus or Metro train—and it suddenly begins to jolt or sway, we will naturally reach out to grab onto something to support us—the seat in front of us, an armrest, a support pole. When an entire world is shaking and heaving, we look for security, for something to

which to cling. Sometimes it has been a strong leader—history has shown repeatedly how that usually ends, with tyranny and ruin and more suffering.

Sometimes it has been the search for wealth. I remember a story from the great flood of October 1983 in Clifton, Arizona, where we lived as newlyweds. A retired copper miner was pulled from the tree to which he had clung for hours as the San Francisco River roared and surged around him. He spoke limited English, but it was enough. “Forty years- all gone. Forty years- all gone.”

God says to the people of Judah, “I’ve got this! I will shake everything, to do a new thing.”

God promises to SEND “THE DESIRED OF NATIONS.” There is some argument over the best translation of the Hebrew. In the context of Haggai, the people are worried that they do not have the material wealth needed for rebuilding the Temple. Some modern translations, such as the Jerusalem Bible, render Haggai 2:7 as God shaking the nations so that they will send their own treasure to Jerusalem for the reconstruction. Our translation (NRSV) and others have “the desired of the nations.” God’s response to God’s people is, “You worry over many things. I will meet your true and deepest need. THIS is what you and all peoples truly desire and need: my only beloved Son.”

Our New Testament reading is Mary’s Song, “The Magnificat.” When the monastery worshipers would gather in candle-lighted darkness from December 17 to 23, and pray through the O Antiphons which inspired “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”, they would first recite Mary’s Song. In Luke, Mary sings a powerful doxology after her relative Elizabeth confirms that she does indeed bear in her womb the Son of God, the Desire of Nations.

Think of all that changed so abruptly for Mary. She had a life in a stable place. When Ruth and I were dating, her mother loved watching a Spanish language telenovela, “*Maria de Nadie*” (“Nobody’s Mary”), who lived in a village so quiet and remote that “the only thing that ever comes to pass is the train.” That sort of quiet is not always a bad thing. Mary probably had a good idea of what her life would probably be like. She was committed to marry Joseph, and their families were probably planning the celebration for a later date. Their lives would certainly follow the predictable Nazareth pattern: be born, get married, raise a family, worship God and celebrate the yearly festivals of the faith, die and rest in peace. Her world would surely have been shaken severely by the Angel Gabriel’s announcement. Everything heaved and shook—but her faith in God held firm. She stepped forward and offered herself as God’s servant.

Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest in Germany, preached a sermon during Advent 1941 in Munich. At that time Adolph Hitler’s armies appeared to be winning the Second World War, to the despair of many, including Delp. Still, he saw hope amid the crumbling and heaving. “Perhaps what we modern people need most is to be genuinely shaken, so that where life is grounded, we would feel its stability; and where life is unstable and uncertain, immoral and

unprincipled, we would know that, also, and endure it”(Delp, p. 41). Amid all that she may have realized would no longer be assured for her, Mary found grounding and strength, and sang of hope.

Her song has been “cancelled” many times over the centuries. In the 1700s, it was excised from the service for evening prayer among personnel of the British Empire’s East India Company. In Argentina in the 1970s, the military government banned it when mothers of college-age children who had been kidnapped and had disappeared would recite it as they stood in the main plaza in the capital, clutching pictures of their missing loved ones (Debra Dean Murphy, “Faith Matters: Miriam of Nazareth Still Sings”, *Christian Century* (December 15, 2021), p. 37). Spurred by the Spirit, Mary sang of God enacting the promise of Haggai 2:7.

Do you feel shaking beneath our feet? Do you hear stormy winds rising? Do you feel as if the order to which we have been accustomed is being not only severely shaken, but flipped forcibly upside down? Mary might tell us to stand fast on our faith in and commitment to God and to hold on tight. For in the end, and through all the upheaval, God will keep that last promise from Haggai 2:7-9.

GOD WILL BRING GLORY AND PEACE. Where can we catch a glimpse of them even now, amid the shaking? At Advent we remember that we still look for the full brightness of glory, and the full sweetness of heaven’s peace. They began not with piles of treasure and gold but with a child born in Bethlehem and cradled in a manger. Today, amid the turmoil of 2021, the church is called to be a manger where the world can look to Jesus, one place where the world can see the meaning of the salvation he brings.

Envy, strife, and quarrels rage on in the world—all too often even within and among Christ’s people. But when we are at our Spirit-molded best, we live in peace with one another by extending and accepting the forgiveness we have received from God. We have sometimes even been instruments of God for bringing a taste of heaven’s peace among nations and in societies. In our worship, in our mission, and in our daily lives, may our song be in the spirit of the plea in the ancient invitation, set to music so many years ago, that still expresses the longing of the world:

“Come, Desire of nations bind/
all people in one heart and mind./
Bid envy, strife, and
quarrels cease/fill the whole world with heaven’s peace./

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!”