

**“GOD WITH US,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, December 19, 2021**

Today is Advent’s fourth Sunday. At the start of this morning’s service we lit the fourth candle. In contrast to the blue candles we have lit up until now, it is bright pink. While the other candles signify hope, peace, and love, today’s candle represents joy. It’s all about the joy remembered and a joy that we continue to feel knowing that God does not abandon our troubled world but, as celebrated later this week at Christmas, sends his very own son to redeem our lives and help us deal with all that is amiss.

Some churches call this day “Gaudete Sunday”—*gaudete* being the Latin word for *rejoice*. Yet here at St. Paul we prefer to call it “Emmanuel Sunday,” remembering one of the biblical titles that the early church conferred upon Jesus. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah anticipates the coming of a messiah sent from God, declaring: “The Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (*Isaiah 7:14*) The Gospel of Matthew, which we read this morning, makes clear that the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy pronounced 700 years earlier. As Matthew specifically says, citing Isaiah verbatim: “All this,” namely, Mary’s unexpected pregnancy, “took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through his prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”)...” (*Matthew 1:22-23*) But Matthew goes one step further explaining that Immanuel (or Emmanuel) “means God with us.” (*Matthew 1:23*)

Emmanuel as “God with us” was particularly important for Matthew to affirm because the Christian Church already had a more complex understanding of the messiah than ancient Judaism ever did. Indeed, Matthew and other apostles taught that in the person of Jesus, thanks to the incarnation in which the divine spirit became embodied in human flesh, full divinity and full humanity seamlessly co-existed. During ancient Israel’s wilderness years after presenting the Ten Commandments, God had expressly warned Moses that “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” (*Exodus 20:2-17; 33:30*) Yet in Jesus God was doing a new thing, actually allowing his people to see him in the compelling face and countenance of his only begotten son. (*Isaiah 43:19*) Essentially, through Jesus who was both his son and the divine made flesh (which is what incarnation means), God was bridging the distance that he had once kept him from his people. It was all a part of God’s determination to really save us when all else, including the beautiful Ten Commandments, had all failed.

Easy as it is to pronounce, Emmanuel has a beautiful sound to it. Wouldn’t you agree?

It rolls off the tongue. No wonder it has become part of the poetry of the most cherished Advent hymns and refrains, like those we sing today.

One of my own most favorite hymns is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” It’s ancient. It’s widely believed that this particular Advent carol was sung or chanted in Christian churches and monasteries as early as 800 A.D. That’s 1200 years ago. Originally composed with seven Latin verses, each emphasizing a different dimension of the messiah’s role, it was probably reserved, just as we sing it today, for the very last week of Advent on the cusp of Christmas. Each day a different verse was likely sung or chanted by monks as part of their spiritual preparation for welcoming Jesus’ nativity all over again.

It was only in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that this extraordinary Advent carol fully emerged in the way we know and sing it from our hymnals today. For this we are indebted to a Protestant Anglican priest named John Mason Neale who was stationed in his ministry on the Portuguese-speaking island of Madeira off the African coast. Clearly, Neale had an ear for the makings of a precious hymn or carol. To him is credited such other great Christians songs as “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice,” which we also sing today, and “Glory, Laud, and Honor,” which always opens our Palm Sunday services.

Apparently, the Reverend Neale heard “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” chanted in Latin and decided to translate and transcribe it all into English for use in his own Anglican communion of churches. At that time, he also decided to update and reset it to a new-old melody. Specifically, he chose a 15<sup>th</sup> century processional hymn preserved by French and Portuguese Franciscan nuns. Yet despite the relative antiquity of both words and music, “*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*” became—to use the parlance of our own day—a hit. Within just 25 years, it had spread across the English-speaking Christian world as a cherished Advent song. Churches of all stripes perform it--choirs, orchestras, and brass ensembles alike.

In the slightly more contemporary version that appears in our own *Chalice Hymnal*, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” offers up four different references to Jesus Christ, each biblically based. Of course, borrowing straight from the Prophet Isaiah, both the carol title and its first stanza present Jesus Christ as “Emmanuel”—God with us. However, In the second stanza, Christ is represented as “Dayspring,” which is just another way of talking about the Morning Star that we find mentioned in the Old Testament Book of Numbers and the New Testament Book of Revelation as a term for the messiah. (*Numbers 24:17; Revelation 22:10*) Finally, in stanzas three and four, Christ is depicted as the embodiment of ultimate Wisdom and as the “Desire of Nations”—the savior that all humankind seeks.

