

## I. Set Up

- A. Good Morning. Intro. Welcome to guests. Today we start a new series – it’s designed to help us prepare for Advent – which is related to Christmas but a bit different.
- B. Advent is the time set aside for us to prepare ourselves – our hearts, our homes, our lives – for the coming of the Messiah.
- C. The series is called “Songs of the Season.” We are looking at some of the great Christmas hymns, unpacking their message. Looking behind the lyrics at the Scripture that inspired the writers.
- D. Today Mike will be walking us through one of the oldest Christmas songs still in circulation, It’s the 1,200-year-old hymn: *O Come O Come Emmanuel*.
- E. And we will move from the message of that hymn into communion.
- F. As we continue in worship let me frame what follow by reading Isaiah 7:14. The first verse of “O come, O come Emmanuel” is based on this prophecy. Writing hundreds of years before Christ was born, Isaiah said, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the virgin is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” With these words, Israel was introduced to Emmanuel – God with us – the hope for the Christian world held captive on a dark, sinful Earth. With these words, Advent begins. Right now...

## II. Introduction

- A. A number of years ago, back when Joe Girardi – who just recently stepped down from managing the Yankees – was playing baseball for the Cubs, he and his family attended Christ Church. And one day we ended up out for lunch and he was telling me that he was thinking about leaving Chicago to be bench coach for the Yankees under Joe Torre. And I said, I didn’t really see the need.
  - 1. My argument was, “Joe, you’re a smart guy. You went to Northwestern. You’ve played catcher (which is often understood to be the on-field manager) for your whole career.
  - 2. You’ve played in the bigs for over a dozen years. What’s left to learn? You’ve got this. Really. I get what a football coach does. And I get what a basketball coach does. But it doesn’t look to me like that much is going on for a baseball coach to do. You set the batting line up. You call a hit and run. Tell the player on first to steal. Bring in a new pitcher. You’ve got this. Or am I wrong?”
  - 3. And he said, “You have no idea what is going on. Most professional players don’t understand the game.”
- B. I found that fascinating. So I asked another former baseball player if he thought it was true. And he agreed with Girardi. And he went on to say that when he watches games on TV, he leaves the sound off, because the announcers generally have no idea what they are talking about.
- C. And then this past season I had a chance to go to a game with a guy who works in baseball analytics. And I said, “I want to see the game through your eyes. What is happening here?” And he was pointing out lots of things I had no idea about.

D. Well, it turns out that the idea that there is a lot going on that people do not understand, is not only true in baseball. It happens in lots of other things: other sports, politics, the market.

E. It's been said that there are three kinds of people: Those who make things happen; those who watch things happen and those who look around and say, "What just happened."

F. In an effort to help you not be in the third camp today, I am going to explain the song we are going to sing at the end of this service.

G. The Christmas carols we sing are underappreciated. I'm quite sure that's true with kids.

1. In *Silent Night*, they hear "round yon virgin" and think they are saying Round John Virgin – and probably picture Friar Tuck in Disney's *Robin Hood* movie.

2. In *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, most kids think we are talking about an angel named Harold.

3. In *Gloria, in excelsis deo* – which means "glory to God in the highest" – becomes "In a Chelsea stable."

H. Kid's are often in the dark on a lot of this. That's OK. That's not my concern right now. My point is, lots of adults say the right words with no idea what they mean or with no idea all that they mean. A lot is lost.

I. As our culture moves further from any type of Christian moorings, allusions people would have understood before, go unnoticed.

1. This is unfortunate because there are some very profound ideas get lost.

2. And, by the way, it's ironic because these songs were often written to teach illiterate people deep truths. Today we miss the truths the illiterate people living 1,000 years ago were dialed in on.

J. I did a series on Christmas hymns ten years ago. At that time, we looked at: *Joy to the World*, *Silent Night*, *What Child is This* and *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. This year we are repeating a few and adding some new ones.

