

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on November 29, 2020 – Advent 1
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Happy First Day of the New Christian Liturgical Year!! What? Too long a greeting? Okay then, let's try this one. Happy First Day of Advent! Of course, that greeting begs the question of what is Advent? A familiar word, certainly, but do we really know what Advent is and why it's important to the practice of our Christian faith? I'm not sure most of us do which is why I think spending a little time this morning to explore Advent itself could be helpful. The simplest way to think of it, as most of us do, is as the church's way of counting down to Christmas. In most Christian traditions, Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. When exactly Advent began as a religious practice is somewhat murky, originating as it did as early as the 5th century. The way in which it was observed also varied quite a bit depending on a lot of factors. By the time Urban V became Pope in 1362, Advent was five weeks long. However long the season was observed, the remarkable thing is that the Advent liturgy remained the same for centuries, changing only after the Second Vatican Council of the mid 20th century. Even then only some minor changes were made to clarify the difference between Advent and Lent.

At its core, Advent remains what it has always been – a time of spiritual preparation and anticipation of the birth of the Christ Child. What few Christians fully appreciate about Advent, however, is that when we are observing Advent we are really observing three things simultaneously: the physical nativity or birth of Christ in Bethlehem, the reception of Christ into the heart of the believer, and the eschatological Second Coming of Christ. So, let's unpack that a bit. The physical nativity or birth of Christ in Bethlehem, that part we get. That's the part the Scriptures talk about. That's the thing creches depict. That's what the Christmas Carols are singing about. Okay, we get that.

But what about the second part – the reception of Christ into the heart of the believer? That seems like something we might understand on an intellectual level, but do we really connect this idea of welcoming Christ

into our hearts with the birth of the Christ Child? That's a tough one to answer, primarily I think, because we get so hung up on our romanticized notions of that long ago starlit night that we just don't make the connection that the adorable baby blissfully sleeping on the hay is the same Jesus who preached the Sermon on the Mount and walked on the water and fed the five thousand and told stories like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. There is, I think, a major disconnect for most of us between the beautiful baby in the manger – too often depicted with blond hair and blue eyes which is a complete misrepresentation of what this Semitic baby would have looked like – and the Jesus of the Gospel stories, the Jesus of the Last Supper and the Cross, the Jesus of the Resurrection. And yet, in Advent, that is exactly the Jesus we are asked to receive into our hearts, the baby in the manger and the man on the cross. That can be confusing, for sure.

Then it gets even more confusing when we consider the third thing we are observing as we engage with the rituals of Advent – the Second Coming of Christ. This is also called the *Parousia* which is the Greek translation of the Latin word *adventus* or coming. This is one of those things that means a lot to theologians, and perhaps to some clergy especially in the Roman Catholic Church, but it is usually lost in translation, so to speak, in most Protestant traditions. The Second Coming of Christ refers to the time when Jesus will return triumphantly to initiate the Kingdom of God as heaven on earth. As such it is eschatological or dealing with “end times.” How exactly this will happen is disputed among various Christian traditions and depends greatly on whether or not the Book of Revelation is understood as a book of prophecies that will literally come true or something else entirely. Jesus did at times speak of returning again after his ascension and it's quite clear that the disciples, now apostles, believed that would happen. But the years passed and Jesus didn't come back leaving them to wonder what all his talk of returning was really about. Two thousand years later we are still wondering about that so it is quite fitting, I think, that part of our anticipation, our preparation, for Advent should be wrestling with this great mystery of our faith.

Advent is a part of Christmas celebrations but is primarily observed in the church. You can purchase an Advent calendar to mark off the days of the season although I admit to finding it distressing when so-called Advent

calendars only mention Santa. You can also purchase an Advent devotional which provides daily prayers for the season. This year I have prepared for our church a very simple Advent resource which explains how to make your own Advent wreath at home and offers suggestions for things you can do each week to experience more deeply our four themes of Advent – Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. You might be interested to know that these themes can vary greatly and also encompass other themes like the people of the Advent story – the Prophets, the Shepherds, the Shepherds and the Magi.

In the final analysis, what matters about Advent is that we pause in our busy, frenetic lives to consider prayerfully what it means to each of us personally to welcome the Christ Child and all he represents into our hearts and our lives. This is even more the case in this year of Covid with everyone's lives turned upside down and the playing out of the most divisive election in our history. It is no exaggeration to say, I think, that we have lost our way as a nation in so many ways. We have witnessed environmental protections rolled back to alarming levels. We have seen science diminished and disregarded. We have seen permission given to treat others as somehow less than. We have witnessed claims of religious liberty used to take away the rights of others. Dear ones, we are in a sad state at this moment, something we can all agree on even if we agree on nothing else. As Christians, then, we have never been in need of Advent more than we are this year. To quote the words of the immortal character Auntie Mame, “we need a little Christmas, right this very minute!”

