

Isaiah 7:10-16 (NRSV)

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Isaiah 40:1-2 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

Isaiah 61:1-4 (NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to
the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our
God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of
ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of
mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a
faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of
righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display
his glory.
⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former
devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many
generations.

Darkness then. Darkness now. So much darkness all around. Yet, Advent marks our preparation for the coming light of the Christ-child which obliterates the darkness. Rejoice! Rejoice! God has come . . . and God is coming.

We have a tendency to race into the many joys of Christmas, missing Advent entirely. While it's supposed to be a time of preparation for the coming of the Christ-child, we are tempted to make Christmas last the whole month long. By December 26, we're anxious to take the tree down, put the decorations away, and get ready for the New Year's party.

But when Abby Smith designed the cover of this year's Advent edition of *The Connection*, she got it just right. Not lots of splashy red and green. But just a lone candle held in the midst of the darkness. Christmas is not supposed to be the end, but the beginning of something new, God's new thing. The Twelve Days of Christmas *begins* December 25.

Darkness and a candle

Today's Scripture passages, all from the book of Isaiah, were written in times of fear and loss, yet they hold out the promise of God's bright light shining into the darkness. Today's carol, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is a haunting cry for God to put things right, to "ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile . . . disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight."

Our first passage (7:10-16) is set in 734 BC. The people of God have lived in divided kingdoms for nearly 200 years, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Now, the great Assyrian empire is poised on the northern borders of Israel. The king of Israel has entered into a defensive alliance with Syria to its north and seeks a similar alliance with Judah. Ahaz, the king of Judah, doesn't know whether to be more fearful of his neighbors or the Assyrians. When Ahaz refuses to cooperate in this defensive pact, his neighbors arrive at the border, ready to install a new king of their own who will join their alliance.

At this critical time, Isaiah, God's prophet, comes to meet Ahaz. Isaiah carries word of a promise from God. Ahaz is to forget these national alliances and trust God for deliverance from the Assyrians. Isaiah even goes so far as to tell King Ahaz that he can test God if he doesn't believe these promises. But Ahaz refuses it all. He chooses the political path, rejects the promises of God, and seeks an alliance with the Assyrians. But Isaiah warns Ahaz that Assyria will prove to be Judah's undoing (Isaiah 7:17).

Though the darkness will collapse upon Israel in a few years and upon Judah in about 150 years, God promises that a faithful remnant will endure. Judah itself (the "young woman" of v. 14) will give birth to this faithful remnant (the "son"),¹ culminating in the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, who will be the faithful remnant of one, the righteous Jew who is able to keep the covenant by loving God and loving neighbor every day and in every way.

Out of exile

The second and third of today's passages from Isaiah are from the portion that is sometimes referred to as Second Isaiah. Comprising chapters 40-66, these writings are those of a prophet working during the darkest period in Israel's history, the Babylonian exile, when tens of thousands of Jews had been forcibly moved a thousand miles from home after the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC.

The Story of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Not much is known about the origin of the words or the melody of this well-known carol. In his book, *101 Hymn Stories*, Kenneth Osbeck writes:

"This hymn finds its origin in the medieval Roman Church of the twelfth century and possibly even earlier. It began as a series of Antiphons—short statements sung at the beginning of the Psalm or of the Magnificat at Vespers during the Advent season. Each of the Antiphons greets the Savior with one of the many titles ascribed to Him in the Scriptures: Emmanuel, Lord of Might, Rod of Jesse, Day-Spring, Key of David. The hauntingly catchy modal melody for this text was originally a Plainsong or Chant, the earliest form of singing in the Church.

During the nineteenth century there were a number of Anglican ministers and scholars, such as John M. Neale, who developed a keen interest in rediscovering and translating into English many of the ancient Greek, Latin and German hymns. John Neale, born in London, England, on January 24, 1818, undoubtedly did more than any other person to make available the rich heritage of Greek and Latin hymns."

In his book, *Then Sings My Soul*, Robert Morgan tells us that John Neale wanted the church of his day to embrace the tradition of dignity and liturgy that characterized in earlier centuries. We can hear Neale at work on this mission in "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and his other carols: "Good King Wenceslas" and "Good Christian Men, Rejoice," as well as his famous Palm Sunday hymn, "All Glory, Laud, and Honor."

