

“The Promise of Emmanuel”  
Isaiah 7:10-14; Matthew 1:18-25  
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I'd like to begin with a question this morning: Are you as bothered as much as I am how the Christmas season seems to get longer all the time, that instead of just the last month or two of the year, it now begins as early as summer in some places? For instance, this past summer, the Hallmark Channel once again introduced its “Christmas in July” movie lineup. Beginning on July 9<sup>th</sup> and for the rest of the month, you could have seen such films as "Christmas Comes Twice," "Christmas by Starlight," "Love, Lights, Hanukkah" and "A Christmas Tree Grows in Colorado." Furthermore, by late August or early September, commercials were already being aired that start, “With Christmas just around the corner, have you begun thinking about what you can get for that special man (or woman) in your life?” I had to think about that for a minute when all of a sudden, it struck me, “Christmas! Just around the corner! Why Christmas is a good five months away and ALREADY they’re trying to sell me something.” I personally try to block out as much of this talk as I can until Thanksgiving has passed, and only THEN do I allow myself to get into the Yuletide spirit. That’s when Rose and I visit the local Christmas tree farm and cut down our personally-selected Frasier Fir; that’s when box after box of lights and bulbs and other familiar decorations are hauled out from the attic to transform the REST of the house into a home filled with bright colors and lots of nostalgia.

Thus, two days ago, I gave myself permission to start getting into the holiday mood. From then to December 25<sup>th</sup>, I’ll be humming from morning to night some familiar Christmas song that runs on an endless loop through my head. Meanwhile, every time I get into my car, I’ll immediately start cruising the dial for that FM station that plays nothing but Christmas music 24-hours a day. Come evening time, I might tune into HGTV’s annual “Great Christmas Light Fight” where homes across the country compete to see who has the most garish and gaudy light display to their neighbors displeasure, or perhaps sit through one of those insipid “television specials” like the ones Andy Williams and Bob Hope used to host every year when I was a kid growing up. (Of course I draw the line with “The Nine Kittens of Christmas” which the Hallmark Channel televised the other night.) When you stop and think about it, Christmas is REALLY about building one’s expectations- take away all the anticipation and the excitement element and it’s no longer “the hap, happiest season of all” as Andy Williams once crooned. When the leftover turkey and pumpkin pie has been put away in the fridge, the final football game on the television set concluded, and the last member of the family departed for home, then Thanksgiving is OFFICIALLY over and Christmas can REALLY begin!

Of course, a large part of the “reason for the season” has always been its MUSIC, and its TRUE. ONE of the songs you’ll hear reflecting that growing sense of eagerness and expectation is “Here Comes Santa Claus,” written and sung by the old singing cowboy himself, Gene Autry, and then later recorded by Elvis Presley:

*Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus, right down Santa Claus Lane.  
Vixen and Blitzen and all his reindeer are pulling on the reins.  
Bells are ringing and children singing, all is merry and bright.*

*Hang your stocking and say your prayers for Santa Claus comes tonight.*

Autry got the idea for it after riding his horse in the 1946 Santa Claus Lane Parade in Los Angeles. As he trotted along the crowd-filled boulevard, he could hear spectators chant, "*Here comes Santa Claus. Here comes Santa Claus.*" And so it was the anticipation of the appearance of SANTA that originally inspired this Christmas standard which has SINCE become a holiday staple.

Well this morning's message was ALSO inspired by the anticipation of a great crowd of people. On the first Sunday in Advent, Christians gather in churches all over the globe to express their excitement at the coming of ANOTHER public figure- not Santa Claus but JESUS CHRIST. Instead of a fat man in a red suit, we welcome the birth of the Son of God in the guise of a new-born babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger. And instead of a sleigh full of gifts targeted for good little girls and boys, Jesus is HIMSELF the gift- the fullness of God and his love freely available for EVERYONE to receive- REGARDLESS of age or sex or race or ethnicity or how good or bad you may have been.

Scripture has given him the name "Immanuel" meaning "God is with us," a name full of promise whose origin can be traced back some seven hundred years earlier. Now get ready for another one of my history lessons! It was during a period of great national crisis. Israel, which had formerly been a collection of tribes, had been consolidated into a single nation under the reign of King David- this was around a thousand years before the birth of Christ. But now some three hundred years later--in the year 722 B.C.--she had already been divided into two separate kingdoms with Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Assyria, which at the time was the world's greatest superpower, was preparing a force to attack the northern kingdom of Israel and Syria, and the kings of those two countries joined forces together to protect themselves against her. However, they knew that without the aid and support of the southern kingdom of Judah, they really didn't stand much of a chance. Therefore, they appealed to Ahaz--the king of Judah--to enlist him into their coalition. But fearful that such an alliance would only serve to antagonize the Assyrians, King Ahaz did the political thing and he chose to remain neutral.

