

It's one of our oldest and most beloved Advent hymns: "O come, O come, Emmanuel." 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 1,200 years old, maybe even 1,500 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 17<sup>th</sup> through December 23<sup>rd</sup>. That's why the verses of Hymn 56 have dates beside them. These prayers, these verses build in anticipation as Christmas Eve approaches.

This Advent I want to look at each of the seven verses. (10:30--We just sang two of them. And we'll sing two more each Sunday during Advent.)

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."

Verse 1 and 8 are identical, so we'll save talking about verse one until another week, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent. But today I want to zero in on verse 6.

The sixth verse is the verse for December 21<sup>st</sup>. It 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.<sup>1</sup>*

The dayspring is the rising sun in the east. The symbolic imagery here is comparing the dawning light of Christ breaking through spiritual darkness to the rising sun breaking through the darkness of night.

In the old days, churches were built so that their altars were on the east end of the building. The rising sun in the morning would shine through the windows behind the altar.

Even today, in churches like St. Paul's where the altar is on the west side of the building, as far as church vocabulary is concerned, that direction {pointing toward altar} is not west, but rather "ecclesiastical east."

As a footnote, this symbolism even extends to our funeral practices. This is pretty trivial, but it's something funeral directors are still trained to know. In the Episcopal Church, as well as in other liturgical churches, bodies in caskets are brought in feet first, with their feet facing liturgical east. The original thought was that if Jesus returned during the funeral and the dead were raised, then the deceased could sit up in their coffin, look east, and see Jesus rising

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<sup>1</sup> #56, *The Hymnal 1982*

like the sun behind the window over the altar. Furthermore, at clergy funerals, bodies are brought in head first. Presumably if the resurrection happened during a clergy funeral, the clergy person could sit up in their coffin, face the congregation, and say, "Hey everyone, look at Jesus!"

*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 coming of Jesus, the season of Advent, is not just about preparing for the birth of a baby in a manger. Advent is also a time of preparation for Jesus' return in glory. He comes to make things right. He comes to establish his perfect kingdom of justice and peace. And he comes to bring life. He will swallow up death forever.

The light of the Son of God, who is like the rising sun, will scatter the dark shadows of death forever.

Two weeks ago I preached on the prophet Malachi who termed the coming of the Messiah as the rising of the "Sun of Righteousness."<sup>2</sup> I said two weeks ago that there's a verse from the carol "Hark the herald angels sing" 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!*<sup>3</sup>

Light and life. No more darkness and death.

And remember the context of verse 6. This is the verse for December 21<sup>st</sup>. That's the time of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. During this time of year, the daylight decreases and the nights grow longer.

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.

In a few weeks, on Christmas Eve, we will hear from the Prophet Isaiah that the people who walk in darkness will see God's glorious light.<sup>4</sup> That's the promise of this verse. The light will come. It will come into this world.

And there is promise of the resurrection, the promise of new life. The light of Jesus brings life. In the words of the prologue of the Gospel of John,"

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<sup>2</sup> Malachi 4:2

<sup>3</sup> #87, *The Hymnal 1982*

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 9:2

"In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."<sup>5</sup>

So during this season of Advent, we prepare for our annual celebration of the light coming into the world in the baby born in Bethlehem that first Christmas. But we also prepare for Christ's return in power and glory. We wait, in this present darkness, for the dawn from on high to break upon us, for the light to return in all of its fullness.

The light of Christ has come into the world. And we await his return in all its glory. We wait in the darkness for the dawn.

And how do we live as we wait? Our Epistle lesson from Romans offers us a classic Advent image. Paul says, "The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."<sup>6</sup>

That's a tremendous statement. We live in darkness. We're waiting for the dawn. The dawn will come; the day is near. But in the meantime, as we live in the midst of darkness, we don't have to be stuck in the darkness ourselves. We can put on the armor of light.

Several years earlier, Paul had said that when you are baptized into Christ, you clothe yourself with Christ.<sup>7</sup> Now he's extended that image.

You clothe yourself with Christ, with Christ's nature. And that nature is armor to protect you from the darkness around you. And that nature is light to shine in the darkness.

The coming of Christ is like searchlight or a lighthouse beam piercing the darkness. I remember one night in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. A few days before I had visited what is arguably the loveliest American lighthouse at Cape Hatteras. Though it was built in 1870, it is still the tallest brick lighthouse in the U.S. It is also beautiful: a black and white pattern spiraling up twenty stories from a red brick base against the blue sky. Absolutely gorgeous.

But it wasn't until a few days after my visit that I gained an even more powerful appreciation of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. I was coming back by ferry from Ocracoke Island as the sun was setting over the sound. It was dark by the time I drove off the ferry and started heading back north along the seashore. And then I saw it. Whoosh. This enormous, piercing beam of light moved across the sky above me. Eight or ten seconds later, whoosh, there it was again.

I realized that I was seeing the light from the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse still miles ahead of me. I wasn't just seeing the lighthouse as a picturesque candy-striped structure. I was seeing it in action, as it was piercing the darkness for 20 miles in all directions, providing guidance for those in dangerous waters.

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<sup>5</sup> John 1:4-5

<sup>6</sup> Romans 13:12

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:27

The light of Christ has come like a piercing lighthouse beam. And one day it will come again like the rising sun. And in the meantime, we are called to put on the armor of light, to let our little piece of Christ's light shine in the darkness.

During the season of Advent, we see the twinkle and the warm glow of small lights adorning trees and houses all around us. We are like those myriad small light. But we prepare for the celebration of the coming of the True Light into the world. There is one Light that surpasses all other lights. Keep alert in the midst of the darkness. And wait for dawning of that great light.

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and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
and death's dark shadow put to flight.  
Rejoice, rejoice.  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*