These latter titles are also entirely biblical, to be found in the Old Testament books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. (*Isaiah 11:2; Jeremiah 10:7*) Nevertheless, amid the engaging multiplicity of titles for Jesus as the messiah, Neale's great hymn or carol always returns to "Emmanuel." In the refrain we sing: "Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!"

Neale's chosen melody certainly adds to the depth of this carol or hymn. While the carol's repeated refrain is hopeful and joyous, it stands as a counterpoint to other images such as a "captive Israel" that needs ransoming, "gloomy clouds of night" which need to be dispersed, and "death's deep shadows" that must be put to flight. The whole carol is also set to a somber melody in minor key which in its own tones suggests the woes of a dispirited world before Jesus the Christ comes to redeem us, ushering in fresh hope, peace, and love that are the other themes of our Advent weeks each year. I always find this very biblically nuanced Advent hymn, which does not ignore the darker aspects of human life, cathartic. It always reminds me profoundly as to why we need Jesus as "God with us," which is what Christmas is all about.

I think we all know that there's a lot of despair going around in our times. I heard someone just the other day express bewilderment that God doesn't bring everything to an end now. Admittedly, there are no shortage of potential reasons to get down in the dumps. Covid is everyone's pressing concern, isn't it? Then there's all that political tumult across our nation. And if that isn't enough, a whole section of the Midwest just got slammed by devastating tornados. No less terrible has been the shooting of high schoolers in Oxford, Michigan by a classmate—a tragedy which has touched one of our sister congregations in that town, Immanuel United Church of Christ, which our own choir will soon be visiting. Yet Advent and Christmas which witness so powerfully and wonderfully to Jesus as Emmanuel, as "God with us," affirm that God is not through with either this world he created, nor with us who populate it. Instead, God still seeks to redeem and renew all of his creation until that truly final hour somewhere in the future when he chooses to usher in his kingdom with Jesus coming to us a second time in power and glory.

In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul, who early experienced God's redemptive grace through his mystical encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, speaks eloquently and with great feeling about the troubled state of the world in his own time. (*Acts 9:4, 22:7-16*) He describes God's creation "groan[ing] with pain, like the pain of childbirth." (*Romans 8:22*) Paul also notes our own inclinations to groan as if in pain awaiting God to "set our whole being free" through the coming of his ultimate kingdom

with Jesus at its head. But then the Apostle goes on to express his own conviction that “in all things God works for good with those who love, those whom he has called according to his purpose.” (*Romans 8:28*) Most pointedly, but rhetorically, Paul asks: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (*Romans 8:31*) In fact, he thereafter insists, “nothing can separate us from [God’s] love.” (*Romans 8:37*) Ultimately, as Paul affirms, there is no greater proof that “God is for us” than the fact that Jesus is “God with us,” revealing God’s total love in the most visible and tangible ways. Despite all the problems of the world which may sometimes feel so overwhelming we certainly have in Jesus and through our trust in him good reasons for hope and to remain the loving people that God intends us to be. And, regardless of our trials that still have to be endured, we can be at peace and know joy fully confident that God’s will and our own efforts to serve his higher purposes will eventually bear fruit and prevail to our benefit and the benefit of all who love the Lord and seek to follow in his ways.

Like me, you’ve heard it said that we can’t really enjoy what’s sweet without having tasted the sour or the salty. I don’t think that the sweetness of Christmas or even the sweetness of the salvation that Jesus brings to our lives can be appreciated without contemplating the sour, salty, somber, and sobering circumstances of life on planet earth that the Advent season recalls for us from times past and holds up to us in times present. In these final days of Advent in the week ahead leading up to Christmas and its Twelve Day season, followed by Epiphany, may we take some time amid all else we’re doing to pause and seriously reflect on our own deep need for Christ given all the problems at hand. Then let’s do our best to open our hearts and minds to Jesus’ saving love and grace and all the peace and joy that our walk with him as God’s own son can make possible for us. May we ready ourselves to faithfully welcome Christ into our lives anew. **Amen.**