

As I begin today’s sermon, let me ask your help.

Would you all, please, reach out, grab a hymnal and hold it in front of you for a moment?

You may not realize it, but you hold in your hands
an ancient library
containing treasures from many centuries past

The hymnal is a **TREASURY OF FAITH**
with songs and prayers gathered from many lands and languages.

This morning, I invite you to take a closer look at one of those treasures –
a hymn that we’re going to sing in a few minutes.

We marked it with a ribbon at the beginning of the service.
Hymn 357 – “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

As you turn to this hymn, I’ll ask our organist, Earlene Wagner, to play through the melody line very softly...
(Earlene plays)

It is a plaintive, haunting melody –
the sort of sound one might expect to hear in a medieval monastery.

For that’s where this music comes from.
This music is called **PLAINSONG** – the sort of tune that Christian monks
were singing 800 years ago!

The words are even older.

The unknown Latin writer who composed the lyrics more than 900 years ago
was putting into poetry some ancient prayers that were already hundreds
of years old in HIS day!

Those prayer he used were called “The Great O Antiphons” of Advent
because each began with the word “O”...

O Wisdom
O Adonai

O Root of Jesse
O Key of David
O Dayspring
O King of the Nations
O Emmanuel

It was all in Latin, of course, and impossible for most of us to understand... until about 160 years ago.

That's when an Englishman named John Mason Neale translated this ancient, beautiful prayer into English and put it into a book of hymns in the year 1851.

I should add that Mr. Neale was an ordained clergyman in the Church of England.

He had been sick – so sick he was unable to do any of his pastoral work, so he devoted himself to translating hymns.

This ancient treasure,
translated and preserved through the faithful work of Doctor Neale,
you and I hold in our hands this morning.

What does it say?

And why do we sing these old, old words in our day –
a day of fast foods,
plasma TVs,
robotic assembly lines and
genetic engineering?

Well, understand first that this hymn is really a PRAYER...

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

It is a prayer that springs from a deep NEED
that has not changed in all the intervening centuries.

For we know what it means to be CAPTIVES!
There are very few sitting here in church today
who have not been enslaved to something –

addicted to alcohol or some other drug
held fast by a secret, shameful lust,
bound in the grip of simmering resentments and angry grudges.

We know what it means to MOURN –
for dear ones who have died
for lost innocence and lost opportunities
for failures in our relationship, for hurting the ones we love.

And which of us has not lived through some lonely EXILE –
alienated from someone who used to be a friend
at odds with fellow workers or teammates or neighbors,
separated or divorced from one's spouse...

cut off from one's own church, or far away from GOD HIMSELF?

Each stanza of this hymn says the prayer in a slightly different way:

In stanza one, like kidnap victims, we pray for RANSOM –
We impoverished, helpless poor ones with not a dime in our pockets
plead for a ransom to be paid that will spring us from our
dreadful CAPTIVITY to sin.

In stanza four we pray for a RESCUER
who can come like a SWAT team, and storm the fortress where we're held.
We, who are hopelessly weak and overmatched, cry for Someone mighty
enough to take on the Super-powers – Satan and Death.

In stanza five, we long for HOME.
We sing like weary travelers who have endured flat tires, seedy motels,
weak coffee and cold shoulders.
We look longingly for the Highway to Heaven that ends in warmth and Light
and the loving welcome of the Father's House.

Until we get there, we pray **in stanza six**,
for some GOOD CHEER when life gets GLOOMY
and the fear of death hovers like thick FOG at Midnight.

We cannot do such things alone!

Unless someone with REAL POWER comes to help, we are LOST!

A few weeks ago there was a story about a woman who drove off a road into a cold stream. The car came to rest upside down in the water and began to fill. Neither the woman nor her three children could get free from their seatbelts.

They screamed for help, but who would hear their pathetic cries?

Incredibly, someone came. A passerby noticed tire tracks leading off the road, stopped to investigate, and saw the little family in trouble.

Wading into the cold water, he managed to free each one from the belts and pull them to safety, just in time...

In the same way, we cry out this prayer.

But our prayer is not a “shot in the dark”!

We are not sending arrows into a dark void... to a nameless, shapeless “something” up there “somewhere”

This hymn directs our prayer to a very SPECIFIC HELPER who can do all we ask, and more.

We sing with hope and confidence, for we know His wonderful NAMES!

O Come, Emmanuel... Rod of Jesse

O Come, Dayspring from on high...

O Come, you Wisdom, you Key of David, you Desire of Nations...

For these are some of the 200+ names given to Jesus in the BIBLE, picture names full of the meaning of who He is and what He does for people.

Each stanza begins the same way...”O Come!”

We say it again, and again, and still again...”O Come!”

For the hymn reminds us to pray persistently, and not give up: “O Come!”

For that is the meaning of the word ADVENT. It is a season set aside for us to pray for the coming of Jesus Christ into our world and into our personal lives:

“O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.”

The Good News of Advent is that He does!

This hymn is more than a PRAYER. It is also a PROMISE.

Did you notice that each stanza, begun with our desperate need,
ends with God's sure, certain promise:

“REJOICE! EMMANUEL SHALL COME TO YOU, O ISRAEL!”

In a story book that I used to read to my children,
there is a scene in which a young girl is given the gift of a magic horn.

“Sound the horn in your great need,”
says the Giver, “and help will come to you.”

We do not need a MAGIC HORN. We have only to ask God for the rescue we need.
“O Come!” we pray,
and His response sounds forth, “Emmanuel shall come!”

God made that promise a long time ago through His prophet Isaiah:
Isaiah 7:14:

**Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and you shall call His name Emmanuel.**

God Kept His promise when Jesus was born of Mary.

That night the angels sang in the sky,
and the song goes on today...with good reason!

For at Christmas, GOD HIMSELF came down among us to do
all the things we prayed for in this hymn:
to pay that RANSOM with His blood
to conquer Satan's tyranny with a word
to bring CHEER to those who sat in darkness
to open the way HOME

Is there anyone here this morning
who is CAPTIVE to someone or something other than Christ?
who no longer has the price to buy himself back from his lonely exile?

Then let us SING TO HIM!

For the Son of God has appeared and redeemed us,
and He is determined not to let that ransom go to waste.

He is EMMANUEL. God with us. And with you too! So REJOICE!

Is there anyone here this morning
for whom this hectic life goes at a killing pace,
someone left sighing and saying “I feel like the Devil” or “I feel like hell”?

for whom these are not mere figures of speech
but the deadly symptoms of Satan’s tyranny?

Then let us SING TO HIM!

For the Son of God has appeared to destroy the work of the Devil,
and He is determined to snatch us out of His grasp.

He is EMMANUEL. God with us. And with you too! So REJOICE!

Let us become preachers of the Gospel in our music.

Let us speak to one another
in songs and hymns and spiritual songs,
making melody to the Lord
and to each other,
singing our Advent prayer
and God’s Advent promise.

Let’s do it now. We rise to sing and speak this hymn. The directions are
in your bulletins...

(sing the hymn)