

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
First Sunday in Advent
November 29, 2020

Carols of Christmas: The Gospel in Christmas Carols
Prophet's Words from Long Ago

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 9:1-7 (NIV)

9.1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NIV)

*11.1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.*

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*

*6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

*10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the
nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.*

Micah 5:2-5a (NIV)

2 *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*

3 *Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.*

4 *He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.*

5 *And he will be our peace . . .*

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Long before the retail industry took over Christmas and began anticipating their year-end revenues by starting pre-Christmas sales, the church had begun the practice of anticipating the celebration of the birth of Christ by observing a season of thoughtful reflection, repentance, and contemplation of the wondrous gift of God that is ours through the birth of his son.

And long before radio stations started playing popular Christmas music in October, the church had developed a rich tradition of composing special music to celebrate the coming of Christ. From antiphonal chants to oratorios, cantatas, and concerti; from carols and hymns and special songs to operas and operettas, symphonic works, and folk musicals—the list of magnificent music for Advent and Christmas is massive. Pick your style: chamber music or smooth jazz, country-western ballad or Bach chorale; it doesn't matter. Whatever your musical palate craves, there is probably a Christmas piece to please your tastes. And it's quite likely that it is one of the best representatives of that genre of music. Christmas brings out the best in musical composition as well as the best in human behavior.

[Slide 2]

For this Advent, I would like to take us on a short musical adventure (*pun noted*). Because not only has Christmas been the source of some of the greatest music in the Western tradition, sacred Christmas music has been one of the most important vehicles for proclaiming the gospel and teaching essential truths of Christian belief. The songs of Christmas contain deep and powerful lyrics for us to reflect on as we consider what it means to celebrate Christmas. So instead of just singing them and feeling somewhat cheerier because they are familiar, I want us to listen to them, and think about what they are saying to us—what God is saying to us through them as we sing them this Advent season.

There's something about human beings and the way we're wired, when you put a tune to lyrics, you can remember those words far longer than if you just tried to memorize them. In fact, if you need to memorize something, and you want it to stick, just set it to a tune. Your brain will recall the words and the tune for decades. And if you add an emotional attachment to that music? Those words—and the feelings you had when you heard it earlier in your life and the long-buried memories associated with that time of your life—will provoke powerful associations that will still have a deep impact on you when you recall it later, even if you've gone many years without hearing the tune.

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Let me give you an example from my own life. I grew up singing in the church choir, and then in choir in school and college. (This was my choir director at KU, Dr. Ralston.) I loved choir, loved everything about it. At KU, Christmas Vespers was my favorite concert of the year. There were lots of reasons I loved Vespers—lots of things I loved about those performances—but one of my most powerful memories of Christmas Vespers is associated with the hymn we sang earlier, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

This piece of music has a rich history—which I'll get to in a bit—but for now, consider simply its two-part structure. There is a verse, with its haunting, brooding melody in a minor key. [*hum*] Then there is a jubilant chorus that moves to the relative major key, which brings both performer and hearer from sadness to cheer, even as the tune moves back to finish in the minor key.

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During the years that I was in the choir at KU, Christmas Vespers was performed in Hoch Auditorium. (This was before Hoch was remodeled following the lightning strike and fire that destroyed much of the old hall in 1991). A brass band played the pre-service music from a balcony open to the outside. [Slide 5] The orchestra sat on the main floor; the top choirs processed into the hall and sang from the stage, and the freshmen choir sat in the upper balcony. The music for the concert varied from year to year, except for three pieces. The processional and recessional for the choir were always the same: “O Come All Ye Faithful” on the way in, and “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” on the way out.

