



Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns

SESSION 1: "O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL"

By singing this hymn we are camped out with the ancient Israelites, asking ourselves how it is we have grown distanced from God, and asking as well what we feel captive to, and what we are exiled from.

Goal for the Session

Participants will experience Advent as a time to reflect not only on joyous anticipation but also on the struggles and sufferings that compelled God to deliver the incarnation.

Preparing for the Session

- This study does not use an Advent candle. Many groups find it meaningful to do this. If your group would like to light a candle each week, please consider beginning each session by lighting the appropriate candle. You might do this before the "Opening" prayer.
- Read or sing through the hymn at least once to yourself so that you have a feel for the hymn's mood.
- Have hymnals on all of the chairs, and have the chairs arrayed in a circle.
- If possible, have a rendition of the hymn queued up on a CD player. Also, have a Bible at hand, marked at Isaiah 10.
- Ideally you will have already distributed (through e-mail or copies) the Participant Handout to all participants prior to the first gathering. If not, suggestions are given in this Leader's Guide for participants to read relevant sections during the session. However, for successive week's sessions consider distributing

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Introduction to the Advent study
- Sing hymn

EXPLORING

- Isaiah 10:14
- Small groups: What does it mean to struggle?
- Small groups: What does "God with us" mean?

RESPONDING

- Rewriting your verse

CLOSING

- Small-group reports
- Sing new hymn
- Prepare for next session

the next handout at the end of each session, giving participants plenty of time to read them. Make reading the handouts prior to each session a commitment of your group so that your time will be spent wisely. Reading the Participant Handout through the week provides a special devotional space for participants during this Advent season.

- The “Opening” prayer is written as a short, responsive reading. Either make copies for participants or write it on newsprint or the board.

Teaching Tip

Keep in mind that some people are self-conscious about singing, especially in a small group, and especially without instrumental accompaniment. You will be asking the group to sing the hymn, but if they are simply accompanying a taped version they might be less inclined to feel uncomfortable.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Leader: Dear God, from the depths of exile hear the prayers of your children who feel so very far away from you.

Group: O come, O come, Emmanuel!

Leader: Deliver us, O God, your chosen people.

All: Rejoice, rejoice, for Emmanuel shall come to us, and will deliver us. **Amen.**

2. Introduction to the Advent Study

Welcome participants and give copies of the first Participant Handout to anyone who has not already received it. Explain that this Advent study will be a reflection on Advent themes as seen through four well-known hymns: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”; “O Little Town of Bethlehem”; “Silent Night”; and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Encourage participants to read the handouts prior to each session and come with their reflections and thoughts.

3. Sing Hymn

Invite participants to hear it as a song of exile and to pay close attention to the mood it evokes in them.

Exploring (20 minutes)

4. Isaiah 7:10–14

Begin by reading aloud Isaiah 7:10–14. As you will see, the hymn was inspired by verse 14. Ask people to talk a little bit about what Isaiah’s audience was enduring at the time of his oracle.

If they have not read their handouts, give them a couple minutes to read the introduction in the handout.

5. Small Groups—What Does it Mean to Struggle?

Divide into three roughly equal groups, and ask each to appoint a “scribe” to report back to the larger group at session’s end.

Each group will be given a verse of the hymn and a topic to concentrate on. They are challenged to come up with a short story or example to share later with the larger group.

Group 1 is responsible for discussing the first verse of the hymn. Have them concentrate on how today we can feel captive and in exile. Give examples: How can adolescents feel exiled from the “cool group” at school? Can adults feel exiled from their family because they work too many hours, or they feel as though the family doesn’t need them? Can you feel exiled from your church because you don’t believe with the same fervor that others seem to hold? Encourage personal stories, not political declarations or general commentaries on societal ills.

Group 2 is responsible for discussing the second verse. What does the hymnist mean by the word “dayspring”? Can people share stories of gloomy times when all seemed dark and the dawn seemed so far away that they almost wanted to implore it to come? What does the dawn bring? What does the hymnist mean by “death’s dark shadows put to flight”? Again, encourage people to draw from their own personal experiences.

Group 3 is responsible for discussing the third verse. In particular, have them zero in on the line sometimes written, “O bid our sad divisions cease.” Where are there sad divisions in their lives and in their world? In the church? In families? What divides us? Give examples, such as the wars in the Middle East, the political divisions in Washington, D.C., differences of opinion about abortion, or perhaps the way children with special needs are to be treated by the school system, or whether sex education should be taught to older kids in church school.

6. Small Groups—What Does “God with Us” Mean?

Have the three groups shift emphasis. How can the phrase “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel” be brought to bear on the issues they have discussed?