Upon hearing this, the rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel and the nation of Syria felt their only chance was to launch a coup to depose Ahaz and replace him with someone who would be more supportive of their coalition. But Ahaz learned of their plot and panicked. Therefore, forced with what he felt was the lesser of two evils, he cast his lot with mighty Assyria, thinking that such a move might yet save his throne. To ingratiate himself with Tiglath-pileser, the Assyrian king, he sent tribute to him, pledging along with it his complete and utter loyalty. Then he appealed to him for help against the growing threat posed by Israel and Syria.

The prophet Isaiah saw this new allegiance with the fierce and bloody Assyrians as a great betrayal against God and he warned Ahaz that there would be disastrous consequences for both him and the country if he proceeded with it. He assured him that Israel and Syria could NEVER overthrow him for God was in control and would never allow such an event to occur. God had promised that only a son of David would ever rule upon that throne. However, if Ahaz REFUSED to trust that promise, believing that Assyria could provide him greater security than God, then he and his people would be punished FAR MORE than any of his predecessors EVER had.

Well in a final attempt to change the king's mind, Isaiah gives him a sign from God. And WHAT is that sign- it is of all things the birth of a child. Here we see how Judah is on the verge of extinction by the greatest military power in the ancient world and God's response is NOT to raise up a mightier army from within her own borders, NOR is it to send another country to her aid. Rather, it is the promise that a young girl would give birth to a baby and his name would be Emmanuel or "God is with us." In the ninth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet tells Ahaz that the government would be upon this new king's shoulders; he would bear the titles "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" and his reign would be marked by everlasting peace and righteousness. This promise was reaffirmed just two chapters LATER where this child is described as possessing the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of the knowledge and fear of the Lord. A new age in history would be inaugurated- an era in which oppression and bondage would cease, and where the poor and exploited would be defended- ONLY, King Ahaz had to BELIEVE in this promise, a divine oath ratified by the birth of this child, and NOT SURRENDER to his worst fears.

In exchange for Ahaz's unconditional loyalty, Tiglath-pileser and his Assyrian army arrived just in time to subdue both Israel and Syria and put both their kings to death. In gratitude Ahaz presented him with the sacred vessels used in Temple worship as tribute. He tore down the bronze altar used in the worship of Jehovah and instead set up a NEW altar dedicated to the gods of Syria and Assyria. He then sealed up the Temple and proceeded to erect heathen altars in every corner of the city. His apostasy was now complete.

Ahaz's sin was that he opted for the security of a powerful yet spiritually bankrupt nation rather than trusted the GREATER security offered by the One who controlled all history. He was FAR more concerned with the "ARMIES OF MEN" than he was in the "arm of the Lord"; MORE interested in his OWN survival than faithfulness to the one who had endowed him with that authority in the FIRST place. Yet, in spite of her faithlessness and disobedience, God would give Judah a NEW promise- one which included the inauguration of a new king and a new era of peace and prosperity for God's people. God's covenant oath to David would NOT be broken; his royal tree would NEVER be terminated. But due to Ahaz's apostasy, he would hasten the judgment that would eventually befall Judah a century and a half later.

However, Judah's judgment WOULD NOT BE TOTAL like the northern kingdom of Israel's was. Rather, it was intended to CHASTISE and DISCIPLINE her in order that a faithful remnant might arise from out of her. As a result of her punishment, a righteous few who truly loved God and delighted in serving Him would emerge. It would be THESE--the TRUE Israel, the REAL people of God--who would trust that promise, who would preserve the line of David until that day when Immanuel should be born. Of this, Isaiah was so certain that he even named his OWN son "Shear-jashub," a name meaning "A Remnant Shall Return."

This promise remained a light for the Jews even during her darkest nights. For centuries afterwards, Israel was conquered by one civilization after another- first by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians; then came the Persians who in turn were followed by the Romans. Over a thousand years of Jewish history with all its glories and successes were eventually brought to a close. Yet, despite their bondage, they never stopped watching for that child. In fact, the expectation was SO great that hundreds often believed that THEY were the Promised One. Mothers all over Israel named their first-born sons Jesus or "Savior" in the hope that perhaps THEIR son just may be the long-awaited babe. It was a simple sign given by Isaiah to the king

of Judah on the eve of her greatest national crisis and yet that one sign, MORE THAN ANY OTHER, galvanized Judah's hopes and faith for the next seven hundred years- the sign of a baby's birth, their future Deliverer.

