

WHAT NAME SHALL WE CALL HIM?

1. "The Great O Antiphons: O Emmanuel"

Isaiah 7:10-16

November 29, 2015, First Sunday in Advent

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The beginning of Advent and the march forward to Christmas Eve is official here. Regardless of what the department stores have been saying for at least 4 weeks, the lighting of the Christmas Tree at Macy on November 22 and the excitement about Black Friday which starts on Thanksgiving Thursday, just to confuse us, and all of that is but prelude to what gets started today, the First Sunday of Advent. Regardless of what you hear other places the Advent/Christmas season is our season, distinctively Christian.

The whole idea of gift giving and thinking of others and serving others and taking meals to shut-ins or fixing meals at Our Daily Bread all starts with Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus came to serve not to be served. Jesus came from God bringing to us the greatest gift of all, God's love incarnate in a human being, encased in a little baby and then set loose in the world. No god had ever done that before or since. "God so loved the world that he gave...." is the way the writer of John's gospel put it.

The season is distinctively Christian also because of all the odd words that we use to describe it. Words that are lost on the non-Christian society around us: words like Advent (what does that really mean?) and Emmanuel, and the Magnificat, and Messiah and phrases like the Second Coming of Jesus and the Antiphons of Advent.

And that was a reminder to me about the Antiphons of Advent, I had completely forgotten about then until Carol Strickland suggested the topic when we were brainstorming about what our Advent theme might be. It is an intriguing story these names for Jesus that come out of the Old Testament, mostly Isaiah, and used as a chant by the early church in the 4th and 5th centuries. They were often used before and after the recitation of the Magnificat, the song of Mary in Luke's Gospel that Mary sang after the angel Gabriel told her she was going to have a baby and his name would be Emmanuel! The antiphons are a collage of Old Testament words for the coming Messiah. In their context they stress the hope of the Savior's coming.

To the Protestant world they are most familiar to us in the hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel!", which was part of the lighting of the Advent Candle and will be each week, and our opening hymn this morning. Each verse of the hymn includes one of the antiphons, our hymnbook has but three verses but like many hymns there are many more verses and at least seven in "O Come, O Come Emmanuel!" to cover the seven antiphons.

They may be used in family devotions and other places throughout the advent season. They are a reminder to us that this is a season of waiting and patience as the ancient world waited a long time for God to work his purpose out. So, for the weeks of advent we will spend time working through the words O Emmanuel, O Flowers of the stump of Jesse and O Wisdom the next few

weeks for the messiah that came down to us from the prophet Isaiah, a real person, who lived back in the 8th century B.C.

Our scripture this morning from Isaiah 7 tell a story from about 733-732 B.C. I think it is a good story. One of the delights of this time of year is to listen to a good story. Children love to have a story read to them or told to them, we have three grandchildren spending this week with us along with their parents and there has been much story telling. A well told story leaves people wanting to know “how does it end” or “how does it come out?” You sit down in front of the TV and a “Peanuts” special comes on and even though you have seen it before you are entranced again by the story line. Will Charlie get to kick the football this time or will Lucy pull it up just as his foot gets there?

The Bible has a word for this “wanting to see how the story turns out.” The word is “waiting.” Waiting to see how the story ends. For the Bible is basically a story. When theologians and Bible Scholars are pushed to what a particular passages means, the scholar finally pushes his/her chair back, takes off their glasses and says—“Once upon a time....”

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus ... Early on the morning of the first day of the week the women made their way down the garden path to the tomb ... Ten days after Jesus ascension into heaven as the disciples and others were gathered in the upper room a sudden wind blew through the windows and filled the house.” The Bible is a story and the characters spend time waiting on the Lord. Ask anyone who is a child at heart what they are waiting for this Christmas and they will tell you they are waiting to hear the story once again.

The story begins today with a king, Ahaz, and a prophet, Isaiah. The king is worried because the armies of two nations are surrounding him and want to conquer him, his people and the land including Jerusalem. Imagine how frightening that would be! Terror! Where is homeland security? God’s man, Isaiah shows up and says, “Good news, king! God will give you a sign any sign you want it can be as high as heaven or as low as Sheol. Just ask king and God will do it for you!” Wow, what an offer from God, he is trying to help the poor king and his frightened people.

But the king isn’t sure. He says, “No, I would rather not bother God with this worry. I don’t want to put God to the test!” Isaiah, remember he is the prophet of God, can’t believe it. Here God is offering the king good news but the king doesn’t want it. Maybe he is afraid or he doesn’t trust God or thinks God might trick him? What do you think? Does God do that?

So then Isaiah says, “Hear this, O house of David! He’s talking now to everyone – all the people. Your king has wearied you with this talk of war and destruction. Now, he is going to weary God also?” How can God help someone who doesn’t want help or is too afraid to receive help or who doesn’t trust God?”

“So king, Ahaz, listen up. You might not have wanted a sign but God is going to give you a sign anyway.” And this is the sign:

“Look, there is a young woman who is going to give birth to a son and his name will be Immanuel. He will eat a very healthy diet, not this food that you eat, king; he will eat curds and honey, and by that time he will be old enough to refuse the evil and to do the good.”

And oh king, by the time the child is old enough to refuse the evil and to the good the kings that you dread so much will be dead and their lands will be deserted.

The king was afraid to ask God for a sign because he didn't trust enough in God to get by his own fears. He couldn't imagine that God was going to help him and get him out of his troubles. Well, the story doesn't have a happy ending for Ahaz if you continue to read the chapters later in Isaiah. Ahaz continues to make alliances with his enemies to ensure his reign. Eventually it led to his downfall but the young woman had given birth and by the time Ahaz was leaving the scene his son Hezekiah, one of the best kings ascends the throne and lives out the prophecy of Isaiah.

The words in Isaiah 7 about a young woman, “look she is with child ... and they will call him Immanuel” are certainly a light shining from the 8th century down to the first century A.D. when the writer of Matthew remembers them and includes them in the birth story of Jesus as told to Joseph. He says, the woman Joseph was engaged to is going to have a son and Matthew quotes from Isaiah 7:14 ... “Look the virgin shall conceive and have a child and they shall name him Emmanuel (God with us)!” They couldn't believe it and we find it hard to believe as well if we are honest with ourselves. Why would God do something like this for us anyway? The gods or our own little gods that we have made up for ourselves don't do things like that for us. So why would the big God with the capital “G” do this?

I think that is one of the reasons we really busy ourselves at Christmas, to try and avoid “the real reason behind the season.” If we stopped and thought about it ... it would either drive us crazy trying to figure out the “why?” or we would become believers in “the whole God came to earth business.”

There is a legend from the Middle Ages, which tells of the time when the whole world became fascinated with the story of the Christ-child in the manger. Tens of thousands were charmed into belief and attachment to the meaning behind what came to earth on Christmas Eve. The whole earth sensed a rebirth. But then, this legend says, the devil and his kind got worried. They called a council meeting to determine what to do and how they could combat such an outrageous overthrow of their rule in the hearts of women and men everywhere.

After several heated arguments and sundry compromises, the strategy they went with was “the Christmas rush.” (Now remember this was in the Middle Ages) Can you believe it? So the devil decided to send his little nephew and niece devils to and fro throughout the whole wide earth to busy people with the myriads of little devilish things they like to do anyway. (It was said that the devil feared Christmas more than any other thing.) With all of the outward celebrations and the long lists of things to do and get and busy yourself with ... the inward strength and glory would

go unnoticed. Ever since (they reported a full 500 years ago) the strategy has been working. More and more of God's people have forgotten what Christmas is all about.

So, along comes Advent again this year, taking all that is ordinary and regular and same about the world and crowning it with the loving kindness that only Advent/Christmas can bring. It was that way back at the time of Isaiah when doom and gloom was everywhere and the king wouldn't even ask God for a sign or word of hope. But God gave it to him anyway ... Look, a young woman will soon give birth and the child's name will be Immanuel ... God is with us! And he was. Or, in the new beginning when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judah in the days of Herod the King ... and Joseph was encouraged with the same words, "Look a virgin shall conceive and give birth and we will call him Emmanuel, God is with us." And he was. Wise men came on their search seeking after some new way of seeing things, had their search ennobled. Shepherds in the fields gossiping away the lonely hours guarding sheep that belonged to others in the town, had their gossip changed to the greatest word they had ever heard. Mary and Joseph, in that most natural of all miraculous events that a man and woman can encounter, birth, and it became the pivotal point of all history. Ordinary people, doing their own thing, as they saw it all to do and along came Emmanuel, a little baby that they wrapped in the only cheap cloths they had at their disposal and their ordinariness became extraordinary.

Don't let Emmanuel get away from you this Advent/Christmas season. Don't let Emmanuel just become another word: whisper it in your prayers at night, say it aloud when you arise each day, Emmanuel ... for surely God is with us and with us again!