Responding (15 minutes)

7. Rewriting Your Verse

Now invite each group to rewrite their verse in a contemporary manner that incorporates both the struggles they have identified and the joy they feel over the impending incarnation. Here is an example of a rewriting of the third verse by a group that had discussed divisions within their community over gay marriage:

O come, dear God, and help us see
The gift of human dignity
Let all be guided from thy light above
And work our differences out in love.
Give thanks! Give thanks! To God on high
May families of all stripes draw nigh!

Teaching Tip: If the topic of gay marriage is too controversial for your group and will sidetrack the entire session, don't use this example. Either come up with an example on your own prior to the session or just explain the idea to the group.

Closing (10 minutes)

8. Small-Group Reports

Gather again as a large group, and ask the scribes to read the key word or phrase from the hymn that their group was concentrating on. Then have the scribe report on the content of your discussions. Ask them to please be brief.

After the last group has reported, try to synthesize the connections people made between human longings (the first stanzas of each verse) and human hope (the last stanzas of each verse).

9. Sing New Hymn

Finally, sing the new hymn, allowing one smaller group at a time to sing their new verse.

10. Prepare for Next Session

Distribute copies of the second Participant Handout and agree as a group that everyone will read this during the week.

Teaching Alternatives

- Begin by asking the group to make themselves as comfortable as possible. If there are pillows or if the floor is carpeted, invite people to lie down and stretch out. Then darken the room and ask people to close their eyes. Explain that they are about to hear one verse of the hymn. Play the first verse from a recording. When the verse is over, with their eyes still closed, they are invited to say whatever comes to their mind or heart. For instance, when they hear the phrase "ransom captive Israel," someone may be stirred to say something about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, someone else might be inspired to say something about prison and prisoners. Someone else might be reminded of their own metaphoric captivity to a bad job or an unfulfilling social life. As they are speaking, the leader can quietly be writing notes about what people have shared. After a few minutes, do the same with verse 2, and then verse 3. When finished, let the room sit in dark silence for a moment. Then slowly bring the lights back up and invite people into a circle. Share what they have said, and invite conversation around how we can be healing agents to one another's wounds, and to the wounds of the world.
- Look at the words to the original, seven-verse hymn (see the "'O' Antiphon" section of the Participant Handout) and encourage small-group discussion around the question of how each entreaty speaks to a different aspect of God (in order: Wisdom, Lordship, God of history, Author of the covenant with Israel, Morning Star, Ruler of the world, Incarnation).

Key Scriptures

Isaiah 7:1–25

Matthew 1:18–24

Romans 8:31–32

For More Information

christianmusic.suite101.com.

Kathy Coffey, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel: Prayer for the Jubilee," <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1299.asp>.



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SESSION 1: “O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL”

By singing this hymn we are camped out with the ancient Israelites, asking ourselves how it is we have grown distanced from God, and asking as well what we feel captive to, and what we are exiled from.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer,
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife, and discord cease,
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel!



By singing this hymn we are camped out with the ancient Israelites, asking ourselves how it is we have grown distanced from God, and asking as well what we feel captive to, and what we are exiled from.

be celebratory or emotionally uplifting, but soothing, quieting, and contemplative.¹

The second reason is its biblical setting. Inspired by Isaiah 7:14 (“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman [or virgin] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel”), we are reminded that the prophet was speaking to a Judean kingdom that was long on corruption and short on faith. They were ruled by the ineffective king Ahaz, and they were at war with Assyria. Idolatry was rampant (Isa. 2:6–22), society was disintegrating (Isa. 3:1–15), and the poor were being treated with unmitigated disdain (Isa. 3:15). Things were not good, and while there was hope to be found in this prophecy of a savior, the immediate outlook for the Judean people was grim.²

With this in mind we can appreciate how the hymn is meant to serve us in this season, because hope is often most poignantly felt and greatly valued when despair is most close at hand. It is not intended to evoke in us, say, good tidings of great joy, or choirs of angels singing in exultation, but to speak to our greatest longings

Introduction

Unlike so many unabashedly joyous Advent hymns, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is haunting to the point of being almost dirge-like in tone and temperament. We sing it at a pace more appropriate to Vespers than to morning worship, and this is fitting for two reasons.

The first reason is that it was in fact originally composed—possibly as early as the eighth century—as a processional hymn to be sung during Vespers in the last week of the Advent season. It was not written to

and our deepest pain. Hymns are evocative by nature, and “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is no different. But while a good many Advent hymns are designed to evoke the kind of excited, antsy anticipation a young child has in the days and weeks leading up to Christmas (think of the lift we get when we sing “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” or “Joy to the World”), this one puts us in the position of having to find hope in the face of profound suffering. It is the difference between hope *because* and hope *despite*; between “I hope *because* the Christ is coming” and “I hope *despite* the bleakness of my circumstances.”

