

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
Mid-Advent IV
21 December 2011
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

We're at the end of Advent.
Christmas is right around the corner.
The decorations are up.
The shopping's done (for the most part).
The cookies are baked and given.
School is out.
We're ready.

That's why today's hymn is the last hymn of Advent.
It's even the last Advent hymn in your hymnal!

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!"

We began our Advent preparations with the advent prayer:
"Savior of the Nations, Come!"
And that's how we'll end them, too.

This hymn today is also ancient.
We're not exactly sure when it was written,
though medieval tradition says it was Gregory the Great, sometime in the 6th century.

We know for sure that at least by the 9th century the "O Antiphons," were widely used the days leading up to Christmas.
Have a look at these, they're included on the same page as the hymn (357).

Each antiphon follows the same format:
O,
Old Testament Name of God,
Attribute of God,
Petition for God to *come*.

These "O Antiphons" were originally written in Latin, and they were chanted by the congregation each day leading up to Christmas Eve during the Vespers service, beginning December 17th.

What's fascinating about them, is that if you take the first letter of the Latin Name in each petition, and reverse the order, you get the Latin phrase, *Ero Cras*—
which means, "Tomorrow I will be here!"

No, it wasn't a coincidence, they thought these things through when putting them together!

For the ancient church, there was a desire for the Lord to return.
Sometimes, I think we've lost that.

This hymn, these antiphons, are the prayers of those longing for Christmas—
 not for the stockings and presents and trees and cookies and Santa—
 but for the Christ,
 the Wisdom of God,
 the Lord of might,
 the Branch of Jesse's tree,
 the Key of David,
 the Dayspring from on high,
 the Desire of nations,
 for *Emmanuel*: God with us!

This sort of desire, this longing is often missing from the Church today.

We've forgotten who He is, what He does, and why He comes.
 We've forgotten how ruined this world is, how wretched and poor we are, how serious sin is.

This hymn helps us to see the longing for Christ that we also should have among us.

And it does it first and foremost by rooting us into the story of the Old Testament.

All the names of God come from the Old Testament.

Wisdom comes to us chiefly from Proverbs.

There, Wisdom speaks and has a voice, He says,
 "When God established the heavens, I was there; when He drew a circle on the
 face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when He established the
 fountains of the deep...then I was beside Him, like a master workman, and I was
 daily His delight" (Prov 8:27-30).

Wisdom is the Word of God, that which comes from the mouth of the Most High.

It was by Wisdom, the Word, that the world came to be,
 that it received its order.

We pray in stanza 2 of today's hymn for this Wisdom to come to us,
 to *show us the path of knowledge and teach us the ways of Wisdom*.

We find this prayer fulfilled on Christmas morning when we hear,
And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14).

In stanza 3 we sing "O Come, O come, Thou Lord of might—"
 this comes from the "O Adonai" antiphon.

Adonai is the Hebrew word for Lord.

It was used instead of speaking God's revealed name: Yahweh.
Adonai was the one who appeared to Moses in the burning bush
 and who gave the 10 Words to Moses on Sinai's holy mountain.

We pray in this stanza that the God of the Old Testament,
 the God who revealed Himself to Moses and yet Moses did not die—
 we pray for this God to come to us also,
 with an outstretched arm ready to redeem us from our slavery and sin.

Then comes the *Root of Jesse*, or *Branch of Jesse's tree* (stanza 4).

This is the name of God from today's Old Testament reading,
 "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his
 roots shall bear fruit" (Isa 11:1).

Jesse was David's father.

So the coming Messiah, the one for whom we pray to come in this antiphon, is to be a
 descendent of Jesse, a Son of David.

Here we pray for deliverance.

Free them from Satan's tyranny
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave (357:4).

In stanza five we call upon this Christ as the *Key of David*,
 who *opens and no one can close*,
 who *locks and no one can open*.

The doors that are either locked or open are the doors or gates of heaven.

So we pray here that this Christ would come and open the doors of heaven to us,
 to let us into His kingdom,
 to be safe from the prison of hell and the shadow of death.

We pray that misery would come to an end,
 that suffering would cease,
 that war would be no more,
 and that death would be forever defeated.

From here we call upon the *Dayspring from on high*, or what might be called the Morning Star,
 the rising of the Sun, the light that comes to us from the East.

We should notice that the antiphon for December 21st is a prayer to the rising Sun.

Why does the date matter?

Because it's the shortest day of the year,
 the day where the sun comes to us least,
 where the light and warmth and life of the sun is limited most.

On this day we pray for the true light, the true Son to shine in the darkness
 of our hearts, and lead us into the light of His glory.

We sometimes forget how scary the darkness is—

maybe it's because of how easy it is for us to turn the lights on.

But for the ancients, darkness was terrifying.

No flashlights, no light-switches, no electricity—
 when it's dark, it's really dark.

For them, the rising of the sun is safety, assurance, and hope.

Here we pray for our true safety, our true assurance that God is with us in Christ.

We pray that Christ would come,

and *disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight*.

In the last stanza of the hymn, the second to last antiphon,

we call upon our coming Lord as the *Desire of the nations*,
 the King and ruler, the cornerstone that unites us all together.

Here we pray for the unity of the church, the unity of humanity, the rescue and gathering together of all of us who have been dispersed and scattered throughout the world.

We pray here that our divisions would come to an end.

We pray that the Church would be whole and one,

that denominations would come to an end and that we'd all be together in one fellowship,
one life-together.

And with that, we come finally to stanza 1, but the last antiphon:

O come, O come, Emmanuel...

God with us, come!

Ransom us, rescue us, pay our debts, forgive our sins, look upon us with grace, and draw our life into Yours!

O God with us, Emmanuel, Jesus,
comfort us in our mourning,
lead us out of our exile from Eden,
and walk among us again!

This is the longing the ancients had,
and this is our longing too!

But our longing is different than those in the Old Testament.

We recognize that Christ *has* come among us,
that He *has* walked among us,
that He took up flesh as ours and went to the cross for us!

The Word became flesh already—
sin was paid for, the ransom delivered, you are free.

Our longing, though,
is that Christ would come to us and bring us to Himself.

That He would free us from the pains and sorrows and death that still surround us.

We pray for the second coming, the Last Day, the return in glory.

And in the meantime, we pray that He comes to us in forgiveness, by word and sacrament.

He will come—

Ero Cras—

I will be here tomorrow!

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit