

ABC 11/30/25

**Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel**

Scripture – Isaiah 35:4-10, Luke 1:68-79

Message: Fear not, our God is coming to save us

Purpose: Deepen the meaning of this familiar song

## **Introduction**

Behold – The season of our Lord’s advent is upon us. Or, to put it another way – perhaps a more modern way – It’s beginning to look a lot... like Christmas.

I’m not sure where November went. Indeed, the years fly by and our time shortens by the moment, but I am glad of this moment. I am glad to be here with you, as we give thanks for all the Lord has done for us, and as we look ahead now, to the celebration, to the spectacle, and to the festivities of Christmas.

One of my favorite aspects of this season is the music. Our family pulled out our Christmas CDs this week. I also tuned into to 105.7 the other day to see if they were playing Christmas songs yet – they are normally 80s rock and roll – and the first song I heard was a rousing version of Joy to the world!

Is that not a strange cultural phenomenon? – that radio stations play so many Christmas songs? Think of the contrast in content between rock and roll, or whatever the latest top 40 pop music sounds like, and then turn to the same station now and they’re playing Christmas songs.

This is a time of year when the line between sacred and secular blurs. The music of Christmas has become such a cultural force, so that now many sacred songs are well known and loved even by a culture that resists Christianity. I believe that these familiar songs can be a path for the gospel to reach the hearts of many who wander, but there is also a risk for us: Is it possible that we miss the message of these songs because they are so familiar? Perhaps.



And that is one reason why for the next several weeks we are going to unpack some carols of Christmas. We are going to dig deep into their words, which sometimes sound foreign to modern ears, and to their history and Biblical context. In this way we hope to find their meaning and power newly awakened in us and be inspired anew by their messages of hope and joy and peace in this troubled land.

Would you pray with me?

Our song for consideration this morning, is *Oh come, Oh come, Emmanuel*.

### **Brief history:**

The song as we know it today has a lot to do with **this man – John Mason Neale**. Neale was an Anglican priest and scholar, and he was a rather busy man, but he occasionally found time in the evenings to translate old Latin and Greek texts into English. In 1851 he published what would eventually become “Oh come, oh come Emmanuel”, but the version that we have in our hymnal today was his second stab at it – in 1861.

The thing is, Neale did not really write this song. He simply translated a series of latin prayers that go back to at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century. These prayers were called “antiphons” and the series he translated were specifically associated with the week leading up to Christmas. Monks would chant these prayers as a way to prepare their hearts for the celebration of Jesus birth – which looked at lot different 1200 years ago than it does today. Neale’s translation was paired with a 15<sup>th</sup> century French tune and song would go on to become one of the best-known advent hymns.

One thing we will probably see as a recurring theme in this series is the importance of the mid 1800s as the time when many songs and traditions take root and where Christmas as we know it today was born. The 1800s feel like ancient history, don’t they? But in the grand scheme of Christian history it really isn’t that far back.



Consider this: most of us who are alive today could think back 20 or 40 or even 60 years ago and think of someone we knew who was in their 80s or 90s at that time. Think of a great aunt or uncle, or an elder in the church when you were little. That person, if you had thought to ask them, would probably have remembered someone from *their* childhood who was in *their* 80s or 90s. That person would have been alive during the mid-1800s. In other words, most of us are only 2 or 3 degrees of separation away from someone who was alive when “Oh come, Oh come Emmanuel was first sung. In contrast, the antiphons – the specific prayers that John Mason Neal translated, had been in use for at least 1000 years by his time, and those prayers were heavily based on scripture, which is, of course, even older.

That being said – 160 years ago is still long time ago, and words have a way of taking on different meanings. So, we shouldn’t be surprised if some of the verses to “Oh come of come Emmanuel” are a little hard to understand. So let us take some time today to unpack these and make some sense of them.

There are – depending on your hymnal – 7 verses: corresponding to the 7 prayers they came from, but I only want to look at the 4 verses in our hymnal this morning.

The first one is fairly straight forward:

**O come, O come, Emmanuel,**

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

Emmanuel of course means “God with us” and this first verse asks simply that God would ransom captive Israel. The story of Israel deals frequently with themes of captivity, as Israel was conquered and many of the people were taken away as captives. In Jesus’ day one of the expectations for the Messiah was that he would ransom, or rescue, the people from their oppressive overlords.



