

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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Here we are, one day from Christmas Eve and two days from Christmas Day. What an exciting time and what a glorious time. The chancel additions which are so dramatic and artistic speak to us of the coming celebration. Poinsettias (will be/are) surround the altar and further announce the Christmas observances here at Augustana. Christmas is so close that it is a struggle to remember that today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent. The Day of the Nativity hangs right before us, but we cannot taste it just yet. Our preparations remain incomplete.

To help us express the Advent longing today, we sing the hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” The version printed in the Lutheran Book of Worship included five verses, but the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship includes eight verses, too many to sing all together so the eight are divided into four sung at one time and the last four at a later time in our worship service.

These eight verses have been used in the Church for a long time. The first reference to them comes from the 5th Century which means that they were in existence before that time. They are called the “O Antiphons,” Each of the eight verses begins, “O come.” The verses were used one each day from December 17 to the 24, a reminder of what the Church was preparing to celebrate on The Day of the Nativity, December 25.

Each verse uses a title expressing the hope of a Messiah, most from the prophet Isaiah. This hymn was also a teaching tool, so I want to make this a learning experience for you, too. Take pencil or pen in hand, and follow me though this ancient hymn.

The first and last verses are identical. It is the climax of the hymn, so we will treat that one last. So we begin with, “O come, O Wisdom from on high.” To see how the Church used this to educate, we need to refer to the Latin form of this hymn. The word for Wisdom in Latin is *Sapientia*, so to the left of the number “2” write a letter “S.” In Isaiah 28:29 we read, “Wonderful is His counsel and great is His wisdom.” This wisdom was before the creation of the universe, so this verse takes us back before the beginning of creation.

To the left of number “3” write an “A.” That represents the word “Adonai,” or “Lord” in English. In Isaiah 33:22 we read, “Indeed the Lord will be there with us, majestic; yes the Lord our judge, the Lord our lawgiver, the Lord our king, he it is who will save us.” This verse propels us forward into the history of Israel to whom God gave his Law, the Ten Commandments, and who ruled Israel through Moses, Joshua, Judges, Prophets, and

Kings. We have moved from proclamation of God as the Wisdom behind all of creation to the Lord who created his Chosen People and gave them leaders and Laws.

Next, to the left of number “4” write an “R.” “R” is for “Radix,” meaning “root.” Isaiah 11:1 reads “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” As little further, 11:10 reads, “In that Day, the root of Jesse, set up as an ensign for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.” The announcement made in the fourth verse of our hymn is that the Messiah will be not just for the Israel but for all. He will be King of kings.

We proceed to number 5 and please write a “C” to the left of number “5.” “O come, O Key of David.” David, the greatest king of Israel, to whom the Lord God promised an everlasting throne, a kingdom without end. That hope was fulfilled in the Christ who ushered in the Kingdom of God. We think of the memorable words of Isaiah 9:7, “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” This verse tells us that the Messiah will establish a kingdom not of earth but of heaven.

Moving on to number 6, write to the left of that number an “O.” “O come, O Dayspring.” That is the same as “The Morning Star” or “Rising Star” heralding the dawn. As applied to the hope for the Messiah, Isaiah wrote, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” One of the ways we speak of the Christ is as the “Light of the World.” This verse describes the power of the Light of God over all death, darkness, and fear.

We have just two more. Next to number “7” write a “R.” I know you already used an ‘R’ next to verse 4, but this is another one. This “R” represents the Messiah as King. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” That’s the nature of the Messiah’s kingship, one who cares, reconciles, and heals.

Lastly, the antiphon for December 24, we arrive at the familiar verse, “O come, O come Emmanuel.” So next to number “8” write an “E.” Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). This one is not just another baby; this one was sent from above for the purpose of being our Savior, Lord, and King. He is God in the flesh for us and for all. We are at the gates of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus.

Now on the margin or somewhere on the sheet with the hymn, write in a line the letters next to the numbers, but make #8 the first letter, # 7 the second letter, and so on. What do you get? ERO CRAS. That means “Tomorrow, I will come.” If we used these antiphons on their appointed days, #8 would be used on December 24. The “tomorrow” would be December 25, the Day of the Nativity (or birth) of Our Lord.

In singing this ancient hymn we join the Church's cry and longing for the King who will restore all things to God, who will establish the rule of compassion, justice, and mercy for all and forever. This hymn helps us to pray our faith, for indeed it was used in the prayer service called Vespers, or Evening Prayer.

Beyond some historical information, we incorporate this hymn into our worship today so that we can join the parade of the faithful in offering our petitions to the Lord and opening our hearts and minds to how the Lord God comes to us and what the Messiah does in our lives. It is not enough to sing about the coming of the Messiah. We are to demonstrate the coming of the Messiah to this earth and to each of us by how we live our lives.

We can use this as a prayer and as a source of reflection or contemplation (which is also prayer). In verse 2, we sing of Wisdom from on high: do I refer my priorities and values to the wisdom of the Messiah so that his Light shines upon them to reveal either the glory of the Lord or a need to alter my priorities and values to more accurately witness to the glory of the Lord. As I sing for the release that the Branch of Jesse brings, am I actually praying that I not be so entrapped by the allure of the world that I miss the power of the new creation in Christ offered to me – and you. In this hymn I also offer my supplication that my purpose and vision be clear, focused, and centered not on the things of earth but on the things of heaven. For that I certainly need the Light of Christ, a light unlike any other, for that Light of Christ exposes deceit, false assumptions and pretenses, selfishness, lies, prejudices, and erroneous self-justification. That light sees right into my heart, your heart, and the heart of the matter no matter what matter we're talking about. The Messiah compels me to seek fellowship with all in this broken world, not to be like everybody else but to experience the reconciliation God intends for his children through the gift of the Son. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and lead us from this earthly exile to our heavenly home.

It is my hope that our Advent prayers might be enhanced and enlarged as we look forward to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. In just a minute we will sing verses 5-8 of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Sing them thoughtfully, reflectively, and personally. Take this bulletin home and read the whole hymn again as part of your evening devotions. These words are for each one of us to use as we express our hopes and dreams of life, the longings and cries of our hearts, and the faith and devotion we embrace. Amen.