K. Today we take up *O Come O Come Emmanuel*

1. A song whose lyrics date back to the Dark Ages, 1,200 years ago;

2. And whose melody – which is slow and majestic and a bit haunting – has ties back to the 1500s. It was initially a Latin chant. Then it was set to a melody. The version we know now is related to the melody from the 1500s but was modified in the 1800s. But any way you look at it – in an age when yesterday's paper is dated – this is something first written 1,200 years ago and it has been sung to this tune for three hundred years.<sup>1</sup>

III. We are going to focus on the lyrics in a moment, but there are some things you should see before we jump in.

A. For starters, the person who wrote this song knew the Bible very well.

1. Tradition holds that it was written by a monk. This is a guess based on the idea that, during the 700s not many people knew the Bible very well. Europe was in a bad way. The Roman Empire had collapsed; civilization had broken; life was hard; literacy was down; ignorance was up and warfare was unending. Very few people could read. Fewer still had access to a Bible. But as you are about to see, whoever wrote this hymn knew the Bible well.

2. References to things like Rod of Jesse, Dayspring, Desire of Nations are rich biblical allusions. They are not what you pick up the first time you read through the book. The person who wrote this song knew the Bible well.

B. Second: this song does a brilliant job of capturing Advent.

1. Today we focus on Christmas. Which, before it was all about presents and Egg Nog and Cyber Monday and Black Friday. Before there were debates about the artwork on Starbucks's coffee cups or whether we should go along with Happy Holidays, was a celebration focused on the birth of Jesus.

2. Advent is something different. Advent, a term that comes from the Latin word *adventus* – refers to the time of preparing for his arrival.

3. At Christ Church we do not make a lot of the Christian calendar. More liturgical or “higher” churches - like the Anglicans, Catholics or Lutherans – do.

a) They divide the year into a series of seasons, each with their own theological focus and color and music and theme.

b) And as a rule, in those churches the sermon is based on the Gospel text that corresponds with the focus of the calendar and the goal is, every year you go through the life of Christ. And the year starts with Advent. It is kicked off right now with a focus on the announcement from the angel Gabriel to Mary telling her that she is going to give birth to the Messiah.

4. And during Advent we are supposed to adopt a mindset of preparation. We are supposed to identify with the Old Testament prophets who were waiting for the Messiah to show up the first time so we can relieve the joy on Christmas. And, we are to be aware that we are still waiting for his return.

a) Jesus showed up the first time as a baby in meekness. He inaugurated his kingdom. But what we are after – a world that works; a world without sin, suffering, pain, death, cancer, hate and war – that world doesn't happen until his return.

b) Advent is a time when we look back and think about their waiting and we seek to prepare our own hearts and lives for his return.

c) *O Come O Come Emmanuel* bounces back and forth between longing for his first coming and longing for his second coming – his return.

C. The third thing to appreciate about this song is that the music that is used today captures Advent. It has a somber, haunting vibe.<sup>2</sup>

1. There is a hint of celebration. It's not all lament. The writer wants us to have confidence in God's promises. But this isn't *Joy to the World* or *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* – which are upbeat. And that is good. We need some somber Christmas songs. We need some songs that reflect the longing, aching, yearning that still goes on. That is where some of you are right now. This isn't a moment to celebrate. You are still waiting. You want a world that works a lot better than this one is working.

2. The longer I live the more Christmas is both sadness and excitement. We want to make it a time of joy for the children. Most of them have not lived long enough to suffer. Let them see as much brightness as they can in Jesus. But let's not think that Advent must be all jolly and jingle bells.

D. There is a lot more history to uncover. For instance, this song is an Antiphon.

1. As I noted earlier, the lyrics were initially part of a Latin chant.

2. A thousand years ago, this song was sung by monks during the last week of Advent. As a rule, during that week there were seven different statements made about the Messiah – with one being sung or chanted at the start of a chorus for that day. Things change. This song eventually had seven verses, which pulled seven aspects of Christ's character together and so you were covering it all in one song. And one of the reasons to do this was to educate the common people about who Jesus was. Few songs tell the whole story about Jesus, *O Come O Come Emmanuel* – the version with all seven verses – came close.

E. The only other thing I'll say is, we are singing it today in large part because in the early 19th century an Anglican priest named John Mason Neale rescued it from obscurity.

