

“Word of the Father, Now in Flesh Appearing”

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

We all have a favorite Christmas Carol. So, which one is it for you (and you can't choose anything by Mariah Carey)? Some love the serenity of “Silent Night.” Others prefer the boldness of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” I've always been partial to “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” as long as it's accompanied by the “right” tune, of course. But regardless of which Christmas carol you love the most, it's probably safe to say, “O Come, All Ye Faithful” would be on almost everyone's top ten list. In its original Latin, it's known as “Adeste Fidelis,” and here, at Emmanuel, this anthem stands out as a unique marker of Christmas Day. We sang it this morning as we processed the cross, and its audacious setting and profound lyrics provide the perfect song of celebration and praise.

Written in the 1600's, the earliest printed version of Adeste Fidelis appeared in 1751. Then, in 1841, Frederick Oakeley translated the hymn into English, and “O Come, All Ye Faithful”, as we know it, was born. Over the years, the original four verses have expanded to at least eight, and yet, the most significant development to this great Christmas Carol came not in the lyrics, but in the music itself.

In 1961, David Wilcocks was serving as the Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge. He was writing a choral resource called Carols for Christmas, and when he arranged O Come, All Ye Faithful, he added a dramatic twist to the classic tune that changed everything, and it came in the form of an improbable chord. We all know the tune. It begins with a stately and satisfying introduction and continues on until the fourth verse, where there is a natural crescendo. In the first verse, this climax is accompanied by the lyric, “Come and behold Him, born the king of angels.” In verse three, this high point comes with the words, “Glory to God, in the highest,” and all of it builds to the final verse, where an unexpected and shocking chord grips our ear. To help you notice this shift, listen to the chord as it appears in the first several verses (Matt Johnston plays the standard chord). Now, listen to the same section of the song with the altered chord (Matt Johnston plays the dissonant chord). It is unpredictable and unmistakable. It is also unmatched in its impact.

This arrangement has been called by some “the greatest chord ever written in Western music,” and for musicians and music lovers, it's often referred to as “the Word of the Father Chord” or simply “The Chord.” I learned about The Chord last year on a Christmas Eve radio broadcast as I drove home from a hospital visit, and it was an absolute epiphany to me, because I had always felt the difference in the final verse, but I never understood what was happening musically. Now, I crave and anticipate “The Chord” every time I hear this wonderful carol.

Wilcocks knew what he was doing, and as he looked for a way to amplify the importance of this particular part of the hymn, he included two dissonant notes in the enchanted chord. Those were the sour notes you heard Matt play, yet rather than the wrong note you thought you heard, this

dissonance causes a dramatic tension in the music by combining sounds that do not normally belong together. And that is where the genius of The Chord really matters. You see, in the final verse of O Come, All Ye Faithful, The Chord lines up with the word “Word.” Wilcocks was more than a great musician; he was also an astute theologian, because the unexpected revelation contained in this phrase is the heart of Christmas.

Today, we heard the Christmas story from John’s Gospel in its austere and essential ways. John doesn’t provide us with any details about Jesus’ birth, and we don’t see a picture of the Nativity. We don’t experience the power of the angels’ song or the joy of the shepherds. Instead, we very simply hear the only message that really matters: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And, in this plain and pure proclamation of presence, God smashes through the hollow trappings of our false Christmas, and He grabs us with the startling truth that the eternal Word who was with God at the creation the world; the Word of the Father by whom all things were made; the eternal Word – who is Himself God – has taken on human flesh and, in the most shocking truth of all, John tells us that this gracious and greatest gift of God’s presence is for *us*!

Word of the Father now in flesh appearing – the Incarnation – God in the flesh! We speak this truth every week when we confess that Jesus Christ was “conceived by the Holy Spirit” and “born of the virgin Mary,” and the creedal Christmas story wastes no time in explaining why this matters. It is because Christ Jesus, our God incarnate, “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried...(and) on the third day He rose again from the dead.”

Like The Chord, this act of love is completely unexpected. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God did the unthinkable. He became a man, so that in our place, He could live a perfect life where we have all failed. And in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God took on human flesh so that He could die in the place of human sinners, receiving in His flesh the punishment we justly deserved. And in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God became man, so that in our place, He could defeat death and give us the sure and certain promise of our resurrection from the dead and life everlasting. “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing...” *This* is the truth that gives us life!

The dissonance in our world gives us so many reasons to be discouraged. Each day we face a fallen world twisted by sin, and we feel the frustration of illness, the ache of isolation, and the bitterness of death. Each day we face the darkness of the sin into which we were born...and yet, into this dark world, a Child was born. And into this dark world a Son was given. And into this dark world God became flesh to dwell among us, and not only is God with us...in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God is for us!

Christmas without Christ means nothing, but because God’s Son became flesh for us, this day has an eternal focus that gives Christmas its true meaning. The Word made flesh gives our family gatherings meaning. The Word made flesh gives our gifts meaning. The Word made flesh gives our worship meaning because, in the Word of the Father, we have the promise that God is with us in the flesh, and His presence in the flesh changes everything.

Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. Today, we celebrate this unexpected and unmatched act of love because today, in His Son, forgiveness, life, and salvation have been given to you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold