

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-23; Revelation 21:1-4

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Today, the first Sunday of Advent 2018, we will begin a series of studies on the Scriptural basis for four of the most beautiful Christmas songs churches sing. Most Christmas songs that are popularly sung in churches are narratives like “Once in Royal David’s City,” sentimental like “Silent Night,” and childish folksiness like “Away in a Manger.” But with “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” there is hardly any narrative, and no sentimentality and childish folksiness.

Rather, this hymn addresses the majestic titles of Christ used throughout Scriptures. It may have been used as early as the fifth century by Jewish Christians, since the themes are from the Old Testament. In 800, it was incorporated for the Advent season as seven “antiphons” or anthems, each of them in praise and wonderment of a name for the Messiah, were chanted. In the thirteenth century, these “Great ‘O’ Antiphons” were put in Latin hymn form, “Veni, Emmanuel,” and the “Rejoice” refrain was added. But the use of the hymn did not become widespread until two Anglican priests published an English translation in 1854.

Though popular, the meaning and source of most of the words of this song is lost even to Christians. Obviously, most people today say the word “Christmas” and sing songs about the birth of the infant Jesus not knowing what it means. Way back in 1965, Ray Conniff Singers sang, “O the real meaning of Christmas is the giving of love every day.” Recent polls found that half of Americans don’t celebrate Christmas religiously. In the United Kingdom, a quarter of children between the ages of five and seven think Christmas is a celebration of Simon Cowell’s birthday. The same poll also found that a quarter think that Jesus was born at 10 Downing Street or Buckingham Palace! ¹

What then is the real meaning of Christmas? Our texts have the answer. The baby who was born in Bethlehem had two significant names. One is “Jesus,” which means “the Lord saves.” The other is “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” We will focus today on the name “Immanuel” in four parts: (1) Immanuel in Eden’s Tabernacle; (2) Immanuel in the Wilderness Tabernacle; (3) Immanuel in an Earthly Tabernacle; and (4) Immanuel in the Eternal Tabernacle.

Immanuel in the Garden Tabernacle

To understand Immanuel, one must study all Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, spanning the whole history of mankind: from Creation, to the Fall, to Redemption, and finally to Restoration. So we unfold Immanuel beginning with Creation.

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth and filled it with his creatures, including the man Adam. God was pleased with his finished work that he said it is “*very good*” (Gen 1:31). Of

¹ “Real meaning of Christmas lost on today's children as nearly quarter believe 25th December is Simon Cowell's birthday,” Daily Mail, Dec 2011. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2076523/Christmas-meaning-lost-1-4-children-believe-25-December-Simon-Cowells-birthday.html>. Accessed Nov 29, 2011.

all his creatures, only Adam was made in God's image: he had perfect holiness and righteousness. He also had perfect communion with God, who walked and dwelt with him in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:8). In fact, we know from Scriptures that the Garden was God's tabernacle or dwelling-place. In three places in Ezekiel, it is called *"the garden of God"* (Ezk 28:13, 31:8-9). And in Isaiah 51:3, it is called *"the garden of the LORD."*

Therefore, the garden of Eden was the earthly tabernacle where God dwelt with our first parents. This is where God walked with Adam and Eve to reveal his glorious virtues and his holy will for them. Not only were they to tend and subdue the Garden, but also to guard it from unwanted intruders, specifically the devil. If they accomplished these goals that God assigned them, they and all their descendants would be given the right to eat from the Tree of Life. This tree represented eternal life in God's heavenly dwelling-place, as seen in Revelation 2:7, *"To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God"* (see also 22:14).

God's purpose in creation was for man to walk with him and for him to walk with them. "Walking with God" means living one's life with God, including thoughts, words and deeds. Noah, Abraham, and Zechariah the father of John the Baptizer, were all described as believers who walked with God. God demands that his people walk with him by following his rules and keeping his statutes (Lev 18:4). The Apostle Paul also exhorts us to *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God"* (Col 1:10).

This was God's intention from Creation, echoed throughout Biblical history. But right there in the Garden of God, Adam failed to walk with God.