1. Neale was reading through an ancient book of hymns.<sup>3</sup> Some people golf for relaxation; Fr. Neale apparently read ancient Latin hymns. He was a brilliant scholar. He could write and speak over twenty languages, which is 19 more than most Americans. And he had been emerging as a leading preacher in the Anglican church when he got sideways of someone in the church's hierarchy and was shunted off to the Madeira islands near Africa. This was the equivalent of Siberia. He chose to occupy his time well. While he was there he started an orphanage and a school for girls. And kept up his scholarship. One of the things he did was read old Latin books, and while doing that he ran across this song, translated it into English and sent a copy back to England. And it took off.

#### IV. Verse One

A. O come, O come

1. The initial English translation was "Draw Nigh, Draw nigh Emmanuel."<sup>4</sup> It means the same thing: Jesus, show up. We are ready. We are tired of waiting.

B. Emmanuel is one of the titles of God. It means "God with us."

1. This hymn is based on Isaiah 7, which is where the prophecy concerning Emmanuel is first given. This *passage* follows his amazing call. He gets called into heaven and sees God – God's robe fills the temple, angels are singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy." He is initially terrified and thinks he is going to die. And then he is reassured. And he ends up being one who keeps saying to people, "God is bigger than your problems."

2. Isaiah is a very important prophet and his book is key. When Jesus begins his ministry he does so by preaching a text from Isaiah.

3. Well, verse one of *O Come O Come* is based on Isaiah 7, where we are allowed to look on as God makes a promise to Ahaz, who is king of Judah. He is in a tough spot and he starts to doubt God's promises to him. And Isaiah is sent to say, "You can trust God. He is big enough to do all that He promised. In fact, you can ask for a sign."<sup>5</sup> Any sign at all, and I'll give it to you as proof. Ahaz is a pretty godless leader and he balks. So, God says, through Isaiah: OK, then I will give you a sign. A virgin is going to conceive and give birth to a son who will be God with you. This is an amazing and unthinkable and overwhelming promise.

4. It's crazy in that it's a promise that a virgin is going to conceive – and many people get sidelined by this. Last week in a small group I'm in there were objections raised to the virgin birth. This is not unusual. People today are often, "Can't we be adults here? Virgins don't get pregnant. Let's call it what it is."

5. As miracles go – it's small change. Once you accept that God is real and all powerful and that He loves us and is committed to us, then everything else is pocket change.

6. Once you accept that Jesus is God and eternal and that He set aside heaven for us, then it's not hard to say: he showed up by a divine *miracle? OK, makes sense to me.*

7. Verse one of our hymn is a request to send Emmanuel. It is a plea saying "God, show up!" that is based on Isaiah 7.

C. O Come O Come Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel that mourns in lowly exile here.

1. "Captive Israel mourning in exile" is a reference to a pre-first-coming mindset when the Jews were in Babylonian exile, but it is to remind us that we are in exile until we are fully in the presence of God.

D. O come, O come, Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lonely exile here, Until the Son of God appear, Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel, Shall come to thee, O Israel

V. Verse Two

A. O come, Thou Rod of Jesse

1. In some translations, the "Rod of Jesse" is called the Branch of Jesse. Whichever it is, it is also taken from Isaiah. This time 11:11 which says: A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

2. This is a reference to Christ, who is a descendent of David, who was a son of Jesse.

B. O Come thou Rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan's tyranny

C. From depths of Hell Thy people save; And give them victory o'er the grave

D. Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel; Shall come to thee, o Israel

VI. Verse Three

A. O come, Thou Day-Spring, Come and cheer

1. For this description of Christ we turn to Luke 1:78 where Jesus is referred to as the light of the world who will take away darkness.
- B. O Come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer, Our spirits by thine advent (coming) here. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night. And death's dark shadows put to flight
  1. The destruction of death is something we look to Christ's return to bring about. At the resurrection – which was at the end of his first coming - Jesus defeated death. But it remains a problem. We are still dying. He has promised that when he returns death will be eliminated. Anyone looking forward to that? An end of death?
- C. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night. And death's dark shadow put to death. Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel. Shall come to thee, o Israel