Also in biblical times, it was sometimes the case that people who fell into debt might be arrested and sold into slavery to pay off their lenders. Sometimes instead of selling the person who owed a debt the authorities would take and sell their family members instead. In either case, it was possible for someone to come up with enough money to “buy back” or ransom their family member. When we sing of Jesus paying the debt for our sins – that language is a direct reference to this cultural practice of ransoming or rescuing a loved one from debt slavery.

Verse 2 gets a little bit trickier;

**O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free**

Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell Thy people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave.

The Rod of Jesse is a reference to Jesus by way of his genealogy. Jesse was the father of King David – and King David was a distant ancestor of Jesus. The Rod – or some translations say stump or branch – just means that Jesus is an offshoot of Jesse. Again, this is a prayer for freedom, this time for Satan’s tyranny and the depths of Hell. So, verse one emphasizes our need to be rescued from human captivity and verse two emphasizes our need to be rescued from spiritual captivity.

It is worth remembering that the verses we have are translated from Latin. And so just as we sometimes learn nuance and gain clarity by reading a Bible verse in a different translation, so too can we sometimes find clarity by looking at different translations of other texts. 45 years after John Mason Neale published the standard version of “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel”, **this guy** made his own translation. This is Thomas Alexander Lacey. His 1906 translation of verse 2 reads like this:

**O come, thou Branch of Jesse! draw**

The quarry from the lion's claw;  
From the dread caverns of the grave,  
From nether hell, thy people save.



I love the poetic use of the lion in the place of Satan here – because it gives us a better visual for the danger. “O come, thou Branch of Jesse! draw The quarry from the lion's claw” Hold on to the lion imagery, as I will circle back around to it later.

Verse three;

**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.

For many people this time of year can be very stressful and very depressing. It's dark and the sun goes down early and the nights are long and cold. Many people struggle with seasonal depression – I have long referred to this as the “gloom of night”, and I have sometimes spent sleepless nights struggling with various doubts. I think it's something almost everyone has to deal with at some point or another.

This prayer calls for a “Day-spring” to come and cheer us up with God's presence. The term dayspring is not one we use these days. It was used sparingly even in the King James translation of the Bible, but it simply means the dawn, or the rising of the sun. We heard one of the few uses of this term in the passage from Luke that Keith read earlier this morning:

Here it is the King James – which was pretty much the only English translation of the Bible in the 1800s

***Through the tender mercy of our God;*** whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The rising sun has long been a powerful image for Christians because it reminds us of Jesus rising from the dead. When we see the light of dawn, it reminds us of that hope, and the troubles of night dispense and death's dark shadows flee away.



#### Verse 4

O come, Thou Key of David, come  
 And open wide our heavenly home;  
 Make safe the way that leads on high,  
 And close the path to misery.

Wow, the rhyming there just does not work today, does it? Let's see how Lacey put it:

O Come, thou Lord of David's Key!  
 The royal door fling wide and free;  
 Safeguard for us the heavenward road,  
 And bar the way to death's abode.

Ah, that's better isn't it? It's a pity this translation is rarely sung.

So, what is this last verse for today about? Well, we have had a prayer for freedom from human captivity and from spiritual captivity. We have had a prayer for light when all we see is darkness – so call it emotional captivity. Now we have a prayer that evokes a longing for heaven.

One of the prevailing aspects of Christmas – one of the reasons it is both the most “wonderful time of the year” and also often very difficult – is that the all of the traditions are saturated with a feeling of nostalgia. “Tell us what Christmas was like when you were a kid, Grandpa” - right? Each year we try to regain a hint of the joy we associate with Christmas – and every year it seems harder to capture that same feeling that we remember from the past.

C.S. Lewis once wrote that “if we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” No matter how homelike and festive you make your house this year, it will only ever hint at the beauty and joy we will experience when we find our true home. We may be living here on earth but our *home* is heaven, and Jesus – symbolized by his ancestor David once again – holds the key to heaven for us.



