



## O Come, O Come Emmanuel

**Matthew 1:18-25**

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In this season of Advent, we are looking at some of the *Songs of the Season* – the hymns of the faith that call us to prepare for the celebration and remembrance of Christ’s birth. Last week we looked at the *Magnificat*, which is Mary’s song, offered at the confirmation of the Angel Gabriel’s proclamation of her pregnancy with the Son of God. Today, our scriptural text looks to the other half of this Holy Family – to Joseph – and it invites us to consider one of the oldest hymns of Advent, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*.

It’s a bit interesting that Luke’s Gospel focuses on Mary, and completely ignores Joseph. For Luke, the importance of the gospel message is it’s good news to the poor – and so he uses the poor, unwed, virgin mother to mark the entrance of Jesus. Yet, Matthew’s Gospel focuses on Joseph, and all but completely ignores Mary. For Matthew, the importance is educating the Jewish readers, claiming the promise that Jesus is an extension of God’s work from the past, and that Jesus’s birth, teaching, ministry, and the cross are the fulfillment of God’s promised covenant. To make this Jewish connection, Matthew begins not with the unwed and unknown mother, but on Joseph, who is a direct descendent of David through Jewish lineage.

The first 16 verses of Matthew’s Gospel seek to set the coming birth of Christ in the historical framework of the promise of a child-to-be-king who would come from the Davidic line. Verse one begins, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” It is the original Ancestry.com. The story then recounts the direct lineage of Jesus, beginning with Abraham, passing through David, and concluding with Joseph. Verse 16 ends the genealogy lesson by offering, “and Jacob, the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”

There is a slight problem with the lineage as it ends. The text does *not* make the claim that Joseph is Jesus’ father – it simply says Joseph was the husband of Mary, who was the mother of Jesus. This leads us into our passage from this morning, through which Matthew will clear up the patriarchal relationship between Joseph and Jesus.

Verse 18 begins, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” ... Confirming what we learned last week in Luke’s gospel about the conception of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, though betrothed (that is, though the legal contract between their families had already been finalized), they were not yet married – there had been no consummation of the legal contract. They were not yet sleeping in the same bed, or room, or house.

Joseph found out about the pregnancy, and could only imagine that the pregnancy was due to Mary's unfaithfulness. It clearly wasn't his child, so whose could it have been? For Joseph, who the person was is not the issue ... *that* there is another father for the child is of grave concern.

Joseph is of the line of David ... of the line of Abraham ... this is a family that is as Jewish as Jewish can be. There is an expected responsibility to Jewish law in this family, and Joseph is an upright, faithful, and devout Jew. He not only knows the law, but he is intending on upholding it. In response to finding out that one's wife, betrothed, or girl-friend has been unfaithful, the Jewish law offers little option. Joseph could publicly shame her, which could result in her death – it was still in the realm of possibilities for her to be stoned to death for her adultery. (Remember the story in John 8, where the leaders brought a woman they claimed to have been caught in the act of adultery, just waiting for Jesus' permission to stone her?) Or, Joseph could dismiss her quietly. He could end the contractual agreement between the families regarding the marriage, but could do so without the public humiliation, shaming, and possible bodily injury that would accompany the shame.

The text offers that, "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to the public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." That seems like the gracious option.

But just as soon as he had made up his mind, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David ..." ... Don't forget, Matthew is still working to make the connection to Jesus being in the line of David. This short reminder of Joseph's connection to the line of David is very intentional. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

"By naming the baby, Joseph acknowledges him as his son; in effect, Joseph adopts Jesus, and this incorporates him legally into David's genealogy."<sup>i</sup> If you go back and look at Luke's gospel, if you look at the account of the Angel's appearance to Mary, there is never a name promised the child to Mary. When the angel appears to Mary, the child is called the "Son of God." Even when Mary visits Elizabeth, the child is referred to as "the Lord." Joseph is the one to name the child; Joseph is the one whose role in this birth will incorporate the child into the Davidic line, thus fulfilling the prophecies of old, and tying the birth of Jesus into the historic work and covenant of God.

Going back to Matthew's text, the writer names this affirmation of the prophets. Picking back up in verse 22 we read, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel', which means, 'God with us.'" ... In the origin of the name, the verb *is* does not appear. We tend to add this verb in to make the phrase more palatable given our vernacular and expectation of sentence structure. But the name Emmanuel, as translated directly, means "God with us."

This phrase, this name of Christ, becomes a common theme throughout Matthew's gospel. From the birth story, where he is named as Emmanuel, to the Great Commission, where Christ offers, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age," this theme is carried out throughout Matthew's narrative. *God with us* – this is Christ, this is the promised gift in the Incarnation.

It is this gift and this promise of *God with us* that our hymn invites us to remember in song.

*O Come, O Come Emmanuel* was originally offered in Latin, under the title, *Veni Emmanuel*. It's true origin is undefined and hard to trace, but the words are found in the chants of monastic life as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It was not until 1851 that the hymn writer John Mason Neale compiled the full seven verses into the English hymn we still sing today. The melody for the hymn, which Neale used for the song, dates back to a 15<sup>th</sup> Century French Processional.