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The other unchanging element was the final song of the concert. After the choir recessed from the stage, all of the men from all of the choirs would rush to the second floor and take a position in the hallway behind the first balcony. The doors to the balcony would be opened, and we would begin singing “O Come, O

Come, Emmanuel” in unison, *a capella*. The acoustics in the hallway, and the fact that we were outside the main auditorium, combined to make the song sound even more mysterious and haunting than usual, as if a low chant from far away and long ago were wafting on the wind, rising and falling gently, in anticipation of a great but foreboding announcement. The first verse would close, in a quiet unison: “*until the Son of God appear.*”

Then, suddenly, this host of men’s voices would explode in four-part harmony, double forte, “*Rejoice! Rejoice!*” and the explosion would absolutely ring throughout the hallway and into the auditorium as if giant bells had been struck. The hair on the back of my neck would stand up and I would have goose pimples all over my arms and shivers running down my spine. It was my favorite moment in a long list of favorite moments from Christmas Vespers. I still get chills when I remember that moment, or when I sing, or even think about singing that song.

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But there’s another reason I love this Christmas hymn. I love the richness and the depth of what it says, the powerful connection between the prophecies of Scripture, the event of the birth of the Messiah, and the church’s theology, its reflection on the miracle of Christmas. It’s also an ancient hymn, with a history that goes back at least eight or nine hundred years, and roots that are perhaps an additional four centuries older—and that’s without counting the connection to the Scriptures. Yet it is still—rightly—one of the most beloved Christmas hymns, and as relevant to a 21st century celebration of Advent as any other song we could name.

We’re going to examine this hymn more carefully. But first, let’s go back even further in time, before the hymn was written, before the church began; back to the eighth century before the birth of Christ, about the year 750 BCE.

[Slide 8] *Prophets’ words*

This morning we read four passages: three from the prophet Isaiah, and one from the prophet Micah. Each of these men lived in the eighth century before Christ; they were contemporaries and neighbors. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, and Micah lived in the village of Moresheth about twenty-five miles to the southwest. Both primarily prophesied to the nation of Judah.

During the years of their ministry, the world around them was swirling with conflict and upheaval. Following a lengthy time of stability, peace, and prosperity, the region had been plunged into a series of devastating wars. The first had come when the northern kingdom of Israel allied with the Syrians in an attempt to overthrow the southern kingdom of Judah. That attempt failed, largely because it

brought into the picture the neighborhood bully of Assyria from the northeast, which led to the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and the subjugation of the southern kingdom of Judah. Repeated attempts to rebel by smaller kingdoms around them brought reprisals by Assyria that led to additional hardships.

More concerning than the Assyrian armies and their heavy taxation was the sin of God's people that had brought God's judgment upon them through the Assyrian conquest. Rampant idolatry, sexual immorality, greed, injustice, and economic exploitation of the poor characterized the Judean society. The covenant that defined them as God's people had largely been abandoned. The thriving business of religious sacrifice could not make up for the moral decay and corruption that permeated the society.

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Both Isaiah and Micah spoke to their own day. They addressed the sins of the people and their rulers and called them back to the covenant of God. Few listened, and fewer responded. But there were some, a remnant, who believed. And to them, Isaiah and Micah offered hope. After judgment, God would bring salvation. There would come a deliverer. Their prophecies were fulfilled in part when God spared Jerusalem from destruction, and then later, again in part, when God brought the Jews back from exile in Babylon.

But Isaiah and Micah also spoke of things that would transpire far beyond their day. They looked for a greater deliverer, a king from David's line who would bring a righteous kingdom, in which all would know the goodness and provision of God. He would govern justly. He would bring peace. He would bring the salvation of God—deliverance from their oppressors and salvation from their sin.

And so those who believed their words waited. And as the years and decades and centuries passed, the hope that had sounded so strong and confident in the throats of those who heard Isaiah and Micah began to weaken. The light of expectation grew dim and flickered, as the passing of time clouded their eyes. The prayers became dutiful, then diminished; then desperate. They mourned for their losses and grieved over their suffering and wondered when God would fulfill his promise to his people.