This is why it is so fitting that the first Christmas carol so many people love and enjoy singing is “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” It is the quintessential Advent song since it literally sings an invitation to the Christ Child to appear in our midst once more. This is an ancient hymn, originating in the monasteries of the 8th and 9th centuries. It is, in fact, a form of plainchant, the unique and hauntingly beautiful form of chant used in monasteries for the singing of the Psalms and other Scriptures. Interesting to note is that the words and music for this hymn developed separately. The words trace their origins back to what is known as the “O Antiphons,” a series of plainchant short sentences, sung in conjunction with the Magnificat of Mary from the Gospel of Luke in the days leading up to Christmas. The tune, called *Veni Emmanuel*, we are familiar with as we

sing this beloved hymn actually dates back to the 15th century and is French in origin. But there are other tunes, and other verses than the ones we see in our hymnal. This in itself is quite remarkable, giving us a glimpse of just how ancient the tradition and observance of Advent as embodied in this hymn truly is.

As you might imagine, given its long history, this is a hymn which has been the subject of much theological study and, in fact, the three-fold expectations of Advent are clearly present in the verses. Verse one speaks of the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew texts as having validity only as understood through the lens of Jesus Christ: “O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the son of God appear.” The refrain of each verse repeats this theme of Israel being ransomed by Jesus, echoing the Hebrew understanding of God as a God who is present in the midst of the people, a God who is active in history. This theme of Jesus bringing to life the ancient prophecies of God’s promise to Israel continues throughout the remaining verses: “O come thou Wisdom, from on high, and order all things... O come thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thy justice here.” This is a hymn which captures perfectly the relationship between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jesus of the Gospels. For Christians, the Hebrew Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – is read through our belief that Jesus is the living embodiment of God’s promises to Israel to bring them back from the exile to which their sins have taken them. However, important as that is to Christians, we must always remember that our Jewish brothers and sisters do not read those texts in that same way. For them the Messiah we welcome in the Christ Child has yet to return and in these days when anti-Semitism is very much on the rise, I would suggest that Advent is an appropriate time to reflect on this sad truth. If we wish to be transformed by the Christ Child entering our hearts which is one of our tasks during Advent, then we must be aware of the injustices like this undertaken in Christ’s name falsely.

The Gospel text I chose for our consideration in connection with this hymn is a version of the nativity story we seldom hear. Fascinating to note is that this version puts all its emphasis on Joseph and how it was that this faithful and devout Jewish man accepted the invitation from God to provide a home for this unique baby to be born to the woman to whom he was

engaged. In Matthew's version of the nativity, it is Joseph who receives specific instructions from the angel to name the child to be born "Jesus." Then, the text explains that this name is a crucial piece of the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy from Isaiah that a virgin would conceive and bear a son and his name would be Emmanuel which means "God is with us." In Luke's Gospel, Mary receives the same instructions from the Angel Gabriel about naming the baby Jesus. No mention of "Emmanuel" here. It is in Matthew's Gospel that the instruction given to Joseph about the name during his encounter with an unnamed angel in a dream is followed by the explanation of the name Jesus being a sort of rough equivalent to the Emmanuel of the ancient prophesy. This is a curious difference. Or is it?

Perhaps the angels – we don't know if it's the same angel who visited both or two different angels – had received instructions from God to approach these two very human people in the way which would make the most sense to each of them. To Mary the angel came in person and they had an actual conversation during which an invitation was given and accepted with regard to the birth of this remarkable child to be born. To Joseph the angel appeared in a dream after he had decided he could not proceed with the marriage when he found out Mary was expecting a baby not his own. In both angelic encounters, the angel begins with the same instructions to these very different people. "Do not be afraid" the angel tells Joseph. "Fear not" the angel tells Mary. Then the story of the child to be born and named Jesus is told and reassurances offered that their respective roles in the unfolding of this situation is vital to God's plans not only for them, but for all the people of the world.

"Do not be afraid." These are words that ring out across the millennia to us in this moment as a pandemic rages and our country swirls with discontent, the hopeful promise of a new beginning intermingling with dark conspiracy theories. "Fear not" are the words of the angel that ring out with new urgency as we await the coming of Christmas this year. This is the hope of Advent, the promise that new beginnings are always possible. This is the hope that kept Joseph from running away and gave Mary the courage to risk everything to be part of God's plan for God's beloved people.

Dear ones, dare to believe that these words come from the angels to you and me as well. Hear these words from the angels and take them into

your heart, allowing them to lift the burdens of your worries and fears filling you instead with hope and even excitement about the future God promises is coming our way. This is the promise, the hope, the purpose of Advent. To hear the words of the angels and dare to receive them as our own: Do not be afraid! Dear Ones, do not be afraid because Emmanuel – God with *us*, you and me – is on his way, bringing hope and healing to our weary souls. May we be ready to receive this precious gift and be transformed by it. Amen.

Sources:

https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/chrelations/resources/education/OCE_commentary.htm

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Come,_O_Come,_Emmanuel