In its early use, these seven verses in their original form were chanted each day for the seven days leading up to the celebration of Christmas. With each verse beginning with the *O*, these chants were called the "O Antiphons." In Latin, the original verses begun with these seven phrases:

*O Sapientia* (which means O Wisdom, now found in verse 2)

*O Adonai* (O God ... or O Lord, now found in verse 3)

*O Radix Jesse* (O Root or Branch of Jesse, now found in verse 4)

*O Clavis David* (O Key of David, now found in verse 5)

*O Oriens* (O Dayspring .. which we now sing as O Bright and Morning Star in verse 6)

*O Rex genitium* (O King of Gentiles, now sung as King of Nations in verse 7)

*O Emmanuel* (which we now sing as the first verse)

In the original Latin, these 7 phrases were a backwards acrostic. *Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, Emmanuel* – these letters in order are SARCORE. In reverse order, the spell the Latin phrase 'ero cars,' which translates to English "I will be present tomorrow." There is meaning in the words.

Like Mary's *Magnificat*, and our hymn last week, *My Soul Gives Glory to My God*, this hymn is not just focused on the promise of the birth; it instead focuses on the impact of Christ. Each verse, using a different title or reference to the person of Christ, then sings of the promise of God that is the result of Christ's birth. When we pay close attention to the words, we see that the song is not just offering new promises of new life, but is offering that in Christ, the promises of the prophets are to be fulfilled. The hymn is singing of a renewed hope that all God has promised us in the covenant will be fulfilled in Christ.

It's also worth noting that this song, just as the message of Christ's birth in general, is quite political in nature. I'm always confused by folks who take up the argument that the message of Christ, the birth of Christ, or the church of Christ, should not intermingle with politics. When we pay attention to the language and the promises of God in Christ, they are very politically motivated. These promises were meaningful, important, and applicable to a people who always

seemed to be at the center of a political dispute amidst more powerful nation-states. Whether it was the Egyptians, the Assyrians, or the Romans, the Jewish people and the promise of God in their midst, has always been about freedom from and faith amidst oppressive political powers. How applicable are these words still today, in the midst of political divisions that are fostered by power-hungry dictators, kings, and presidents?

This song is not just about the promise of God to the Jews and Gentiles of the first century, but is still a promise to us today. Consider these words, even in the midst of your own life – in the midst of our own community – and in the midst of the turmoil of our nation and world.

“O come, O King of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind. Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace.” The lament of the song is that we are not at peace with one another. The mourn of the song is that between and within our nations, there is division. In the midst of this division, we’re asking for a new king to come – we’re asking for a new head of the nations to bring unity to us. The invitation of the song is to have our king / dictator / queen / prime minister / president replaced with one whose focus is to bind our hearts together as one. That’s political, and is still as applicable today as it was when chanted by the monks 1300 years ago.

“O Come, O Branch of Jesse’s stem, unto your own and rescue them! From depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o’er the grace.” The reference here is to Jesus as the descendent of King David – in the line of Jesse, who was David’s father. Again, there’s a very political message here. The song is claiming, we want the line of David to rule again, that we might be saved from those who rule over us now. Things are so bad now, we see it as hell – and so we sing, save us from this space that is so bad that we liken it to the place that is absent of God.

“O Come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.” Again, we have the political language of ransoming a captive nation, who exists in exile. These are all images that conjure up the memory of Israel amidst its most difficult political seasons, when it was exiled from its homeland at the mercy of other powerful kings. The song invites Emmanuel, God with us, to come that we might be saved from such exilic suffering. We know that while we reside in exile, we will continue to be oppressed by other kings, until the Son of God appears.

The other verses lament of the deep shadow of living in a time and space without God’s presence in Christ. “Dispel the shadows of the night and turn our darkness into light.” “Make safe for us the heavenward road and bar the way to death’s abode.” The concern of the verses is that life without Christ is bleak. Without God’s presence, we are at the mercy of the powerful. Without God’s Son, we are suffering. Without the heavenly Wisdom, we are lost with no direction.

These are the cries of people in a time of need. These are the mournings of a people who have been abused. These are the fears of a people who need saving from imperialistic emperors.

These are the laments of a people who are lost without direction. There are the chants of a people who yearn for new life, for new leadership, for a new power of peace, and a promise of new possibilities amidst the fear of death.

And then we sing the refrain, with its promise to fulfill all of our deepest needs. “Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.” You have nothing to fear, the refrain chants, for *God with us* is coming to be with you. In the times of fear, God will be with you to provide encouragement. In the times of grief, God will be with you to provide comfort. In the times of turmoil, God will be with you to provide peace. In the times of enslavement, God will be with you to provide freedom. In the times of death, God will be with you to provide new life.

As Christmas draws all the more near, as the season weans toward its close, as the year begins to take its turn, the pain of loss, the fear of the future, the strains of the purse, the angers of the past year ... they all close in on us and the hurt is compounded. But yet, even as we struggle to know how it is we pull ourselves from the downward road, we are reminded, it is God with us – Immanuel – who will lead us. It is God with us – Immanuel – who offers peace. It is God with us – Immanuel – who assures us justice will reign. It is God with us – Immanuel – who says kings and kingdoms will all pass away, but there’s something about that name – Immanuel. God with us. Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

Let us stand and proclaim, in the midst of our fear, our worry, and our own brokenness in the world today, God with us, Immanuel shall come to you. Amen. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.