

“Close Enough for Comfort” (*First Sunday of Advent*)
SERMON SERIES “Do You Hear What I Hear?” (Highlighting Beloved Christmas
Carols)
FEATURED CAROL – “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”
By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: Isaiah 7:10-14
Matthew 1:18-23

Preached: 12/2/18

This morning we begin our Advent preparation. Advent means “coming.” We look forward in anticipation. People – look east, the time is near, of the coming of the year. Make your house fair as you are able. Trim the hearth and set the table. People – look east, and sing today: Love the guest is on the way.

Do you hear what I hear? The sounds of the season? These next few weeks I will be highlighting beloved Christmas carols and using them as a window into what God might be doing among us.

This morning I celebrate one of my favorite carols, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” I like that this song speaks of real struggles...of captivity, mourning, loneliness, gloomy clouds, even death’s dark shadows. It’s not one of those Christmas songs that forces you to be overly cheery when you don’t feel like it – we have enough of those. No, this one seems to be sung in the desert and yearns for a genuine savior, one who is close enough to offer tangible comfort. The song reminds us of our history – the long history of God’s people.

God has always desired closeness with us. When he instructed Moses to build the tabernacle in the wilderness, he did so with careful instructions as to its design. That was where he would meet with them, God said. And all throughout the desert wanderings of Israel, the tabernacle went with them. The Most Holy Place was reassembled each time the Tent of Meeting went up, and God would make his presence known to the high priest.

Centuries later, as the Gospel of John records, “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). (It’s always the last scripture we read on Christmas Eve.) The Greek word literally means that the Word...Jesus, tabernacled (or pitched his tent) in our midst.

John would later write in his Revelation – the last book in our Bible – his fantastic vision of words spoken in a loud voice from the very throne of God - “Now the tabernacle of God is with people, and he will live with them. And they shall be His people.” (Revelation 21:3).

God has always desired closeness with us. And when we are in our most difficult times

or our most real times or our most sensitive times or our most joyful times, we desire closeness with God...yearn to be close enough for comfort.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel has its origin in the sung prayers of medieval monks and nuns. These religious were generally the most educated people of their day, and also the most spiritual. They dedicated their lives to serving and worshiping God. They spent much of their day in silence, except when they were at chapel singing...multiple times a day, singing their hearts out to God.

During the season of Advent, all those centuries ago and continuing, no doubt to this day, monasteries rang with a series of seven antiphons. sung prayers, used in conjunction with the singing of the Magnificat. Each of the antiphons began with "O" followed by a biblical title for the Messiah. All the words would have been in Latin, but the English translation is essentially,

O Wisdom - O Lord - O Root of Jesse - O Key of David - O Dayspring -
O King of the Gentiles - O Emmanuel

The hymn we sing, the one in our Presbyterian hymnal, now has only three verses, with the familiar refrain: Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Our hymn begins:

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Before the arrival of the child who would ransom the world—before the coming of Emmanuel--there was a lot of waiting. Centuries of waiting for the nation of Israel. God's people suffered foreign invasions, terrorism, and exile. Through the dark years, they clung to the simple hope of a Messiah, a Rescuer, who would show up and make things right.

They yearned for His arrival, even without understanding what it would look like when it happened. Most expected Him to come as a military commander, someone to take down their oppressors with a flashy show of force. Imagine their surprise when Jesus came as an infant...

Emmanuel, which means "God with us." This is how God's redemption begins: with presence. Rather than offering military might, God offered himself. Rather than erase their dark days, God entered into them.

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here.

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

What does it mean that we say or sing to God, "Come"? We invite God to be with us...open our hearts. It helps us assume the posture we need when we face our own lonely exile. Sometimes life seems to immerse us in dark days that make the light of Christmas morning seem like a distant reality. So, it's all right to plead for the presence of Jesus.

We have learned what he is like. He is the light that shines in the darkness, as sure as the sunrise...Dayspring. He's the kind of God who doesn't dismiss the dark, but rather enters into it with us and ultimately places Himself in a position to be broken by it for our sake. He's the kind of God who understands and cares about the heartbreaks of our life. He's the kind of God who shows up, who is worth the waiting, even if it feels like it takes as many centuries as it did for Israel.

O come, Desire of Nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind
Bid envy, strife and discord cease
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

If this season you are facing the cold shadows of winter in your soul, may this song spark hope that the Rescuer is coming, that His presence is a gift we can always anticipate.

This Advent expectation, this waiting in the dark, is a place where we can pray, "Come and be with me, Jesus. Come and be with us. Let us feel your presence in this world of political and social partisanship. We are so tired of envy, strife and discord. Come into our darknesses. Fill us and all the earth with your peace. O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.