

What was I thinking?

December 5, 2021



Advent II

Some jokes seem to make the rounds this time every year. They usually go something like this: “This is a season of unparalleled beauty, tradition, wonder, and magic. Too bad you’re a musician. Go practice.” Any of us who sing in choirs, play instruments, or are choir directors and/or organists laugh. We love this time of year, but it’s also exhausting. I’m feeling it this week as I write this. I plan to keep this relatively short so that I can go practice.

If I asked what your favorite Advent hymn is, some of you might start naming Christmas hymns and carols. In a few cases, you might be right, because it’s not always clear. *Joy to the World!* was actually intended to be an Advent hymn and it is in the Advent section in some Lutheran hymnals. It’s really a paraphrase of Psalm 98 by Isaac Watts. *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* was meant by Charles Wesley to be Christmas hymn, but in most hymnals it’s in the Advent section.

But I think it’s safe to say many of us would choose *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* as our favorite Advent hymn. You’ve probably noticed we use parts of it as responses in our services in Advent. We may sing a stanza of it after the lighting of our Advent wreath, and we sing the refrain, “Rejoice! Rejoice!” as our benediction response. Every once in a while, someone asks, “Can’t we just sing through the whole hymn like it’s supposed to be?” Or as one of my teachers says, “the way God wrote it.”

In this case, it wasn’t originally a hymn to be sung stanza after stanza. It’s a collection of response or antiphons. Remember our talk of the new Antiphonal Organ we now enjoy in our sanctuary? The word “antiphonal” means things sounding from different

places, usually alternating. An antiphon is something that is sung or played in this manner. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* is a collection of antiphons. They were originally meant to be sung in alternation with the Magnificat (the Song of Mary – “My soul magnifies the Lord”). Each antiphon was sung before and after the singing of the Magnificat in Vespers services in the week leading up to Christmas. So, there are seven; one for each night of the week. The last antiphon to be sung the night before Christmas Eve is what we now know as the first stanza.

They are often referred to as the “Great ‘O’ Antiphons.” Each begins with “O” and addresses the Messiah with one of his scriptural titles, followed by a petition appropriate to that title. For example, the one we’re singing as a response this Sunday is:

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 Wisdom, O Lord of might, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Desire of Nations, you get the idea. What’s even more interesting is, if you look at the original Latin, after the “O,” the titles are in this order:

Sapientia
Adonay
Radix
Clavis David
Oriens
Rex
Emmanuel

If you take the first letter of each title, SARCORE, you have a reverse acrostic – reverse those letters and they spell “ero cras,” which means “I shall be with you tomorrow.” Musicians and artists seem to like putting hidden messages in their work.

If all of that confuses you, don’t worry about it. We will sing one of the antiphons as a response, we’ll sing “Rejoice?” as a response, and we’ll also sing it “the way God wrote it” as the final hymn tomorrow.



Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live there himself. (C.S. Lewis)

O come, O come, Emmanuel.

God be with you till we meet again.

John