



O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Sermon Series: Get Into the Spirit: The Songs of Christmas

Sunday, December 2, 2007
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Isaiah 7:10-14

This morning we begin our Advent series on the songs of Christmas. Have you ever noticed how often at this time of year we repeat ourselves? Turkeys say “Gobble, Gobble.” Santa says, “Ho, ho, ho.” We sing, “Falalalalalalala” and the Hallujah chorus is just --- that, -- a chorus of hallelujahs over and over again. It reminds me of a cartoon that appeared in *New Yorker* magazine a while back in which Yo Yo Ma and Butros Butros Ghali are having lunch in a restaurant. Butros Butros says, “I’ll have the cous cous.” Yo Yo asks the waiter, “How’s the mahi mahi?” to which the waiter, of course, replies, “So so.”

We repeat for emphasis, don’t we? This morning our featured song begins with

the plaintive cry, “*O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel.*”

Now let me ask: why begin Advent with one of the very few sad sounding Christmas carols? What an odd way to drum up Christmas joy by having everyone stand at the end of the sermon and sing this dirge-like hymn with words like “captive” and “lonely” and “exiled.” This hymn even talks about “death’s dark shadows.” Why not skip over this downer and go right ahead to jingle belling our way to Grandma’s house laughing all the way? How can a song in a minor key add to our Yuletide cheer?

Well, -- it can, -- if it tells us why Jesus came to earth. Before you celebrate the coming of a Savior, you really need to know what he came to save you from!

And so this morning (for one Sunday of Advent) we go back and live in the Old Testament before the Messiah's coming and in stanza after stanza we echo the yearning of Israel. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel." Then in the chorus after each stanza God speaks his promise: "Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

It's a song of hope. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says the three most important things in the world are faith, hope and love. Hope is to our spirits what oxygen is to our lungs. Without hope you die. Maybe not physically, but emotionally, spiritually. Without hope you're dead as a doornail. On the other hand, a tiny ray of hope can keep you going and going through the worst trials and hardships.

But many people live without hope. Indeed, it is hard to hope sometimes – it is easier to opt for another course. Just ask King Ahaz. This morning in Isaiah 7:10-14 we meet one of the really "bad boys of the Bible," one of the really bad kings of the Old Testament. Let me fill you in on the background of one of the great Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

At the time of the events in our reading this morning things are really looking dire for the people Israel. An enemy army is laying siege to Jerusalem and Israel's army is no match for them. King Ahaz, the King of Judah/of Israel, caves in to despair. He even sacrifices one of his own sons to a pagan god trying to call in supernatural help. At this moment Ahaz is trying to decide between two strategies for saving Jerusalem: do you sit tight and trust God to deliver the people or do you dispatch a messenger to form an alliance with the

enemy of your enemy – which happens to be Assyria, the most powerful nation on earth at the time. An alliance with Assyria would ensure victory over the local roughnecks – but with the price-tag of Israel having to become a vassal state of Assyria.

Ahaz is making the rounds inspecting the city's water supply, seeing how long they can hold out. All of a sudden who appears but the prophet Isaiah who says, "King Ahaz, put your hope in God. Don't make this deal with Assyria. God is willing to rescue us. In fact, God told me to tell you to ask for a sign – any sign you want from highest heaven to lowest hell."

In other words, even amidst grimmest immediate circumstances, God expects us to hope in him. "Name your sign, Ahaz," Isaiah says. Whatever it will take for you to hope in God, God is just waiting to give you. What will it be?" "

Oh, I can't bother God by asking for a sign," says the king. Isaiah replies, "Okay then" and then we hear these famous words that the Lord himself will give you a sign. "*The virgin (or young woman) will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel*" (meaning God with us). Let's look together at verse 10 of Isaiah 7:

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give*

you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.**

A baby would appear out of nowhere as Israel's hope. A few chapters later Isaiah 11 would describe this baby as "*a fresh shoot out of the stump of Jesse.*" Jesse was King David's father. In other words, out of the dry dead stump of a defunct monarchy was going to sprout a fresh hope for Israel. New hope would suddenly sprout in the form of a baby.

