

December 13, 2020
Rev. Jane Florence
Sermon: O Come, Emmanuel
Text: Luke 1: 46-55



Let's go to the Theater.....

Imagine you are seated in your patron spot, chatting with those around you. The overhead lights blink; others hurry to their seat. The lights dim until the theater is enveloped in darkness. To the stage left a flickering candle illuminates Benedictine monks standing in the wings. Dark robes make all but their faces disappear in the shadows, candles light slowly and a chorus of Gregorian chanting begins....

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.... Rejoice! Rejoice!
Their song continues but fades into background music.

In a similarly barren setting, a young woman, not more than a mere girl really, sits on an otherwise darkened stage when the spotlight bursts upon her and a voice booms from overhead,
“Greeting favored one!”

The girl jumps at the intrusion of an angelic being proclaiming news of a royal baby and the more astounding news that she is to birth him. The audience may giggle at this line. This girl is a ‘handmaiden’. She’s not a princess or a high priest’s daughter. She isn’t draped in royal blue silk. She’s wearing a peasant tunic; she’s just a servant, a lowly servant. A future king of Israel is going to be born into poverty? Preposterous! Is this play now to become a comedy or a tragedy?

In a surprising twist the young servant girl, first startled by this birth announcement, turns her protest rather quickly into humble acceptance,

“Here am I ; let it be- let it be with me according to your words.”

Mary hurries swiftly off stage as the backdrop raises to reveal a lovely hill country village where an elderly man and woman stand at the doorway to their home. Mary enters the rural scene, runs to the woman and receives a warm embrace. The older woman touches her own protruding belly, bows her head and offers Mary a blessing. To her relief, Mary was not met with harsh judgment or scorn! She is welcomed by her family and a song rises to her lips. Mary’s single voice , clear, sweet and strong sings the Magnificat.

My soul magnifies the Lord... she begins..

Light again rises softly on stage left as the Gregorian’s chant returns:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.
The two songs overlap and call for the ushering in of change

Mary sings her song , and she begins by celebrating her blessings, but she points to something much larger than the change coming forth within her body. She sings of the holy, the divine. Her song proclaims the real star of the story: God has shown great strength. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones. God has lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things. God has sent the rich away empty.

Mary’s song emphasizes that the great reversal, longed for and hoped for, awaited for centuries is coming to pass. It’s a radical song. Taking the powerful off their thrones! Lifting up the peasants! This is a song of turning the world upside down. It’s about giving a fair share to the 99% and that means less for the 1%. Its message can be heard in the chant produced nine centuries later as these monks echo ancient Israels plea,

O Come, Emmanuel, God with us.... Come to set us free, Come bring us home us out of exile, back into your presence. Come tear down ruthless rulers and bring mercy on your people.

Mary's song proclaims the fulfillment of ancient scriptures telling of Israel's longings. It answers the question: What child is this growing within me? This is the child that is the hope of all the law and prophets. This is the child that will bring big change to the world. It is a song of hope and a song of promise and a song for the lowly and the outcasts. It's a song for the marginalized and the vulnerable, for those discounted and dismissed. Mary sings a song about her child that proclaims a new way is coming into the world.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel. Rejoice!, Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee..

This song we opened our worship with, a favorite of many, is like a well crafted quilt. Benedictine monks gathered the fabric of ancient Israel, hopes, dreams and longings and set it to tune. They sang it particularly each year in the month preceding Christmas when they wove in Mary's Magnificat on Christmas Eve. Over the years new translations of the ancient text, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, sewed new patches onto the familiar melody. In 1916, William Sloane Coffin added more verses to create another border on the beloved tapestry.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high, And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show, And cause us in her ways to go.

O come, Desire of nations, bind All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease; Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

The new verses further emphasized Mary's song calling for people of faith to follow the path of Wisdom and fill the world with peace. Our Christmas songs are not sweet melodies of seasonal nostalgia intended to boost sales in December and get packed away in January. Our Christmas carols are songs of spiritual transformation and songs of political and social change. They are songs of radical transformation opening our hearts to know the holy Divine which brings forth songs of rejoicing and change for Emmanuel, God is with us.

Thanks be to God.