#### VII. Verse Four

- A. O come, Thou Key of David, come
  1. The key of David takes us to Isaiah 22:22 where we learn that the newborn King holds the key to the heavenly kingdom and there is no way to get into the kingdom but through Him.
  2. It's another prophesy, a description about the Messiah given hundreds of years before he was born. In Isaiah 22:22, God says through Isaiah:
    - a) I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.
- B. A request that “the Key of David” come is a call for Jesus to show up.
- C. O come, Thou Key of David, come, And open wide our heavenly home – kick open the doors of heaven - Make safe the way that leads on high. And close the path to misery
  1. Open the door to heaven. Lock the door to hell.
- D. And close the path to misery, Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel. Shall come to thee, o Israel

#### VIII. Verse Five

- A. O come, Desire of nations, bind
  1. Desire of nations is a reference back to the way the King James version of the Bible translates Haggai 2
  2. This phrase also pops up in Charles Wesley's famous Christmas hymn, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. In that hymn we sing, “Come, Desire of nations, come, Fix in us Thy humble home;”
  3. Who is the “Desire of Nations?” This is another way of saying, “Jesus.”
  4. The request is that Jesus pull everyone together.
- B. O Come, Desire of Nations, bind, all peoples in one heart and mind; Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
  1. Wouldn't that be nice? All I want for Christmas is world peace. And the challenge there has as much to do with the conversations around the dinner table I many homes as it does anything happening in the Middle East or Pyongyang

C. Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

IX. So, what we have in the lyrics of this song are a variety of different ways in which we are appealing to Christ to show up and make things right.

A. Every verse highlights a different aspect of his character. The sum total is a reminder that Jesus is amazing. He is God. He is awesome. And that what we want is for His return.

B. In some ways, we are feeling the same thing the Old Testament Jews were experiencing. They have been given promises and they are waiting for them to be fulfilled. The fulfillment will be Jesus’s return. And so, in this song we ask that Jesus return.

X. And for those of you wondering if that is enough, let me direct you back to Isaiah 7 and the promise God makes there.

A. Isaiah 7 is the key in part because Isaiah is saying to Ahaz – a man with a big problem – God has this. Do not worry. His promises are secure. I saw him and I promise you, he is bigger than your problem. What you want is more Jesus.

B. The name Emmanuel means God with us – more specifically it means “the strong God with us.”

C. Make an appeal to the strong God as we sing this song one last time today.

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<sup>1</sup> The tune, *Veni Emmanuel*, was a fifteenth century processional that originated in Lisbon, Portugal. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel was first published in the 1850s in England. It is a simple, reverent tribute to the birth of Christ and to the fulfillment of God's promise to deliver His children from sin. (Source: Ace Collins, *Stories behind the best-loved Songs of Christmas*, Zondervan, 2001, pp. 126-131.)

<sup>2</sup> The writer of the song knows that even after Christ shows up the first time, life will remain hard. The writer knows that when Christ comes the first time he will start to make things right – that is what Jesus did. But what we really, really want awaits his second coming. I don’t want to be too negative here. But Jesus coming as a baby was “only a start.” As one scholar wrote: The final blood is shed. The debt is paid. Forgiveness is purchased. God’s wrath is removed. Adoption is secured. The down payment is in the bank. The first fruits of harvest are in the barn. The future is sure. The joy is great. But the end is not yet. Death still snatches away. Disease still makes us miserable. Calamity still strikes. Satan still prowls. Flesh still wars against the Spirit. Sin still indwells. And we still “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” John Piper.

<sup>3</sup> The *Psalterium Cantionum Catholicarum*.

<sup>4</sup> We have this carol in English today because of the diligent work of John Mason Neale, an Anglican priest born in 1818. While ministering on the Madiera Islands off the northwest coast of Africa, Neale discovered this Latin chant and saw the importance of the carol's message. He translated it into English as Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel.

<sup>5</sup> The kings of Syria and Israel have banded together because they fear the king of Assyria. Their plan is to capture Judah so they can put their own leader in place there who will help them when Assyria moves to overthrow them. Ahaz knows they are plotting against him, so he pre-emptively sets out to form an alliance with Assyria. He sends the Assyria king lots of money and offers to cut a deal. This is a really bad plan. Isaiah shows up with a message from God that says: do not worry about Syria or Israel – they are not going to last.<sup>5</sup>

