

Advent 4 (Series B)

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #357)

We are lousy at waiting. From the plethora of fast-food choices, to TV “on demand”, to the iPhone eliminating nearly every opportunity for boredom, we seldom wait for *anything*. Our lives sprint from one engaging activity to another so much so that the idea of anticipation has become for us the most unusual of all spiritual disciplines.

This is one reason why we’ve lost some of the wonder of arguably the greatest Advent hymn of all time, “O Come, O come Emmanuel”. The hymn pre-supposes the spiritual truth that waiting is not only necessary at times, it is also beneficial. There can be no faith without anticipation. God’s people have always understood this...they were forced to. The great narratives in scripture give us the exciting highlights, but if you read in-between the lines you’ll find that most of salvation history is about waiting.

The hymn is based upon the Great “O” Antiphons of Advent— seven ancient scriptural prayers of waiting (a translation is provided in the *Lutheran Service Book*, 357). One antiphon was traditionally sung each day from December 17th to the 23rd. The opening stanza in modern hymnals is in fact the last antiphon to be prayed, “O Emmanuel, our king and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Savior: come and save us, O Lord our God.” The seven antiphons, originally prayed or sung in Latin, retained their popularity even into the reformation period. For example, English reformer and dramatist John Bale (1495-1563) structured a seven-part Reformation drama called “God’s Promises” upon them—so they have a long, rich and diverse history in the church.

Each Antiphon consists of a title given to Christ in the Old Testament and a petition asking him to come and fulfill a scriptural promise or prophecy. There is a beautiful logic to them. They begin in the remote vastness of the Eternal Wisdom (stanza 2 in our hymnals) continue through Moses and the Law, remembering David and his promised descendant who would rule Israel gloriously. They pass through the Babylonian captivity and the conviction of the later prophets that the Messiah was to be more than an earthly king, declaring that he would be King and Savior of all people, and even more, proclaiming him Emmanuel, God with us. You will notice that the antiphons proceed on an ascending scale of excitement, reaching a crescendo as they usher-in the joy of the Feast of the Nativity.¹

But in each antiphon, we return to the theme of waiting. They are prayers that God would come and teach, redeem, deliver, rescue, enlighten, save, and dwell with His people. These petitions are only possible for people who wait—who understand that God’s promises in Christ are always now, but not yet; here, but still coming. It’s a discipline we would do well to rediscover. Immersing ourselves in these ancient prayers will not only build-up our faith, it might actually slow us down in this busy time of year.

¹ Arthur Carl Piepkorn penned an excellent summary of the theological themes of the antiphons in the original CPH publication of Healy Willan’s setting (1958). I have adapted his words and included them in this paragraph.

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[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be copied for local use.]