The prayer of this verse hinges on the longing for heavenly home and the way to get there. This is a powerful metaphor – made more meaningful to people who mostly had to walk if they needed to travel. In Biblical times the roads were dangerous.... Come to think of it they weren't that safe in the 1800s either... But the metaphor for physical safety while traveling is now transposed into the spiritual journey that we all take – one full of its own dangers. Hold on to this theme too, as it will come back around as well.

After each verse the song returns to the chorus: **Rejoice, Rejoice! Emmanuel** shall come to thee, oh Israel!

Have you ever considered the irony of this chorus? Rejoice – it invites us to rejoice... all in a minor key. The 15<sup>th</sup> century tune we use for this hymn was most likely written for funeral processions. The whole melody has a haunting, melancholy sound. And yet the refrain exclaims “rejoice!”. Not because God *might* come to save us, or even because he *did* come to save us, but because he **SHALL** come to save us.

The season of advent is a time where we remember and celebrate the moment Jesus entered history – when Jesus came to be among us and to enact once and for all God's perfect plan for the salvation of humanity. But advent is also a time when we struggle with the fact that life is still scary. There's a lot to be afraid of in this world where oppressors still too often rule; a world where the captive power of sin can ensnare us or our loved ones, and where we struggle with real emotional baggage and the longing for home that no amount of nostalgia around a Christmas tree can quite satisfy.

It is here that we find ourselves in the “almost, but not yet” part of God's story. We hold in tension – on one hand – the joy that Jesus did enter history, that he lived and died and rose again to triumph over the powers of this world –and on the other hand – the challenge that walking with Jesus means walking some dark and dangerous paths here and now.

What are you afraid of this year?



Are you held captive to the powers of this world? Maybe you are stuck in debt and it feels like you'll never get out. Maybe you are stuck in a dead-end job and you don't know what to do next.

Are you in spiritual captivity? Does sin have control over your life? Jesus holds the key to freedom for you – maybe you know this, but you are scared of the changes you know he needs you to make.

Are you held captive by emotional baggage? Do you find yourself lying awake in the gloom of night, restless and scared of what the next day will bring?

Are you lonely, longing for something you can't quite put your finger on? Maybe the holidays are hard this year because they remind us of someone we lost to death's abode. Is that feeling of home elusive for you this time of year?

The promise for each of us – however we find ourselves feeling this time of year – is the promise of a God who chooses to come and save us. Each time the angels came to announce Jesus' birth they began their messages of hope and expectation with the simple encouragement to "fear not". Fear not, because our God is coming to save us.

As we close out today, we will at last sing "Oh come, Oh come, Emmanuel" together. But I want to read you a passage from Isaiah before we do. I hope that it will help to pull together all of the themes of this song and bring you further up and further in to the meanings of these ancient words. May this song be our prayer this week as we begin this season of Advent. May Jesus strengthen each of us in the season and bring us light in the darkness.

Would you stand as I read this last passage?

**Isaiah 35:4-10 (NLT)**

<sup>4</sup> Say to those with fearful hearts,  
 "Be strong, and do not fear,  
 for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.



He is coming to save you.”

<sup>5</sup> And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind  
and unplug the ears of the deaf.

<sup>6</sup> The lame will leap like a deer,  
and those who cannot speak will sing for joy!

Springs will gush forth in the wilderness,  
and streams will water the wasteland.

<sup>7</sup> The parched ground will become a pool,  
and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.

Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish  
where desert jackals once lived.

<sup>8</sup> And a great road will go through that once deserted land.  
It will be named the Highway of Holiness.

Evil-minded people will never travel on it.

It will be only for those who walk in God’s ways;  
fools will never walk there.

<sup>9</sup> Lions will not lurk along its course,  
nor any other ferocious beasts.

There will be no other dangers.

Only the redeemed will walk on it.

<sup>10</sup> Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return.

They will enter Jerusalem singing,  
crowned with everlasting joy.

Sorrow and mourning will disappear,

and they will be filled with joy and gladness.

These are the Words of God – spoken to the people of God long ago,  
remembered for you, the people of God today. Let’s sing.

### **Benediction**

Be strong – do not fear – Our God is coming to save us. Gladness and Joy  
shall fill us, and sorrow and sighing will pass away. Rejoice, Rejoice!

Emmanuel has come to you, ... and He shall come again. Let us go in hope  
and expectation. AMEN