

It's one of our oldest and most beloved Advent hymns. It's the only Advent hymn that commonly appears in the midst of Christmas carols on popular recordings of Holiday music. It's based on prayers that are at least 1200 years old, maybe even 1500 years old. The text of the prayers was put into poetic verse form some 900 years ago, and they were wedded to their familiar tune some 600 years ago.

The ancient prayers that form the basis for "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" were prayers that were used the last 7 nights of Advent, from December 17th through December 23rd. They build in anticipation as Christmas Eve approaches.

This morning I want to look at each of the seven verses. You might want to look on: Hymn 56.

The verses, and the original prayers they're derived from, are based upon Old Testament names and titles for God, and for the Messiah. They reiterate a series of promises made to the people of Israel. And they have that wonderful refrain that asserts that the promises will be fulfilled: "Rejoice, rejoice. Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

We'll actually start with verse 2 of Hymn 56. The first verse is just a repeat of the last verse, the verse for December 23. We'll save it for the end. We'll start with verse 2, which is really the first verse, the verse for December 17, the verse about Wisdom.

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orderest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.*

Wisdom. Wisdom in the OT is a gift from God to his people. Wisdom is there to instruct us in making right choices. It's about being able to see what is good and bad, right and wrong, and being able to choose wisely. The hymn certainly asks for the coming of that kind of wisdom:

*To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.*

But Wisdom also has a deeper meaning. The Jews regarded God as one. But by Jesus' time, there were certain aspects of God's nature, God's modes of working in the world that were so distinct they were almost personified. They were almost seen as separate agents distinct from God. They were almost viewed as separate entities in and of themselves. They include God's Spirit, God's Word, the Law, God's Presence or Glory, and God's Wisdom.

Wisdom, the book of Proverbs tells us, was with God in the beginning. Through Wisdom, all things were made. To quote the book of Proverbs, "Wisdom says, 'Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth... before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth (Prov 8:23, 25).'"

To ask for the coming of this kind of Wisdom is to ask for more than the ability to make wise choices. It is also asking for God's presence, God's Wisdom, the same Wisdom that helped create and undergird the very existence of the universe.

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orderest all things mightily.*

The first verse is a call for God to help us make good choices. But more deeply, it is a cry for the God who created the heavens and the earth to come to us.

The second verse, December 18 brings to mind a central chapter in Israel's history:

*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.*

The imagery here is Exodus imagery, the release of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and their gathering at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive God's law. The original prayer has even stronger imagery, including also the burning bush, and the image of God's outstretched arm, an Exodus image of God intervening to save his people.

This takes us a step further than the previous verse. In the previous verse we longed for the coming of God who created and ordered the universe.

But now we sing to the God who intervenes in history, the God who is active in the world, the God who breaks in, sometimes in very powerful ways. A Lord of might, who appears in cloud, majesty, and awe. A God who is stronger than Pharaoh, a God who can save his people.

During this time of the year, our dominant image of Jesus is of helpless infant lying in a manger. But that helpless infant is also the Jesus who will later reach out his arms on the hard wood of the cross to save us. And he is the Jesus who one day will return in great power and might to judge the living and the dead.

Thus in the second verse we pray for God's powerful intervention in the world, so that his will may be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

The third verse, the verse for December 19 uses an OT image that is enshrined in the first of our stained glass windows, the one back in the NE corner:

*O come, thou Branch of Jesse's tree,
free them from Satan's tyranny
that trust thy mighty power to save,
and give them victory o'er the grave.*

The image of the branch of Jesse comes from the prophet Isaiah: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots (Is 11:1)."

Remember, Jesse is the father of David, of KING David, and thus the progenitor of all of the kings of the House of David. In art, though Jesse himself is not a king, he's sometimes pictured with a crown to symbolize that he is the ancestor of all of the kings of David's line. In art, the tree growing from Jesse's side is often filled with pictures of other OT kings, with Jesus at the top. Our stained glass window is graphically simplified. But there are still a succession of crowns that stem from Jesse and lead ultimately to Jesus at the top.

But as the hymn proclaims, Jesus is more powerful than any other descendent of Jesse. Jesus is the only king who can free us from Satan's tyranny, who has the power to save us, to even give us victory over death itself.

Thus in the third verse, we pray for the coming of a human king who is more powerful than any other human king before or since. He is truly the King of kings.

The fourth verse, the verse for December 20 uses another powerful image from Isaiah:

*O come, thou Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.*

Isaiah says, "I will place on (the Messiah's) shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open (Is 22:22)."

In ancient times, power and control over the entrance or the gateway was power over the whole entity. Only the most trusted servant would be given the key to a palace, or the key to a city.

But the Messiah is given a key of total power, a key that can open wide heaven's gates, a key that can shut the gates of hell to make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery.

Thus in the fourth verse, the Messiah comes to open the prison gates, to release us from the bondage of sin and death and hell, and to bring us into God's heavenly kingdom.

The fifth verse, the verse December 20 uses the image of the Messiah as dawning light:

*O come, thou Dayspring from on high,
and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadow put to flight.*

The dayspring is the rising sun in the east. The prophet Malachi termed Jesus coming as the rising of the Sun of Righteousness (Mal 4:2). There's a verse from the carol "Hark the herald angels sing" (Hymnal 87) that uses this same imagery:

Risen with healing in his wings,

*light and life to all he brings,
hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!*

Also, remember that this is the verse for December 21st, the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. In the midst of Advent darkness, we long for the coming of the light. Come rising Sun, cheer us by thy drawing nigh; disperse the gloomy clouds of night.

The fifth verse proclaims that the people who walk in darkness will see God's glorious light.

The sixth verse, the verse for December 22, asks for the Messiah to come and rule the whole world:

*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.*

Our world is a place of disunity and division. Our world is a place of war and violence. Thus we long for the unity and peace that can only come from God. This verse is a fervent prayer.

Draw all the world together. Bind in one the hearts of all mankind; bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace.

The sixth verse longs for the fulfilling of the promise of the angels to the shepherds, that Jesus will bring "Peace on Earth."

The seventh verse, the verse for December 23 sums up all of the other verses, all of the other titles for God and for the Messiah, in the most powerful title possible: Emmanuel, God with us.

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

There is no stronger title for Jesus than Emmanuel. The Word made flesh, living in our midst. He comes to be one of us, to save us from exile, to bring us home. He gives his life to pay our ransom.

He is the summation of all the other verses. He is God's Wisdom. He comes in might. He sits on the throne of his ancestor, David. He has the power to open heaven to us. He is that light that shines in the darkness. He is the king and savior of all tribes and peoples and nations. He is God with us, and one of us.

He comes to us as a baby in a manger. He comes to us crucified and yet risen. He comes to us in the sacrament of his Body and Blood. He comes to us in his body, the church. He will come again to judge the heavens and the earth. And he will come to bring us home.

Rejoice, rejoice.

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.