Immanuel in the Wilderness Tabernacle

After Adam's Fall, man's walk with God – a perfect communion – was broken. With his holy and just character, God could have destroyed mankind when Adam sinned. But in his mercy and grace, he instead had a plan from eternity to save Adam and his children from his wrath. He called Abraham from his pagan roots and gave him faith, so he would walk righteously with God. He promised him a multitude of descendants and a land where they would settle.

But in God's providence, Abraham's descendants were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. So God called Moses to redeem his people from slavery. After defeating Egypt with ten plagues, God made a covenant with his people at Mount Sinai, declaring them to be a *"people for his treasured possession"* (Deu 7:6). If they walked with him, God promised them, *"I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people"* (Lev 26:12).

God's promise to dwell with his people was made visible in the tabernacle in the wilderness that he commanded Moses to build. God dwelt in the tabernacle that traveled with Israel wherever they went (2 Sam 7:6). So he revealed his plan for King Solomon to build the temple in Jerusalem, because, he said, *"I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent"* (2 Sam 7:2). Before the tabernacle was built, God commanded Moses to build the "tent of meeting," saying, *"I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God"* (Exo 29:45). It's striking that the Hebrew verb "to dwell" is also the root word for "tabernacle." So all throughout Israel's wilderness wanderings, the

LORD was with them in the tabernacle, *“For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys”* (Exo 40:38).

But God’s people Israel repeatedly rebelled against God, until finally, some 800 years after the Exodus, God’s patience ran out. He left his dwelling-place in the temple in Jerusalem, signified by the departure of the cloud of glory from the temple. The Jews believed that God would never leave them, no matter how wicked they were, as long as the temple stood (Jer 7:4). So they did not heed the warnings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel that Jerusalem will be destroyed by the Babylonians if they did not repent. After the LORD left the temple, his dwelling-place with his people, the city and the temple were destroyed by the Babylonians (Ezk 10:1-3).

Did this mean that God completely forsook his people then? No, because even when they were in exile, faithful believers such as Ezekiel and Daniel and his three friends were protected by God. In exile, the LORD says, *“yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone”* (Ezk 11:16). They trusted in the promise of the prophets that the LORD would “ransom captive Israel” from its “lonely exile”: *“And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing”* (Isa 35:10). The faithful remnant in exile not only desired to return to the Promised Land, but they also mourned, longed and hoped for God to dwell with them again in a temple, *“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion”* (Psa 137:1).

Immanuel in the Earthly Tabernacle

God’s people Israel waited for the Messiah, “the Consolation of Israel” in Isaiah 40:1, to come. The LORD also revealed another sign for Israel in Isaiah 7:14, *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”* In this 8th century B.C. prophecy, Isaiah was actually foretelling that King Ahaz would bear a son whose name will be different and mean “a speedy plunder.” The sign foretells God’s judgment against King Ahaz for disobeying God’s command to not align himself with Assyria. He did not trust God’s promise to protect his kingdom. Not long after, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and took its people as slaves in its many lands (Isa 8:1-4).

But in Matthew 1:20-23, the final fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy was announced by an angel to Joseph that Mary would conceive, and will bear a Son, and she will call him “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” The Apostle Paul says that this Immanuel came at God’s appointed time, *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman...”* (Gal 4:4). The Word who was in the beginning with God assumed human flesh from his fathers Abraham and David (Matt 1:1). This is why he is called the “Rod of Jesse,” David’s father (Isa 11:1, 10; Rom 15:12). He is also the “key of David” (Isa 22:22; Rev 3:7), because he – not Peter – holds the key to death and hell (Rev 1:18).

This is why John 1:14 says, *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* The verb “dwelt” is derived from the noun that means “tent” or “tabernacle.” So in 2 Corinthians 5:4, Paul tells us, *“For while we are still in this tent [mortal body], we groan.”* In fact, the KJV translates “tent” as “tabernacle.” Therefore, Jesus who was born not only assumed an earthly “tabernacle” or flesh and blood. But he is actually our “tabernacle,” our Immanuel, “God with us,” because from that day he was born, he dwelt and walked with us his people in our earthly pilgrimage.

