

19 December 2012  
Advent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

The third and final hymn we will look at and consider this Advent season is *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* (LSB #357). The hymn itself is based on what are known as the seven “Great O Antiphons” - short verses that were sung around the Magnificat during Vespers on the final seven days of the Advent season. And so they came to be special and well-loved verses, building up to the celebration of Christmas and teaching what the celebration of Christmas was all about.

We don't know who originally composed them or when. They may go back to as early as the fifth century. Some loved them so much they added verses, and there were at times as many as sixteen. But these seven - the biblical number of perfection - are the ones that survived and by consensus became the ones that lasted through history.

Each antiphon contains a title of Christ, a description of that title, and then a request, a prayer. Tonight, we'll sing each verse of the hymn, hear the antiphon, and then briefly consider what it is teaching us of Christ. We sing now the first verse:

*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!*

**O Emmanuel, our king and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Savior:  
Come and save us, O Lord our God.**

*Emmanuel - God with us.* During the holidays we like and treasure having family and friends with us. But how about this? God with us! God with sinners. God Himself come to serve sinners and save sinners. God with us not to destroy us (as we deserve) but in mercy come to bring us back from our exile in sin; to bring us back into the family - His family - in the forgiveness of our sins.

Matthew put it so plainly and matter-of-factly, how this birth happened, but this birth was anything but matter-of-fact! Both from how it took place - a virgin conceives and bears a son, but also in that this one now come is *Emmanuel, God with us*. God in the manger. God nursing at the breast of His mother. God so little

and weak. Yes, this is our God, weak for us but strong to save. With us as one of us; like us, but also not like us - He is without sin. With us in our misery and mourning, so that we can be with Him in His glory and light. We sing the second verse:

*O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,  
Who ord'rest all things mightily;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

**O Wisdom, proceeding from the mouth of the Most High,  
pervading and permeating all creation, mightily ordering all things:  
Come and teach us the way of prudence.**

When we create something, it is often said that we put ourselves into it; we pour our heart and soul into it. We could perhaps say that of God, who created man and woman *in His image*. But we can say it *even more* now! For this babe, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger, is the Creator God who has now put Himself concretely into His creation. He who created everything in the beginning by His Word and ordered all things in heaven and on earth in His great and infinite wisdom, now takes our human flesh to be our Saviour. What a wonder this is!

And so we pray in this antiphon: *Come and teach us the way of prudence*. Come and teach us who have lost our way. Come and teach us the way of faith - that we repent of ourselves and trust in You alone. For He who has ordered all things in creation, has now come to order and prepare for us the way to heaven. Teach us, O Wisdom, to follow in this way. We sing the third verse:

*O come, O come, Thou Lord of might,  
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height  
In ancient times didst give the Law  
In cloud and majesty and awe.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

**O Adonai and ruler of the house of Israel,  
who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and gave him the Law on Sinai:  
Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.**

When Israel was in the bondage of slavery in Egypt, there was nothing they could do. They could not free themselves, they had to wait for someone to come and save them. This God did, sending Moses as His spokesman - but it was God, of course, who saved, working signs and wonders of great awe. This is our reality as well. We

who are in bondage to sin and death. And there is nothing we can do to free ourselves. There must be one to come and save us. And this child in the manger is that one. The burning bush represents Him. For just as the bush burned but was not consumed, so the holy and majestic God is in a human body and yet it is not consumed. For God comes in mercy and gentleness, to save us in our great need.

And that we always remember that great need and remember our bondage to sin is why He gave the Law on Sinai. He knew the people of Israel would soon forget, and that we would forget. And forgetting our sin and need, so forget our Saviour and our need for a Saviour. So Sinai's Law shows us our sin and need, so that Calvary's cross show us our redeemer. And so we pray: *Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.* Free us from our sin, so that we may come not to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion, and worship the One who does such great things for us. We sing the fourth verse of the hymn:

*O come, Thou Branch of Jesse's tree,  
Free them from Satan's tyranny  
That trust Thy mighty pow'r to save,  
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

**O Root of Jesse, standing as an ensign before the peoples,  
before whom all kings are mute, to whom all the nations will do homage:  
Come quickly to deliver us.**

During the reign of King David, Jesse's son, Israel was at its greatest and most glorious. But not too long after that, because of their sin and idolatry, the great tree of Israel was chopped down and reduced to a stump. But, God promised, a branch will grow from that chopped down, lifeless-looking stump. A shoot will grow, and God's people, God's kingdom will again be grand and glorious. Not as a kingdom of this earth, but a kingdom *greater* than this earth - a kingdom in heaven for all time. And in Bethlehem, that branch begins to grow.

