

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

DECEMBER 2024

The haunting tune of *'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'* will soon begin the Advent season, the four Sundays preceding the celebration of Christmas. Why is it so haunting? It's December, shouldn't the music be merry like all the other music of the season? Enough of the doldrums, we need a little Christmas, right this very moment, we need a little Christmas now (and so the song goes).

Well, to an extent you are right. We so look forward to December to lighten up both figuratively and literally our darkened world. With the celebration of Christmas and all the things we do to enjoy the season, we overlook all that is wrong in the world and choose to be lighthearted, doing many of the traditions we grew up with as we cherish the good memories those things give us. There is nothing wrong with that. But if all we do is intoxicate our world with levity for a month, we will have a bad spiritual hangover, a.k.a. depression, when January rolls around and everything returns to the way it was, and nothing has changed.

Listen to *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. The origin of this is a prayer traced back 1200 years to the monastic life in the 8th or 9th century. That time period was in the midst of the Dark Ages, so named after the fall of the Roman Empire and a decline of culture and science. Fear, superstition and the Black Death plague characterized the time. This understandably led people to long for better days, to have hope that enabled them to hold on in the midst of all that was so negative. The hope of the Second Coming, that God in the Son would return and make everything right again. So this prayer developed because it strengthened the heart to hold on even when the circumstances lacked any reason to think things could be different. In evening Vespers, the seven days before Christmas, the prayers intensified in praying for Jesus' return. Seven characteristics of who Jesus was shaped the prayers. Each night a different aspect of Jesus was named in hopes of His return: Wisdom, Adoni (great Lord of Might), Branch of Jesse's Stem, Key of David, Morning Star, King of Nations, and Emmanuel (God with us). Over time, the refrain was added as an encouraging answer to the prayer offered: *Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel*. The emphasis is on the word 'shall' with the belief that this will happen.

Our hope in God is not that God will take us out of our misery, but that God will come and meet us in all that makes life difficult. To quote Ron Rolheiser, "*Faith in God does not, in this world, save one from pain, misunderstanding, loneliness, and death. Faith does not offer a life free of pain. What God does promise is to be with us in that pain. That is why our Savior's name is Emmanuel, a name which means God-is-with-us.*" As Avery Dulles put it, "*God does not give you a ladder to crawl out of the human condition, but a drill to burrow into the heart of it.*" If we are willing to do so, what we will find is God who is with us in our pain and is walking us through and eventually out of that dark valley. This is the hope of the season of Advent.

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near (Isaiah 55:6). That passage continues by calling us to turn from negative thoughts about our circumstances and to seek God. For those who do, they will find God's compassion amid their heartache. In ancient times, the community of believers used the Antiphons that we know as *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, to turn from the darkness of life being experienced. During this Advent season, enjoy the things you do but add to those pleasures some sober reflection on God's presence with you in whatever circumstances you presently find yourself. In Christ alone is your hope. Oh, and be sure to share it with someone in desperate need of the same.

With love,