Handel chose the words of Isaiah 40:1-2, "Comfort, O comfort my people," to begin his *Messiah*. When Jesus rose in his hometown synagogue to begin his public ministry, he asked to be handed the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled to the passage we know as Isaiah 61 and read from the verses that begin our third reading, pronouncing that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The time had finally come for God to act. For centuries the Jews had traded one oppressor after another, but now, Jesus claimed to his astonished listeners, the time for God's new thing had arrived!

*Good news to the poor and oppressed.
Broken hearts put back together. Liberty for
all who are captive to sin and death.
Comfort for all who mourn.*

For those who first heard the words of Isaiah 61, it was a message that the days of exile were numbered. For Jesus' listeners, the words promised freedom from Caesar and a world put right.

How do we hear these words? Do we acknowledge the darkness of our own world, our own need for the binding of broken hearts, as we anxiously await the coming of the Christ-child.

*"Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee,
O Israel!"*

¹Barry Webb's commentary on Isaiah in *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP, 1996) series helped me to see how the words of Isaiah could have both (1) made sense to King Ahaz and (2) point us to Christ, as seen by Matthew (1:23). Emmanuel (or Immanuel) means simply "God-with-us." Thus when Isaiah tells Ahaz that Judah (the woman) will bear a faithful son, the remnant who will stay true to God, that remnant will truly be "God-with-us." Of course, Jesus will be Emmanuel in a new way, "God-with-us" as God incarnate. When Matthew quoted this Emmanuel passage he used the Septuagint's Greek translation of the Hebrew, in which "young woman" is rendered "virgin/parthenos."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of preparation. But I'm not so sure that we view Advent as a time of preparation. Should we? You might consider what Advent means to you. What would it mean to *prepare* for Christmas (and I don't mean getting the tree up!)? What you think is the purpose of Advent? Indeed, why has the church developed church seasons like Lent and Advent at all? Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday on the church calendar. It is the beginning of the new Christian year. Why would the beginning of Advent be the beginning of the year? What does this signify about our faith?
2. You might share some stories of times in your life that you received particularly good news? What do these stories have in common? What made the news so good? Have you ever waited a long time for good news? How did you feel when it arrived? Did the wait make the good news seem all the more good? How can we build up our anticipation of the good news of Christmas?
3. Discuss today's highlighted carol, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." What does it mean to you? In what ways do the words and the music work together to convey a heightened sense of anticipation? Find a hymnal and look at the first line of each of the seven stanzas (#211 in the UMC hymnal). Each verse begins with a title given to Jesus, yet all coming from the Old Testament. What do each of these seven titles convey to you?

A Dickens of a Christmas

Are you hoping for a Christmas season with more joy and less stress?

If so (and who isn't!), we hope that you'll join us for a special Advent series in Scott Engle's Sunday morning class. We'll look at the world-transforming coming of Jesus Christ through the familiar Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*. Without ever referring to Jesus by name, Dickens created a memorable story about the power of Christmas (hint, Christ!) to transform lives.

This four-week series begins this weekend, on Sunday, December 2.
Scott's class meets every Sunday in Festival Hall at 11am.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, DEC 2 – DEC 8

The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of Scripture readings for use during worship. At St. Andrew, when we are not in a sermon series, the Scripture passages we use in worship are often taken from the lectionary. The Heart & Mind readings for this Advent season will all be taken from the lectionary readings for the appropriate week. Thus, these readings are for the first weekend of Advent.

Here is the key question to ask yourself about each of these readings. Why do you think it was selected by church leaders as especially appropriate for Advent? Or to put it another way, when they had the entire Bible from which to select, why these passages?

Sunday, Isaiah 2:1-5 This passage is about the coming Day of the Lord when all people would come together to live in peace and worship the LORD God.

Monday, Jeremiah 33:14-16 This passage too is about a coming day when all God's promises would be fulfilled. What were God's promises? Have they been fulfilled? How?

Tuesday, Matthew 24:36-44 This passage is often taken to refer to Jesus' second coming. Why do you think that is? If it isn't referring to Jesus' second coming, what might Jesus be talking about? The "Son of Man" reference is from Daniel 7 and refers to Jesus.

Wednesday, Luke 21:25-36 This passage echoes the passage from Matthew. What is the parable of the fig tree about? What is its main point?

Thursday, Romans 13:11-14 Paul urges the Christians in Rome to be always ready for Christ's return. What does this have to do with Advent?

Friday, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 What does Paul mean by "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ?"

Saturday, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Paul urges the Thessalonians toward love so that they may be blameless when Jesus comes again, with all the believers.