

This Advent I've been preaching on one of our oldest and most beloved Advent hymns: "O come, O come, Emmanuel." It's based on prayers that are at least 1,200 years old. The verses of the hymn, and the original prayers they're derived from, are based upon Old Testament names and titles for God, and for the Messiah.

This week I'm focusing on the final verses of the hymn, verses 7 & 8.

But I've preached on the other verses out of order to make them line up with our Sunday readings. And so I want to step back for a moment and talk about the progression as you move through the verses in order. Because verse 1 of the hymn is also verse 8, the cycle of verses actually begins with verse 2.

Verse 2 begins with the image of 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.¹*

Wisdom undergirds the universe. Wisdom orders all things; God's Wisdom was part of the creation of creation. Wisdom also comes to enlighten us.

But, if you think about it, Wisdom is rather abstract. It can seem a bit distant. It can seem like an aloof image by itself, perhaps a bit passive. So the next verse is much more active.

*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 image here is active. God intervenes, God is mighty, God is powerful. But the downside here is that this picture of God by itself can seem a bit scary. A God who appears in fire and cloud and earthquake can be very intimidating.

So the next two verses offer more human images. The coming Messiah is not just Wisdom, not just the Mighty Lord of awesome power. He is also a person:

*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.*

*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.*

¹ #56, *The Hymnal 1982*

The branch of Jesse, the Key of David. This is a human king. This is God's servant. But this is no ordinary human king. He has the power to save his people from death, and to open heaven to them.

The next image is of the rising sun:
*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.*

It's a comforting image. If you're dwelling in darkness—just wait. The sun will rise. And it will rise soon. Hang on—the light is coming.

Which brings us to our two verses for today.

The seventh 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. We have struggles with war and terrorism and violence. This past election cycle has exposed deep divisions and political differences in our nation.

Thus this verse is a fervent prayer. We need the unity and peace that can only come from God. That's what this hymn verse addresses. *O come, Desire of nations.* In the original prayer, the line is come, "O King of the Nations and their desire." The desire of nations is the ruler we need and the ruler we long for.

Four weeks ago on Christ the King Sunday we prayed for that kind of peace that only can come from Jesus our King. Our prayer that day stated,

"Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule..."

This coming Saturday we will hear again the promise of the angels to the shepherds. They announce the birth of a new king in Bethlehem. Jesus the King is the only one who can bring "Peace on earth, and goodwill to all people."

That's what this verse is asking for. Come, O King of all peoples. 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." All tribes and languages and peoples and nations will be drawn to his throne. One day, he will establish his kingdom of perfect justice and perfect peace.

Which brings us to the last verse. The eighth 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, God with us. Emmanuel is the Word made flesh, living in our midst. We heard that title used today in both our OT and our Gospel lessons.

We are in exile. We are estranged from each other. We mourn. We grieve over the state of the world around us. We are captive to forces beyond our control. We make small fixes but huge problems remain.

And yet, God does not choose to remain aloof. Jesus doesn't just stay on the sidelines. He suits up and gets in the game. He becomes a real human being. Not a distant king on a distant throne. But a servant king who lives with us. Who suffers alongside of us. Who takes the worst that the world can dish out.

We need God. Emmanuel. God with us. The one who is the Wisdom from on High, the Lord of Power and Might, the Descendent of Jesse and Key of David, the Rising Sun, the King of Nations and their desire.

He comes to be one of us. He comes to save us from exile. He comes to save us from darkness and death and to bring us new life.

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.

There's actually a hidden message in the original prayers. If you line up all of the titles of Jesus in the Latin versions of these prayers, in these verses of "O come, O come, Emmanuel," there is an acrostic.

The first letters of each of the 7 titles in Latin spell out a Latin phrase."² That phrase is "Ero Cras." In English it's, "I will be tomorrow" or "I will be there tomorrow."

After finishing the series 7 days of prayers on December 23, the promise is there: I will be there tomorrow. On Christmas Eve, we will celebrate that Good News. Emmanuel has been born among us. He is with us today. And one day he will return in power and glory to establish his perfect kingdom, forever.

That's what we look forward to in Advent. That is the mystery of faith. Christ was born. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Our Advent longings, our exile, our living in darkness and in the shadow of death cause us to wait in anticipation. We wait until the Son of God appears.

Rejoice, rejoice.

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

² And in reverse order, of most recent to oldest—**Emmanuel**; **Rex Gentium**; **Oriens**; **Clavis David**; **Radix Jesse**; **Adonai**; **Sapientia**—spells the acrostic "Ero Cras."