

**“Waiting for God”**  
**Reflections on O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

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Various scriptures from Isaiah

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“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is my favourite song of Advent. This carol grew from ancient Latin prayers. Monks wrote them in the Middle Ages, and sang them in the days leading to Christmas. They drew on words from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah had given comfort and challenge to God’s people 700 years before Jesus, and continues to speak to us today. But we have a problem. Many of us are unfamiliar with the images and promises Isaiah wrote about.

This morning, we’re going to hear the scriptures and sing each verse. We’ll discover some of the treasures they contain. Woven between them, we’ll pray and reflect, together and in silence. We’ll celebrate the Lord’s Supper. And, at the end, we’ll hear the greatest promise and treasure of all.

**Sapientia: Waiting for God’s Wisdom**

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>*

Wisdom is not the same as smarts. Smart people can be very foolish, and some of the wisest people are the most simple. Wisdom is living in tune with how the world works. Wisdom is walking with the ways of life, instead of against them.

These days, we have so much information just a fingertap away. We hear more opinions than ever. But do we walk with wisdom?

God promises that someone is coming. This person will live fully in God’s wisdom, blessing us all. So pray: “Come, Holy Wisdom, come into our lives and our world, and show us your ways.”

***O come, O Wisdom from on high,  
who orders all things mightily;  
to us the path of knowledge show,  
and teach us in her ways to go.<sup>2</sup>***

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 11.2 (KJV).

<sup>2</sup> The verses are from Healey Willan’s arrangement, which is popular throughout the English-speaking world. It is the first hymn in Voices United. It is based on a 15<sup>th</sup> century plainsong melody. Willan was a

**Adonai: Waiting for the LORD**

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners . . .  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*<sup>3</sup>

“Lord” is a power word. It brings us into the world of politics. We do politics as countries, as towns, as neighbourhoods. In families and friendships. In churches. The problem is not politics nor power. We can use power to bless; we can use it to curse. What do we do with power? That is the question.

This someone who is coming will be filled with God’s Spirit. So he will transform power. Headlines will start shouting good news for poor people, healing to broken hearts, captives set free. God’s power launches an invasion, and the world’s powers will tremble. Yet those who have been cursed in this world, they will rejoice! So pray, *“Come, Sovereign Lord, and use your power to liberate, bring peace, and flow blessings through your world.*

***O come, O come, great Lord of might,  
who to your tribes on Sinai's height  
in ancient times once gave the law  
in cloud, and majesty, and awe.***<sup>4</sup>

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British composer and organist who immigrated to Canada in 1913. He served churches in Toronto. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Healey\\_Willan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Healey_Willan). At the end of this reflection, I have included the verses in Latin and a literal translation into English.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 61.1,3a (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> I restored the original “Lord of might” to reflect the Latin. In Voices United it was changed to “God of might.”

**Radix: Waiting for Jesse's Root**

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;  
a branch will sprout from his roots.  
The Lord's spirit will rest upon him . . .  
He won't judge by appearances,  
nor decide by hearsay.  
He will judge the needy with righteousness,  
and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.<sup>5</sup>*

A chopped-down tree is not necessarily finished. It's stump still has roots!

Jesse was a farmer in the small village called Bethlehem. He had eight sons, and the smallest, David, God made king of Israel. David was far from perfect, but he was great. Especially compared to the disastrous rulers who came after him. It's like the David-tree which had grown from Jesse was chopped down. Just a stump left.

Yet roots deep underground harbour life. From this stump will come a shoot. A new David. A new king. A messiah, chosen by God. The christ, delivering God's people. So pray, "God, send us this Christ."

***O come, O Rod of Jesse's stem,  
from every foe deliver them  
that trust your mighty power to save,  
and give them victory o'er the grave.***

**Clavis: Waiting for David's Key**

*I will place the key to David's house on his shoulder;  
what he opens no one will close,  
and what he closes no one will open.<sup>6</sup>*

A key opens something that is shut and locked. If I give you the key to my house, I'm trusting you with what's inside.

The "Key of David" draws again on the memory and promise of Israel's greatest king. To one who is coming, the New David, God will entrust the key again. He will have God's

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 11.1-2a,3b-4a (CEB)

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 22.22 (CEB).

authority to open the kingdom of heaven, here on earth. He will rule with God's goodness, filled with God's grace and leading us into God's ways. So pray, *"God, give us that good key, someone we can entrust ourselves to."*

***O come, O Key of David, come,  
and open wide our heavenly home;  
make safe the way that leads on high,  
and close the path to misery.***

**Oriens: Waiting for the Rising Sun**

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.  
On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.<sup>7</sup>*

Sometimes the darkness is easy to see: terror, disease, family breakdown, death. But other times we hide darkness behind blasts of neon lights. There is darkness that comes upon us, and there is darkness that comes because we close our eyes.

In dark times, God sends prophets. To shine light and open our eyes. To show us what we cannot see, and to make us see what we don't want to notice. It is in the darkness that God shines light. Sometimes it is a welcome relief. Sometimes it is a disturbing glare.

