



Week One

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

Check-in

How are you? Where have you seen Christ working in your life in the last week? And... to kick off this series, let's start the debate! What's the best Christmas Carol of all time and why? We're not merely asking for your opinion or a favorite here. This is not a "your truth is your truth" sort of thing. Make a declaration! Be bold! The best Christmas Carol of all time is...

Opening Prayer

God-with-Us, remind us that you are a God who did not stay away from Your Creation. You are a Loving Parent who chose to enter our world to remind us of your love.

Introduction

Regardless of which is your favorite, the songs we sing this time of year are reflections of the scriptures about Jesus's birth, and in many cases, add some beautiful elements to the stories you've heard over and over again. The authors of your favorite carols masterfully take the Scriptures and add feeling and emotion and impact. The lyrics drive home a message or add insight we may not have thought of. They offer imagery or an angle we don't find in the scriptures. And so, for this series and the Christmas season, we're going to look at some of your favorite Christmas Carols, the scriptures and stories they are associated with, and allow the insight they offer to us to prepare our hearts for the come of Christ on Christmas.

Warm-up Question: How intense are you about your Christmas music? Do you blast your Christmas Spotify playlist all day every day? Or are you neither here-nor-there about it? Either way, how does it get you in the "Christmas Spirit"?

Scripture & Carol

Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, has historically been a time for Christians to break from the insanity, to pause in the chaos, and remember why we get to have Christmas lists and gift exchanges and Christmas cards... to remember why we get to celebrate this holiday in the first place. This season is a time to re-embrace the coming of Christ into our lives. And one of the best ways to do that is through listening to the music of the season. So, where do we begin?

Well, we're going to start with song that harkens back even farther than that first Christmas, to prophecies from 750 years before Jesus's birth.

-O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

(If you're working through this Reflection Guide in a group, vote on the best singer, and that person has to sing the first verse and refrain. No backing out!) Now, as beautiful as it is, this carol begs some questions. Why is Jesus called Emmanuel? Why didn't the author use the name Jesus? Or Christ? Also, it's obviously not about us today, because it talks about exile, and we're not in exile. And we might be mourning, but that's because we just had to sing this carol in the bar in front of everyone in the small group. And the refrain says, "Emmanuel shall come to thee, O *Israel*." Which isn't us. So, there's a lot that needs broken down here.

To get some answers, let's look at where this song comes from. As we said earlier, it goes back to around 750 bce to the time of the prophet Isaiah, his 7th chapter, verse 14. See, Isaiah was the prophet to the King of Judah, Ahaz, whose people were being threatened by the Syrian army. God told Isaiah to give Ahaz good news, that the Syrians would not overthrow him. "In fact," Isaiah tells him, "Ask God for a sign to prove it." But Ahaz says, "nope, I will not test God." So, Isaiah responds, "okay, if you won't ask for a sign..."

¹⁴ 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. (Isaiah 7:14 NRSV)

Now, 3000 years after the fact, we apply this prophecy differently. But at the time, in the context of what was happening in Isaiah's world, it was understood another way. Whereas Isaiah's people would survive the Syrians, they would be conquered by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans... and for the next few thousand years, would not be free. And so they held onto this prophecy, that when they saw this young woman, (often translated, "virgin,") giving birth to a son, this meant the "ransom from their captivity" would be soon! So, had the song been written back then, they would have been singing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," because it meant emancipation for the captives and a return home for an exiled Israel.

Question 1: Discuss this scripture and story of Isaiah. Had you considered the background of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" before, or had it just been another carol you'd sung without much thought? Were you familiar with the context of this scripture? Does putting the prophecy back in its original setting change its meaning for you?

Reflection

If this is the prophecy, if a virgin giving birth to "Immanuel" is the sign that the people are looking for that will mean their freedom, then of course they're going to sing, "O come, O come, Emmanuel! Get down

here, we want to be free!” They are desperately longing for this promise to be fulfilled, to ransom a captive Israel. But how does this prophecy, this scripture, and our song for today become part of the Christmas story and a carol we sing every year? Well, if we fast forward 750 years to a carpenter named Joseph, he’s preparing to marry a young woman, a virgin, who is with child, and he’s scared. But an Angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him, “don’t be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. Help her raise her son, because, guess what, remember that prophecy from Isaiah? It’s coming true in the birth of her son, Immanuel... God-with-us.” And then, after telling us this story, the writer, Matthew, quotes Isaiah’s prophecy:

**“the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,” (Matthew 1:23 NRSV)**

And so, Ahaz was about 700 years short on seeing this fulfilled. Israel was a few hundred years waiting for this to be fulfilled. But Joseph and Mary and soon, thousands across Israel and Judah would know. They would “Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel HAS come to thee, O Israel.” Some would believe. Some wouldn’t. But we know, a few decades later, many Hebrew people would believe that “God-with-Us, Immanuel” had arrived.

But we’re not Israel, so why do we sing this song now? Because Immanuel wasn’t just for Israel. Ahaz didn’t know it back then, and Isaiah may not have understood it fully at the time. But when the angel appeared to Joseph, and Mary gave birth to a baby thus

fulfilling the prophecy, Immanuel wasn't here just to free a captive Israel. Immanuel, God with us, came to free all of humanity for all time. When we sing this song, we are Israel, and our plea for God to be with us is no less real.

Question 2: How often do we feel like we are held captive by something in our lives, the mistakes we make, the relationships that are a struggle, the hurt we caused or has been inflicted upon us? How often do we feel like the exiled, shunned by those we admire, left-out or ostracized, rejected or lonely? If comfortable, share a situation where you feel (or felt) like Israel did, captive or exiled, and begging to be set free and brought home.

Closing

This carol was not only a plea of Israel while captive and exiled thousands of years ago. This refrain, a plea for Emmanuel to arrive, is our plea today. Verse 6, (yes, there are 6 verses,) uses the name "Dayspring," like Immanuel, as another nickname of Jesus. Dayspring, the beginning of a new day... because like the dawn breaks the dark of night, Christ breaks the chains that bind us and the gloom that surrounds us. And what's the result? It's the chorus of the carol... "Rejoice!" The result of Christ coming into the world to ransom us and to bring us home is for us to "Rejoice! Rejoice!" because... "Immanuel, has come to *us!*" And in this prophecy and this song, we are Israel... we are the ones to whom Christ has come. And so, as we seek to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ through music, through song and

scripture, this Advent, start by singing this song, as Israel did... as a plea, a desperate cry for Christ to come into your life. And when you get to the chorus, belt out that word, “rejoice!” Because Immanuel has come to us, and in doing so, has ransomed us exiles, setting us free from the chains of darkness, and bringing us home. “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel has come to thee, O Israel.”

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.
Close in prayer.**