One Advent hymn that is powerfully evocative of this hope rooted in God's promise is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It is probably the oldest Christmas carol still sung today. Written possibly as early as the 8th century, it served as a processional hymn to be sung during Vespers in the last week of the Advent season. It was not intended to be celebratory like most Christmas songs but soft and contemplative. Sin and sorrow, failure and suffering have seemed to put great distance between God and his people, and the cry is for a Redeemer who will ransom his captive people and restore them to their status as his children. We don't know who wrote it although he was no doubt a monk or priest for it had to have been a scholar with a rich knowledge of both the Old and new Testaments.

In its original form, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" was known as a song of the "Great Antiphons" or "Great O's," an antiphon being a verse usually from Scripture that is sung responsively before and after a psalm or devotional hymn as part of the liturgy. There were seven verses to this hymn and one verse per day was sung or chanted during the last seven days before Christmas. The different verses refer to various biblical prophecies that were realized in the birth of Christ. So "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" really unfolds the story of the Messiah as he was foretold in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New.

The hymn owes its modern popularity to a man named John Mason Neale, an Anglican priest. In 1851, he translated it from the original Latin and joined it with the tune of a 15<sup>th</sup> century processional song called "Veni Emmanuel" that originated in a community of French Franciscan nuns living in Lisbon, Portugal. Neale's translation of the lyrics coupled with "Veni Emmanuel" was first published in the 1850s in England but within twenty-five years, was cut to five verses and called "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It has remained a Christmas favorite ever since.

It begins by pleading for Immanuel, "God Is With Us," the promised Messiah, to come and deliver his people, the Jews, from their lonely exile. It could be a plea made by the Hebrews in Egypt, or possibly those taken captive to Assyria, or even to Babylon in the sixth century B.C. But it could just as easily represent a cry from YOU or ME when we find OURSELVES feeling oppressed or overwhelmed or forsaken and with no one else to appeal to. The refrain instructs them to REJOICE, that indeed Immanuel SHALL come to them as was promised by God. The SECOND verse pleads for this "rod of Jesse" to free us from Satan's tyranny, to save us from the depths of hell and grant us victory over the grave- a point reaffirmed again in the THIRD and FOURTH verses.

When you reach the FIFTH and FINAL verse, it looks BEYOND Christ's first Advent to his SECOND Advent as it pleads for Christ--the "Desire of nations"--to bind all the peoples in one heart and mind; that envy, strife and quarrel cease; and that all the world be filled with heaven's peace. Then comes the familiar refrain: "Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!" So this great hymn looks back to the people of God in bondage and exile and recalls the faithful character of God. Then it looks to the promise of God's long-awaited son and the deliverance he brought with him. Finally, it looks to the future and the hope that the Messiah

shall return a SECOND time and establish God's kingdom of peace throughout the world FOREVER!

My friends, while many will be singing "Here Comes Santa Claus" this Christmas season, WE will be singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Anyone who has ever known the presence of sin in his or her life will never find a gift from Santa that will help to ease THAT burden. JESUS doesn't come on a sleigh, but on a CROSS. His greatest gift is eternal, unbreakable, and fits every size heart. He doesn't shroud it in wrapping and bows but it comes to us in the ONLY manner in which we CAN receive it- plain and unadorned. HE is the gift itself and its name in capital letters is LOVE!

And so God's prescription for US--as it was for the Israelites--is the same; it remains IMMANUEL- "God with us," "God FOR us." As that child became God's sign of hope to a people in the midst of their greatest national crisis, so does it become God's answer for US in the midst of our OWN personal crises. Advent serves as our guarantee that REGARDLESS how hard times may be or how difficult our lives may become, there is ALWAYS reason to hope for God has PLEDGED himself to us; he has PROMISED that he will ALWAYS be there for us, that he will NEVER forsake or abandon us- EVER! By extending his promise to redeem the Jews when they least deserved it, God displayed an unconditional love for all the world to see. And THEN, by fulfilling this promise with the birth of his only-begotten son Jesus some seven hundred years later, God assures us how HIS WORD is HIS BOND, that when Jehovah SPEAKS, God CAN be trusted to fulfill his vows. God CAN be depended upon to be faithful, compassionate, and long-suffering towards us--even when we don't deserve it--and the birth of that small child in a manger in Bethlehem is our PROOF of that. Immanuel, "God With Us," the birth of Jesus- THIS becomes the greatest sign of God's faithfulness to his people, the greatest testament of God's love for you and for me. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, in this season of Advent, may we remember that with the birth of your Son Jesus Christ, the long-promised Immanuel, you birthed hope for the world when without him there was none. The unconditional love we have received by being forgiven our sins and then given the promise of your abiding presence has more than equipped us to overcome whatever would beat us down and rob us of your peace and joy. Help us to remember what a gift your Son has been to us and to trust that he will indeed help us through each trial and every difficulty. In your name we pray, amen and amen.*