God's plan was that this branch would again be chopped down - as Jesus is chopped down in death on the tree of the cross. Yet this branch cannot be stopped! And so He springs to life in His resurrection, and will never be chopped down again. And so in Him, we now have victory over sin, over satan, and over the grave. And all who trust in Him, who look dead under the stumps of gravestones, will rise with Him to life again. The cross is our ensign, our victory banner, our hope. So come, we pray; *come quickly to deliver us.* Come quickly and take us home. We sing verse five:

*O come, Thou Key of David, come,*

*And open wide our heav'nly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

**O Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel,  
You open and no one can close, You close and no one can open:  
Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death.**

Have you ever wished to be somewhere but the door was locked to you? Maybe a sibling slammed the door and wouldn't let you in. Maybe you didn't have authorization or clearance to get in. Maybe it was a place everyone wanted to get in and kept trying to get in, but the lock was just too tight and secure. So it is with heaven. Our sin has locked the door to heaven and sinners cannot get it. There is only one way to enter, one key, and that is the forgiveness of sins that is found only in Christ. Yes, this child in the manger, has come to open the door to Paradise again.

Outside is the ugliness of sin, inside the beauty of holiness. Outside is the darkness of the grave, inside the light of life. Outside is separation from God, inside perfect communion with Him. And Emmanuel comes to our outside! The holy Son becomes sin for us. The Son who dwelt in light eternal enters the darkness with us. The Son who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit is condemned for us sinners. That we may enter in. That we may be beautiful and holy again. That we may be united with God again. That we may enter into his courts with praise. And the best news of all? What He opens, no one can close! *So come, Key of David!* And open wide our heavenly home. We sing verse six of the hymn:

*O come, Thou Dayspring from on high,  
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

**O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting:  
Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.**

There is no life without light. In the beginning, the very first thing created was light. And from that light sprung everything else. So too is it with us. We cannot live without light - without the light of our Lord Jesus Christ, without the light of His Word, without the light of His life. Without Him is only darkness and death. If you live long enough in the darkness, you kind of get used to it. But at the same time, you never really get used to it - as last Friday showed us once again. We need the

light or we will die.

And so in this antiphon we pray: *Come and enlighten us!* And as a demonstration of this very prayer, the fathers of the early church often faced East when praying, for in the East is where the sun rises and scatters the darkness, symbolic of when the Son of God will arise and come again, *and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death*, and scatter that darkness once and for all.

This world can be a pretty dark place. But as the Son came as a baby to shine the light of God's love in a dark world, so even now the Son is coming to us in His Word and Sacraments to enlighten us, to *disperse* and *put to flight* the sins that haunt us, the darkness that frightens us, and the evil that threatens us. That we be safe in Him. Safe until He comes again and darkness is no more. Safe until He comes again and we rise to live in His eternal day. We sing the final verse of the hymn:

*O come, Desire of nations, bind  
In one the hearts of all mankind;  
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,  
And be Thyself our King of Peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

**O King of the nations, the ruler they long for, the cornerstone uniting all people:  
Come and save us all, whom You formed out of clay.**

The "Arab Spring" has shown us many peoples and nations waiting for a ruler who will rule over them with justice and peace. But in this all earthly kings and rulers will fail - they are sinners just like us. There is only one ruler like this which all nations desire, one who is perfect in all His ways, and who is the King of Peace. And so at His birth the angels sang: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men* (Luke 2:14). And as the prophet Micah (5:5) put it: *And He shall be our peace.*

And so we rejoice! For we have such a ruler, such a King! We rejoice *for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:11). Christ the Lord: the Wisdom of God, the Almighty, the Branch of Jesse, the Key of David, the Dayspring from on high, and the King of the nations. He is Emmanuel, God with us. Our Creator is our Saviour, our King is our brother. And so we rejoice. How can we not? And how can we not also sing for Him to come again? To come again and take us home to where the rejoicing will never cease. To the joy of the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, which will make the joy of Christmas seem like nothing! So we do. That's what Advent's all about. And that's what our Saviour's all about. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.