That sense of longing, of waiting with both expectation and the heaviness of disappointment, is part of what this hymn captures. I can't think of a hymn that better expresses the feeling and the meaning of the season of Advent than "*O Come, O Come Emmanuel.*" So let's look more closely at it, shall we?

[Slide 10] *The Advent Antiphons*¹

If you had grown up in what we call the “Middle Ages,” say, somewhere in the 6th through the 11th centuries in Europe, you would have been very familiar with something that we usually don’t encounter except in the movies: monks who lived in monasteries following a carefully structured schedule of prayer, work, and worship services. Around sunset the monks would gather for the evening prayer time, which was known as “Vespers” (from Greek, *hespera*, and Latin, *vesper*, meaning “evening”).

During the season of Advent, a series of seven special texts were inserted into the regular liturgy for Vespers and sung responsively in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. These were known as “antiphons.” Each of these seven antiphons began with an extended “O–” that expressed the deep longing of the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah. Each antiphon gave a different title to Christ taken from the Old Testament that signaled a particular aspect of his person or role. Following the title came a suitable prayer related to his coming.

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Sometime later, by the 12th century, someone had taken five of these seven antiphons (now known as the “Advent [or “Great”] O– Antiphons”) and turned them into an Advent hymn. The composer moved the final verse, “*O veni, veni, Emmanuel*” (“*O come, O come, Emmanuel*”) to the first position and added the refrain. Then in 1851 the Latin hymn was translated into English by Dr. J. M. Nealy. A second version appeared in translation in 1906, courtesy of Canon T. A. Lacey. Today, it is one of the most popular Christmas hymns.

[Slide 12] *The hymn’s structure*

Before we look more closely at the words to this hymn, let’s notice something about its structure. I’ve mentioned the verses (or stanzas) and the refrain. But look a little closer.

First, the hymn is written from the perspective of the people of Israel, who are waiting in expectation for the coming of the Messiah, in accordance with the prophecies recorded in their Scriptures. The ancient chant helps to convey the sense of being situated in this posture of waiting—a lifetime of waiting, of generations, even long centuries of waiting. And yet, thanks to the unknown monk who composed the refrain and added it to the antiphons, we also hear the hymn from the perspective of the prophetic voice that reassures us of the certainty of the fulfillment of those prophecies. We feel both the tension of long-delayed expectation and the release of realization, of promise and fulfillment.

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Second, we hear two “voices” in the hymn, or two speakers. That is, the words of the verses express the voice of one group of people and the words in the refrain represent a different speaker.

In the verses we hear the voice of the people of Israel. They call out to the Messiah, addressing him directly and calling for him to come to them. It is a prayer, the expression of devout longing for the fulfillment of what God has promised. The ache of disappointment, the desperate acknowledgment of their need, the lament of living without the coming of the kingdom of God, the hope to which they still cling—we hear all of that.

But in the refrain, we hear a different voice. We hear the voice of the Lord, who promises that their hope is not in vain. Immanuel, the promised one, who will unite God and his people once more, is coming. The prophets’ words continue to ring out with certainty and conviction.

So when we sing this hymn, we are mentally picturing ourselves in two different places. We start with the people of Israel, standing in their sandals, as it were, holding onto a promise that seems to be never coming. “For a season, we as Christians, put ourselves in the position of ancient Israel, waiting and preparing for the birth of Christ, the promised Saviour.”² But we are also standing on the other side, having heard the declaration that Immanuel is coming and now knowing what was hidden from view before—that the baby born in Bethlehem to the virgin from Nazareth was the one who was promised. He is Immanuel. He is God with us, God come to us, in fulfillment of what he had promised.

