

November 27, 2016: Singing the Story of Christmas: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

This morning, we officially begin our journey of anticipation – of waiting for the coming of the Christ Child – our countdown to Christmas. Every family has different traditions that accompany this beloved season – some go hunting down a Christmas tree together, some gather to bake Christmas cookies, some decorate their home (both inside and out) with care and lots of twinkling lights, others send Christmas cards or make personal visits to that long lost relative. No matter the tradition, it is usually accompanied with the sounds of the season – the beloved Christmas carols and songs we've been singing for generations. Music is piped throughout malls and stores to entertain shoppers, and these favorite Christmas tunes dominate the radio waves, so no matter where you are, you can be surrounded with the sounds of the season. Music has a way of setting the emotional scene as we approach Christmas Day.

Most of these songs we know by heart, if not the words, then definitely the tunes. We find ourselves singing or humming along, often not paying much attention to what the words mean. They connect with us in emotional, spiritual, and theological ways, drawing us into the spirit of the season. As we prepare our hearts for Christ's coming this year, we will dig into some of our beloved Christmas carols to uncover their history and deeper meaning for us today.

Carols were first sung in Europe thousands of years ago, and were pagan songs, sung at the Winter Solstice celebrations as people danced round stone circles. The word Carol actually means dance or a song of praise and joy! Carols used to be written and sung not only for Winter Solstice, but during all four seasons, however only the tradition of singing them at Christmas has really survived. Early Christians took over the pagan solstice celebrations for Christmas and gave people Christian songs to sing instead of pagan ones. In the year 129, a Roman Bishop said that a song called "Angel's Hymn" should be sung at a Christmas service in Rome. Another famous early Christmas Hymn was written in 760, by Comas of Jerusalem, for the Greek Orthodox Church.

Soon after this composers all over Europe started to write 'Christmas carols'. However, not many people liked them as they were all written and sung in Latin, a language that common people couldn't understand. Overtime, the carol lost its association with dancing and became largely the work of clerics and monastics but did not have a place in worship. The singing and writing of carols took a real hit during the English reformation in the 1600's because of the religious and political turmoil of the day and the abandonment of many monasteries who supported their composers. In the late 16th and 17th centuries, the Puritans attempted to suppress Christmas celebrations entirely – including the songs that went with them. But the carol endured and in the 18th century, hymn singing rejuvenated the carol and produced many new ones. Hymnals were published, and the words with their accompanying tunes spread in use and popularity.

I read recently that Christmas carols are the most influential kind of songs in the Western world. They are certainly the best-known genre of religious music – If you think about it, for one month out of every year you will hear songs about the theology of

Christ on your car radio, in elevators and at the shopping mall. Over the years, it's become more commercialized, more about Santa and gift giving, but beyond the secular songs, the message of Christ is still there. People who can't tell you the name of the first book in the New Testament know the story of Jesus' birth from Christmas music. I have to admit that some Christmas carol lyrics are curious. "Little Lord Jesus no crying he makes"...really? And why do three ships comes sailing into landlocked Bethlehem? But many Christmas carols are filled with some profound and basic theology. And so today, we turn to our first carol and unpack it.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel may be the oldest Christmas carol still sung today, and I know it's a favorite of many here in Red Bank. The words did not originate as song, but as antiphons, or liturgical prayers to be spoken in worship. You'll notice that each verse begins with "O" – these "O Antiphons" are mentioned as early as the sixth century A.D., and they had entered common use in liturgical celebrations in Rome by the eighth century. Sometimes called the "Greater Antiphons," these verses were recited at Vespers, one each evening, between December 17 and December 23. Each of the 7 antiphons is based on a different title for Jesus, taken from the Old Testament— titles like Emmanuel, Key of David, Dayspring, and Wisdom. We have this carol in English today because of the diligent work of John Mason Neale, an Anglican priest born in 1818. While ministering on the Madiera Islands off the northwest coast of Africa, Neale discovered this Latin chant and saw the importance of the carol's message. He translated it into English as "Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel."

The tune, Veni Emmanuel, was a fifteenth century processional that originated in Lisbon, Portugal. This tune was linked with the translated "O Antiphon" lyrics in 1851 by Thomas Helmore, and it captures the plaintive mood of longing. It is not the same as the exuberant "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," or the dynamic, "Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King." Instead, it is an excellent musical match to the mood of the song. Longing. Aching. Yearning. Hoping.

This carol goes back and forth from the already, and not yet, the expectant waiting that accompanies the season of Advent. Each of the names used for Jesus in this carol is full of hope – pointing to the hope that we long for from Christ's coming.

- We desire an Emmanuel God who will be with us in the midst of life's struggles.
- We long for God's Wisdom to guide us and teach us the way to life everlasting.
- We search for the Lord who will lead us as a people, living into laws of justice and righteousness.
- We look to be united under one symbol, as the Root of Jesse stood for a restoration of the people of God.
- We seek out the one who will open wide the gates of heaven, both in this life and the life to come, the Key of David who liberates us from all that oppresses.
- We yearn for the light, the Dayspring that casts away all darkness and hopelessness.
- And we ache for enduring peace, the Desire of Nations that would bring an end to wars and hatred.

This carol speaks deeply about the hope we have for the love, guidance, peace, and unity that Christ brings into this world. This is who Jesus is. This is what he has already

brought into our world through his life, death, and resurrection - and yet we are still waiting, still longing, for the fulfilment and completion of Christ's work in our world. And so with every verse, the refrain reaches down musically into our hearts and pull us up, in faith, to see the certainty of the end.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel. Artistically, the rhythm of plaintive longing in the verses, punctuated with powerful bursts of joy in the refrain, are just about right on. The mystery and the wonder of Christian living are captured in the emotion of the song. Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Already. But not yet. For we live in a world where Christ has already come, and yet we still wait... A world where he taught all he could about love and peace and hope and joy - but still we can't seem to get it right.

Sometimes it feels like we might never get it right - with the hatred we see broadcast on the evening news, and the wars that continue night and day. We see people fighting for their rights, for their lives; battling illnesses and addictions, poverty and injustices. We see evil rewarded and righteousness punished. For some, hope and joy are just pretty words ---- but it is into this reality that we sing this song of longing, of waiting, of calling out to the God who comes into our world and walks with us through it all - our Emmanuel God. It is into this reality that we sing, "Rejoice, Rejoice! Emmanuel, shall come to thee." For we have faith that our story doesn't end on this sour, incomplete note - we have faith that God's love shone to us through Jesus Christ is continuing to shine light into the darkness and one shadow at a time is being cast out.

This is the spirit of Advent - the hopeful longing. This realization that while we're not there yet, God's kingdom is continuing to unfold before our very eyes. This year, as we sing, "O Come, O come Emmanuel," I invite you to ponder what you are most longing for in this Advent season. Are you longing for the presence, the wisdom, the leadership, the unity, the liberation, the light, or the peace that Christ's coming promises once again. I invite you to join me in praying for each of these to come into our world - for God knows we need them all! And may the music of the season help you to pray - O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Amen.