The “O” Antiphon

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is an antiphon (*anti*, which means “over,” and *phon*, which means “voice”), or responsive song. So-called “O” antiphons, such as this one, typically had a plaintive quality and were specifically written to be sung at daily prayer in the evenings of the last days of Advent.³

The hymn was originally seven verses long—one verse for each day of the week leading up to Christmas—and each day one of the verses would be sung responsively. In this original version, each verse represented a different biblical attribute of Christ. They were:

- December 17: O Sapientia (O Wisdom)
- December 18: O Adonai (O Adonai)
- December 19: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
- December 20: O Clavis David (O Key of David)
- December 21: O Oriens (O Morning Star)
- December 22: O Rex Gentium (O King of the nations)
- December 23: O Emmanuel (O Emmanuel)

(Note that the first letters of the titles taken backwards form a Latin acrostic of *Ero Cras*, which translates to “Tomorrow, I will come,” mirroring the theme of the antiphons. A little gimmicky, perhaps, but surely we can grant the early hymnist a modest dose of whimsy.)⁴

The hymn that we sing today was translated from the original Latin in 1851 by the Anglican cleric John Mason Neale, who joined it with the tune of a traditional thirteenth-century plainsong. Though Neale

translated all seven verses, we typically sing only the three that were originally composed for, in order, December 23, 21, and 22.

The Stage Is Set

It does not take long for the hymn as we now sing it to establish its mood and setting. The Israel of verse 1 is a captive nation, an exile community in need of ransom or release. The people are in mourning, and they are lonely. And who could blame them? Consider that the Israelites of the exile were also inheritors of a proud dynastic tradition: They and their forebears were chosen people, the conquerors of Canaan, cornerstones of the empires of Saul, David, and Solomon. But pride is a sword with two edges, because without humility as its counterbalance it breeds hubris, arrogance, a sense of entitlement; a sense that the world is yours for the taking.

The Israelites were taken into exile because while they were eager to embrace their status as God’s special people they had become reluctant to live up to the moral responsibilities that were commensurate with that status. They had fallen from God, worshiped idols, neglected the poor, and grown lazy. In exile they felt that God was far away, when the fact of the matter was they were the ones who had distanced themselves from God, not God from them. It is for this reason Isaiah announces that God will bridge the gap that human beings have created, and will come and live among them. Immanuel, “God with us.”

By singing this hymn we are camped out with the ancient Israelites, asking ourselves how it is *we* have grown distanced from God, and asking as well what we feel captive to, and what we are exiled from. And we would do well, as we “mourn in lonely exile here,” to think of exile not just as a place far from home but as a state of mind, situated outside of the embracing arms of a loving community. When we are in exile (*ex ile*, literally, “to wander away”) we are far from that community because we have come to care more about our own wants than others’ needs, or we have allowed difficult times to dull our faith in God. We must be ransomed from the captivity of pride, because in exile status trumps humility and competition bests cooperation. We must be ransomed from the captivity of our impulses, because in exile anger gets the better of patience and we are as quick to dispense judgment as we are slow to bestow mercy. We must be ransomed from the captivity of despair, because in

church on Sunday we sing the hymns but are not moved by them, recite the prayers but do not believe them, listen to the sermons but do not hear them. There is something missing.

What is missing, this hymn reminds us, is God in our lives. But even our alienation from God is not definitive because we are only in exile *until the son of God appears*, as surely he will—as surely God promised Isaiah and Isaiah promised Israel. There is no rejoicing in the state of exile but there *is* rejoicing in the anticipation that God will come again to call us back from the wilderness and into that loving community. So maybe, just maybe, the Advent season will prepare us to receive this God in the form of pure innocence that will soon beckon us from an animal's feedbox in the dead of night behind a simple inn in a modest way station of a town called Bethlehem.

Dawn Is Not Yet Breaking

If, like ancient Israel, we are indeed to be rescued from our longing, then it will happen as it eventually happened for them, by the strengthening of a faith that had become weakened by years of abandoning God in favor of more ephemeral pursuits. If for our forebears these pursuits included such things as power at the expense of compassion and wealth at the expense of charity, for us they might be more banal but no less corrosive. For some of us worship may have come to be experienced as trivial or irrelevant. For others of us it has become difficult for us to love our neighbor because we envy the lushness of his lawn, the enormity of his house, or the opulence of his corner office. Or perhaps it is love of God that has become problematic because our family has fallen on hard times and God seems deaf to our pleas. Life is dark, in part because it is fraught with struggle and in part because we doubt whether God is there to see us through that struggle.