[Slide 14] *Five Pictures of Christ: (1) Immanuel*

Because there are a few different versions of this hymn (based on the two English translations), you’ll find slightly different versions of the verses. But I’d like to point out to you five pictures of Christ that we can see in the five verses.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.*

The first verse sets the scene: we are standing with the people of Israel, pictured as captives in exile, mourning over their sins that brought about the judgment of God. Israel is pictured in exile—and it is a fitting picture. Not only is it a picture of waiting to be released to return to their land, it is a picture of being separated from God, captive to sin, dwelling in darkness, needing the light of God to break through the hold of despair and gloom.

I would submit to you that when the cultural celebrations of Christmas threaten to trap you in empty “feel-goodism,” a healthy antidote is to remember that it was our sins that brought us judgment—judgment that was rightly deserved. Lamenting, mourning over that which has brought devastation into our lives and into the world at large is a proper place from which to begin celebrating Christmas. We need to remember Advent—and the reason for our celebration—if our celebration of Christmas is going to be done rightly.

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And the opening of God’s light in this first verse is powerful. The one who is coming to deliver his people is Immanuel—God with us. God himself will show up. He isn’t sending an angel or a prophet this time. He’s coming himself. Immanuel, the son of God, will bring God’s people out of bondage and the captivity of addiction, sin, and depression.

I never know who is actually listening to me, but if you’ve been listening to me for any length of time, you’ll recognize what I’m about to say. We don’t need the religious observation of Christmas or the traditions of Christmas celebration. As wonderful as they are and as much as I like them (!), religious observations and traditions cannot save anyone from anything, not even from boredom. What we need is Immanuel—the reality of God breaking into the dark of our nights.

[Slide 16] (2) *Root (or Rod) of Jesse*³

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save
And give them vict'ry o'er the grave.*

The “root” or “rod” of Jesse both refer to the Davidic lineage of the Messiah. Both ideas and terms are found in Isaiah’s prophecies. The “root” symbolizes the Messiah’s connection to the person of David, the son of Jesse, who became Israel’s greatest king and the one to whom God promised that he would have a descendant who would rule over God’s people forever. The “rod” (or “branch”) symbolizes the Messiah himself, who would spring from the seemingly shattered line of David that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of a Davidic throne.

This verse announces the one who would come not only to rule, but to deliver God’s people from the tyranny of Satan. Very few people in the West really grasp that they are prisoners of Satan. It usually takes hitting the bottom after addiction has taken over your personality and your life; or you wake up and

realize that you are sabotaging every relationship you've ever had; or you achieve the pinnacle of success in your field and discover you're still empty inside and your trophies are meaningless. Or you turn to Jesus Christ and are forced to face the fact that though you weren't an axe murderer (I hope), you were still a captive to sin, and enslaved to desires and habits that might have been socially acceptable in your particular group, but were damnable and damaging sins.

But Advent announces the coming of the savior. Freedom from sin's hold, freedom from fear of dying, freedom from hell and damnation. The Rod of Jesse has sprouted a new branch—and from that sprout has come a new people freed from the kingdom of darkness to walk in the light of God's ways.

[Slide 17] (3) *Dayspring (Dawn)*

*O come Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here.
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

Light is the theme of the next verse. The Messiah is the bringer of light, the one whose coming signals the dawning of the new day of God's salvation. He is the "*sunrise from on high*," in the words of Zecharias, the father of John the Baptist, prophesying of the one who will "*give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*" (Luke 1:78-79). He will rise like the sun, with healing for his people ("*But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.*" Malachi 4:2.)

[Slide 18]

One of the common complaints I hear around the holidays is from people who say that the season is depressing. Usually the reason for their depression is not hard to find. Often it involves the loss of a loved one who may have died recently or whose death occurred near the holidays. Thinking about not having that person around adds the sorrow of missing out to the pain of their loss. If you find yourself in this boat, let me just say that your feelings are quite normal: just because you're sad at Christmas doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you. And yet—God's answer for you is that he has put the shadows of death to flight. He has conquered the grave. The victory of verse two means that the light of verse three can penetrate any darkness, no matter how deep it might feel.