God wants us to see. See what God sees. See what God is doing. See where God wants us to go. So pray, *"God, shine light. Give us the courage to open our eyes, to see what we need to see."*

***O come, O Dayspring, from on high,  
and cheer us by your drawing nigh;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
and death's dark shadows put to flight.***

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 9.2 (CEB).

**Rex: Waiting for the King of Nations**

*In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house  
will be the highest of the mountains. . . .*

*Many nations will go and say,  
"Come, let's go up to the Lord's mountain,  
to the house of Jacob's God  
so that he may teach us his ways  
and we may walk in God's paths." . . .*

*God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations.*

*Then they will beat their swords into iron plows  
and their spears into pruning tools.*

*Nation will not take up sword against nation;  
they will no longer learn how to make war.<sup>8</sup>*

In ancient times, and today, we say someone is a strong leader because they talk tough. They throw their weight around. We think they make us strong. If we're strong, we are safe, right? No one can hurt us. Giving Israel a king wasn't God's idea. God knew trouble would come of it. The people insisted, though: "Give us a king, so we'll be strong like everyone else."

Imagine a different sort of ruler. One who is truly like God. Who gathers people together, instead of pushing them apart. Who doesn't force obedience, but to whom people flock with excitement and hope. Who brings peace, dismantles weapons, and makes us wonderfully ignorant in the ways of violence. A ruler who will bring God's Kingdom. So pray, "God, bring us into your ways of peace."

***O come, Desire of nations, bind  
all peoples in one heart and mind;  
O bid our sad divisions cease,  
and be for us the Prince of Peace.***

**Emmanuel: Waiting for God**

*The Lord himself will give you a sign.  
Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son,  
and shall name him Immanuel.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 2.2a,3-4 (CEB)

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 7.14 (NRSV).

Someone is coming. God's promises point to it: filled with wisdom, overthrowing powers, a new sort of ruler, one we can entrust ourselves to fully, making us see, and bringing peace. Someone is coming.

From the midst of great fear, God's promise says: "*Look! Look! When you can't see anything else but your own shaking in the wind,*<sup>10</sup> *look! When you can't see any reason for hope, look!*"

*"She shall conceive and bear a son, and call him Emmanuel."*

Emmanuel means "God is with us."

God comes to us, in person.

We've heard these verses this morning in the original order those monks did them.

Look at the key word from each verse:

Wisdom Lord Root Key Dawn King Emmanuel.

Those monks were working in Latin and Hebrew. So in your bulletin, for each I've given the word in that language:

Sapientia Adonai Radix Clavis Oriens Rex Emmanuel.

If you reverse the order, then take the first letter of each word, you get this phrase: "ERO CRAS." Which means, in Latin, "*I will be there tomorrow.*"

These prayers are sung leading to Christmas. They end with assurance: "*I will be there tomorrow.*" So pray with hope in God's promise, "*O come, O come, Emmanuel*". And rejoice!

***O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel  
that mourns in lowly exile here  
until the Son of God appear.***

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

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 7:2.

## The “O Antiphons” in Latin and English<sup>11</sup>

*O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodiisti,  
attingens a fine usque ad finem,  
fortiter suaviterque disponens omnia:  
veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.*

O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,  
reaching from one end to the other,  
mightily and sweetly ordering all things:  
Come and teach us the way of prudence.

*O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel,  
qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti,  
et ei in Sina legem dedisti:  
veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,  
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush  
and gave him the law on Sinai:  
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

*O Radix Jesse, qui stas in signum populorum,  
super quem continebunt reges os suum,  
quem Gentes deprecabuntur:  
veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare.*

O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples;  
before you kings will shut their mouths,  
to you the nations will make their prayer:  
Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.

*O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel;  
qui aperis, et nemo claudit;  
claudis, et nemo aperit:  
veni, et educ vincitum de domo carceris,  
sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;  
you open and no one can shut;  
you shut and no one can open:  
Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house,  
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

*O Oriens,  
splendor lucis aeternae, et sol iustitiae:  
veni, et illumina sedentes  
in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

O Rising Sun,  
splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness:  
Come and enlighten those who dwell  
in darkness and the shadow of death.

*O Rex Gentium, et desideratus earum,  
lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum:  
veni, et salva hominem,  
quem de limo formasti.*

O King of the nations, and their desire,  
the cornerstone making both one:  
Come and save the human race,  
which you fashioned from clay.

*O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster,  
exspectatio Gentium, et Salvator earum:  
veni ad salvandum nos,  
Domine, Deus noster.*

O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver,  
the hope of the nations and their Saviour:  
Come and save us,  
O Lord our God.

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<sup>11</sup> The Latin antiphons are from the *Breviarium Romanum*. The English versions, which are not always literal translations of the Latin, are from the Church of England's *Common Worship* liturgy. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O\\_Antiphons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Antiphons)