But Jesus our Immanuel is not only “*God with us.*” The prophets also promised that this Immanuel would be the “*star of Jacob*” (Num 24:17; Matt 2:2); “*a light for the nations*” (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:3); and the “*sun of righteousness*” (Mal 4:2). This light was fulfilled when Jesus came as the “*true light*” (John 1:9); the “*bright morning Star*” (Rev 22:16); and a light to people walking in darkness (Luke 1:79; 1 Pet 2:9). So, for 400 years after the last prophecy by Malachi, the people of God longed for the coming of Immanuel, the Messiah who would dwell with his people. Simeon, an aged and devout man, waited for him and was satisfied to die after he saw the “*Consolation of Israel*” as an infant (Luke 2:25-32). Jesus dwelt with his people on earth until he accomplished the salvation of his people from sin, death and eternal hell. The good news is that Jesus was born, died, was raised from the grave, and ascended into heaven to save us.

So while we wait for his return from heaven, we who believe in him are given the gift of the Spirit to “*show us the path of knowledge and teach us in its ways to go.*” Isaiah 11:2 prophesied about the Spirit resting upon Jesus, “*And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*” Jesus fulfilled his promise that he would send “*the Spirit of truth... [who] dwells with you and will be in you*” (John 14:17). So Paul reassures us, “*You are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you*” (1 Cor 3:16). That as the church of God, “*You also are being built by God into a dwelling-place for God by the Spirit who dwells in you*” (Eph 2:2). Therefore, the Holy Spirit is our Immanuel, “*God with us,*” until Jesus the God-man Immanuel returns to dwell with us forever in the eternal tabernacle.

Immanuel in the Eternal Tabernacle

So when Jesus returns from heaven, the Spirit “*who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you*” (Rom 8:11). In the heavenly temple, the Spirit will be present with his resurrected people forever, so the glory of this final temple will be much greater than the glory of its earthly copies, namely, the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the temple in Jerusalem (Hag 2:7-9).

In Isaiah 60, we read a description of a beautiful, richly-decorated international temple. All nations will build this tabernacle and bring their wealth into it (10). There will be need of the sun, moon and stars, for the light of the Almighty and the Lamb will be its light (19). He says to his people, “*your days of mourning shall be ended*” (20). Verse 21 says, “*Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever.*” So in verse 1, God calls us to worship, “*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*” And who is this light? Paul quotes this same verse in Ephesians 5:14, “*Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*” Jesus is this shining Light.

And what is this temple? It is not a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, nor any earthly temple. It is the temple in heaven made up God’s people ransomed “*from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev 5:9). This final temple is the new heaven and new earth, not a man-made temple, “*for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*” (Rev 21:22). This is the fulfillment of God’s purpose from Creation: that “*the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God*” (Rev 21:3). The psalmist also longed for this day, “*And*

I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psa 23:6). Jesus our Immanuel is the fulfillment of God’s promise, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days... I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33). Therefore, not only the Garden of Eden, but the whole earth will be full of joyful people, former lonely exiles in a sin-filled world, who are perfectly righteous forever, like their Savior Jesus.

Dear friends, as we begin our Advent meditations, let us always remember that the Immanuel of whom we sing is Jesus who came down from heaven to be born as a lowly human being. Though Christ is in heaven now, the Holy Spirit dwells within you to teach and guide you into holiness. Like those Jewish exiles, we Christians were also ransomed from our “futile ways” by Christ (1 Pet 1:18-19). We are also lonely exiles and strangers in this world as we wait for Jesus our Immanuel to be with us in our eternal *“homeland... a better country, a heavenly one”* (Heb 11:13-16).

Let us always remember that when we gather for worship, not only during this Advent season, but always, we *“come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”* We worship together with all angels in heaven, before God our Judge and Jesus our Mediator. And we worship with all the saints in this world, and all those who are already in heaven (Heb 12:22-24). Our worship in this earthly tabernacle is a mere foretaste of the worship in the new heaven tabernacle to fulfill God’s original purpose. God’s purpose in all redemptive history is summed up in his declaration to his people: *I will dwell with you, and you will dwell with me. I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And I am with you always and forever.”*

So we long and hope for this heavenly assembly, where there will be no more divisions because Jesus, the Desire of the Nations and the Prince of Peace, binds our hearts in peace with God and man. Therefore, *“Rejoice with [heavenly] Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her”* (Isa 66:10).