The same is true for those of you who suffer from periodic depression, or who have been hurt by broken expectations or personal trauma. The God who

came to us—Immanuel—didn't come to tell you to “*shake it off and pull yourself out of it.*” He came to be with us in our pain, to take away our pain, to give us his love in the place of our pain. He came to give you a light that won't go out in darkness, a joy that doesn't depend on the situation you're in, and a peace that passes all understanding, even when you're going through chaos with a shattered shield. Let God into your sadness. Let him into your despair. He will bring you out if you'll hold onto his hand more firmly than you've been holding on to your pain.

[Slide 19] (4) *Key of David*

*O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.*

Verse four presents the Messiah with a simple metaphor that is nevertheless deeply meaningful. He is the key that unlocks heaven, who makes a way for us to be reconciled with God and welcomed into his presence. He is the one who safely guards his people on their way home, guiding them so they are not misled, protecting them against the deception that would lead them to eternal death, eternal misery.

Revelation 1:17-18 always comes to mind when I think of this verse. The glorified Jesus appeared to the apostle John on Patmos and said to him, “*Behold, I am alive forever, and I have the keys of death and hell!*” Jesus is setting people free from the grip of hell and sending them on their way to our heavenly home. If you're not in the band, it's high time to get on board that train! Leave misery behind. Find life and joy and peace and eternal blessing in the Father's presence. There's no better Christmas present than that!

[Slide 20] (5) *Desire of Nations*

*O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill all the world with heaven's peace.*

The fifth picture of Christ in this hymn is one that breaks away from the original setting of Israel in exile to show us a world in exile—nations living in darkness; peoples who are beloved by God, who don't even recognize that the longing in their own hearts that they feel is for him. He is the Desire of all nations, the only one who can satisfy the longing of every human heart. Augustine said it

fifteen hundred years ago; Blaise Pascal developed the idea; C.S. Lewis echoed and developed it further; and it has been repeated and paraphrased by many since then: *There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person that can only be filled by God himself. And we are restless until we find our rest in him.*

Are you thirsty for Christmas joy? Hungry for something more satisfying than gifts or warm family time? Are you looking for something strong enough to quench your longing for a peace that lasts longer than Christmas morning? The Son of God has brought heaven's peace to a world at war with itself and with God.

“*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*”—it is the cry of the heart of the world. The hymn shows us Jesus, the Incarnate Word, the Son of David, the Light of the world, the key to heaven's door, and the only one who can fulfill the longing in our heart for the living God. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to *you*. Welcome him.

[Slide 21] *Transition to communion*

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Jesus said, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20). The prayer of our hymn is answered by the coming of Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God—not just as a baby at Christmas, but as the risen Lord, who sacrificed his life so that you could be reconciled to God. The longing of your heart to be made right with God, to know the living God, is answered when you open the door to his knock and invite him to be Lord of your life.

Communion is our celebration of that union we have in Christ as those who have invited him in. We remember his cross, his death on our behalf, and we remember that we belong together, because he bought us with his blood.

That is our message to you who are here, and to you who are watching. If you belong to Jesus, this table belongs to you. If you don't yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior, you can today. . . . God sent his Son to die in order to reconcile us to himself and give us eternal life. He is the only way to be reconciled with God, the only way to be delivered from evil. He bore your sins, paid the price that you owed, so that you could be forgiven. His death is the only sacrifice that can pay for your sins, your rebellion. He loves you and he will freely pardon you, if you sincerely repent from running your own life and living by your own rules, and come and surrender your life to him. You can commit your life to him right now.

If you are making that commitment to Jesus now, please let us know. We'd like to help you in your walk with Christ, and we can't unless we know who you are and what you need. [END]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.
[*Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .*]

Endnotes

1. Frank Colquhoun, *Hymns that Live: Their Meaning & Message* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 17-24.
2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. This verse, along with verse four, are found in Don Hustad, *Hymns for the Living Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1974).