Ahaz said, "Isaiah, you're crazy", and he went ahead and made a deal with Assyria. If you're a person of hope, people aren't going to think you have all the dots on your dice either. It is so hard to ignore obvious, immediate circumstances and instead hope in God.

Isaiah says, "King Ahaz, I'll give you a sign." And what is the sign? The sign is a person. God's promises are anchored in a person, a baby. "A young woman -- a virgin -- will be with child and bear a son." --- Only He will be the Infinite Infant, --- Emmanuel, --- God with us.

In the church I served up in Grand Rapids there was a man named Jim Mitchell. Jim was widowed, having lost his wife Jan a few years earlier to cancer, and then Jim himself came down with cancer. In one of my visits with him Jim expressed his faith. He said, "Dave, I figure I'm in a win/win position. If I live another year I get to spend another Christmas with my kids and grandkids. If I don't I get to look into the face of Jesus. I can't lose!" I want to have a faith like that. When I think of hope Jim's face as he said that to me will always come to mind. Jim knew what it is to have hope.

A young woman I met years ago, --Lynn -- lost her husband in a tragic accident. Lynn and her husband Jack were newly married and living up in Alaska at the time. Jack was a doctor and was working with the Inuit people. While up in a helicopter one day something went wrong and the helicopter crashed. I met Lynn about a year after Jack's death. She had moved back to San Diego where she'd grown up to be with her family, and she had become active in the church where I belonged. I had heard of her faith and composure. At some point when we were talking I remember her saying, "Never once since Jack's death have I lacked a sense of God being with me." What was with her was the living presence of Jesus Christ bearing her up on eagle's wings and every day giving her hope.

There is plenty of hopelessness around out there in our society and culture. The greatest pain today for many is a sense of hopelessness. Depression, despair, discouragement -- they are all expressions of hopelessness. And it strikes all classes and stations. Every year the Christmas season offers us endless counterproductive ways to medicate our pain by over-eating, over-drinking, over-shopping.

Two years ago or so I went to see the movie *The Pianist*. It tells the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Polish pianist who underwent all the horrors of World War II, including the execution of his family, and went on to become one of the great concert pianists of the world.

Szpilman survives by living underground, being hidden by friends, and is moved from place to place to avoid detection by the Nazis.

In one scene he's ushered into a small apartment by a friend, who says with finger to lips "keep as quiet as possible." In the next door apartment lived the head of German police and across the street is a hospital for wounded German soldiers. "You are now living in the heart of the lion's den," warns the friend. "Keep as quiet as possible."

The friend leaves and Szpilman eyes a piano in the corner of the room. He has not played in months so he goes over, sits down at the bench, opens the keyboard and lifts the felt cover off the keys. On the movie's soundtrack a symphony orchestra starts to play, and we see Szpilman losing himself in the music. Right on cue we see him enter into the playing while the music reaches a soaring crescendo. The camera cuts to a shot of Szpilman's hands, revealing his fingers not touching, but right above the keyboard. All the music he hears is inside his head and his heart.

Every year the Christmas season offers us endless counterproductive ways to medicate our pain. But friends, if you let yourself, you will hear inside your head and heart a song of hope. Even at times when there is no beauty or harmony in your circumstances, when you're in the middle of the lion's den, God will put a song of hope in your heart.

This table represents hope. It is not simply a table of remembrance, nor simply a table of thanksgiving; it is a table of hope. In sharing the bread and the cup we experience a foretaste of the kingdom of God. *In preparation for receiving our Lord's Supper, let us sing the first two stanzas of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."* After receiving

Communion we will sing the final stanza.

O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL
Veni Emmanuel
Latin, c. 12th century

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here; Disperse
the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

<i>Holy Communion Celebrated</i>

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and discord cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!