And so it is in verse 2 that we call for the “dayspring,” the dawn to come and cheer us out of our gloom. Think again of our spiritual ancestors after the world finally collapsed and they were held captive by the Babylonian Empire. It was a dark and furtive time, a time when it was dangerous to worship the God they had so blithely ignored but now wanted very much to be their salvation. They were mocked by a reading of their own history, of a kingdom that was long ago promised to Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars (see Gen. 15:5),



By including this verse at the end of the hymn the authors are reminding us that when the Christ child comes he comes to free us from all that imprisons us, including the arrogance that drove “captive Israel” into “lonely exile” in the first place.

but was now reduced to a small remnant community that had no nation to call their own. The “gloomy clouds of night” could be interpreted as the bleakness of a living purgatory, and that would be correct but incomplete, because the gloom must also consider the frame of mind that overcomes us in that purgatory of failed faith, a frame of mind that has us doubt whether the gloom will ever be lifted.

When we are subjected to any form of suffering that we know will be lifted at a given point of time, we can find within ourselves the wherewithal to endure it. But when neither the certitude of fact nor the encouragement of belief are there for us, we are left to ponder the despair that comes with a kind of doubt-induced gloom that we believe to be interminable.

The Israelites who survived the exile were the ones who reclaimed their faith in a God of salvation and deliverance, and this is what we must do as well. In winter's pall we must believe not only that Emmanuel will come, but that he will come *to us*. What this verse implores us to do is muster our faith when things are hard and faith seems far from us, because if we can find just enough faith to believe that the darkness will pass and the dawn will appear, then it will in fact happen. “Death's dark shadows” will be put to flight; the “gloomy clouds of night” will disperse, and we will again rejoice.

What this means in a broader sense is that we will be a new people, because—as did the Israelites—we will have abandoned the false gods that had become our preoccupations and distractions, our chimeras and illusions and surrogate idols, and returned with strengthened faith to the true God whose imminence we could now await. We can in fact survive our exile and the sufferings that are its hallmark because we know that God will soon be with us.

Us but Not Us Alone

In the final verse we are reminded that faith is personal but not private; that what we wish for ourselves must expand beyond the parochialism of our own lives or even our own communities to embrace all of humankind. It is not just Israel that is being ransomed, nor is it just the spirits of a few that will be cheered by the day-spring of dawn. The yearning for God to be made known to us is a universal yearning, a “desire of nations,” of “all peoples in one heart and mind.” By whatever name God is known (and, as we saw above, in the expanded version of this hymn alone the Christian God is identified by seven different names), the longing for a loving Being to bind people together transcends doctrine, dogma, and creed.

Long a source of division and a pretext for suspicion, the petition of this hymn is that this time, when the love of God is made known to us in the incarnation, *let us for once get it right*. Instead of sowing divisions let us reap unity (“O come, Desire of nations, bind / All peoples in one heart and mind”). Instead of allowing petty jealousies to breed insecurity, anger, and resentment, let us be big enough to recognize that all people are good, that all people are in need, and that all people are deserving of a life free of the impositions of another people’s will (“Bid envy, strife, and discord cease”). And instead of God’s holy name being lent to the most unholy of human activities—war—let this be an occasion to put aside the things that make enemies out of our neighbors and find instead the things that make neighbors out of our enemies (“Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace”).

This last verse is particularly important because it anticipates a great collective weakness we have. All too often it is our tendency to use religion—or nationalism, or patriotism, or family values, or political affiliations, or pedigree, or race, or gender, or orientation—to assert our supremacy over other communities, and by including this verse at the end of the hymn the authors are reminding us that when the Christ child comes he comes to free us from all that imprisons us, including the arrogance that drove “captive Israel” into “lonely exile” in the first place. Just as he is born in humility, so too must we be humble, approaching that little manger not with an air of entitlement but with a sense of gratitude. Let us remember, this last verse is suggesting, that the only way to really see this tiny, tiny baby born into the cool, dark night and laid deep in the straw is to get as close to the Christ as humanly possible. And the only way to get close to Christ is on our knees.

About the Writer

Erik Kolbell is a United Church of Christ minister and author, most recently, of *The God of Second Chances*.

Endnotes

1. Tel Asiado, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel Hymn History,” http://christianmusic.suite101.com/article.cfm/neales_o_come_o_come_emmanuel.
2. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 271.
3. “The Great ‘O Antiphons,’” <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0494.html>.
4. Ibid.