

You may have caught the familiar strains of Advent in this morning's call to worship: "Come into our world, O God. . . . Come, Emmanuel. Come among us in hope." Acknowledging the many indications of darkness and brokenness afflicting not only the world out there but also afflicting the world up close and personal, we went on to pray for God's transforming peace, joy and love. Thus the church and our Jewish forebears and cousins have prayed through the centuries and will continue to pray into the foreseeable future. Advent on the Christian calendar is a time when we appropriately and honestly look around us and within us confessing that all is not as it should be. It is a time of openly raising our longing, our yearning for wholeness and completion. It is a time of seeking God's intervention, presence and strength in setting things right. Advent acknowledges the night even as it anticipates and lives toward the dawn.

Joining the faithful of the ages, we sing Advent's hymn "Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We can trace some of its words, affectionately called the Great O's, back to the 5th or 6th century, and its plaintive tune at least to the 15th century and perhaps even the 8th. Its hope-filled refrain, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come," was added later. Each of the traditional seven verses begins with a title for the Christ adapted from the book of Isaiah: *O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Rising Sun, O King of the Nations, and O Emmanuel*. Each of its verses expresses the struggle of human history and the longing for salvation, light, healing, and deliverance. Isaiah's seven titles are so arranged that if we begin with the last and take the first letter of each, we have the Latin words *ero cras* and the joyful promise, "Tomorrow, I will come."

Some rebel against the heaviness of Advent, arguing that we need to get on with the joy of Christmas rather than becoming bogged down in the doleful waiting of Advent. Human history, however, like our own personal histories, is not always joyful. Indeed, the very fact that the Great Antiphons span the centuries is itself a demonstration of the deep meaning the faithful in every age have attached to their pleas and the deep sense of need that has spurred their recollection. So trace, if you will, their haunting words through the annals of history where human beings battling the dark night of the soul have prayed, "O come, thou Dayspring from on high. . . .disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight." Just as warfare, injustice and human sickness, want and need have stalked every age, so the faithful of every age have cried out to God for understanding and deliverance.

Imagine the antiphons' pleas being sung today among newly targeted Christians in Egypt and Syria. Hear their cries rising from the hutments of African communities devastated by famine and cruelty. Hear them drifting across the refugee camps of Darfur. They sound on the oncology floors of hospitals, down the hallways of the nursing home and in the loneliness of a living room recently bereft of a loved one. "Captive Israel" mourning "in lonely exile" speaks not just of the distant past, but of the tragic reality of the human struggle. The bright light of God's coming matters and matters greatly because it is set over against the deep darkness of human evil, human want and the fundamental conviction that life is always unfinished and we do indeed need a God of mercy and deliverance.

God comes to save. Matthew, probably writing within a decade of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, knows the trauma of living among a people experiencing the devastating loss of every semblance of security and self-determination. In keeping with his heritage, his story of the annunciation of Jesus' birth assigns the baby two significant names. Naming, of course, was a highly significant act in the ancient tradition. It was not just about assigning a child a convenient label to distinguish him or her from other children; it spoke of character and purpose and mission. We are aware of instances in the Bible's story where, after a life-altering event or upon receipt of a significant mission, a person's name is changed to meet the new situation. Abram becomes Abraham; Jacob becomes Israel; Simon becomes Cephas. The naming of the child belonged to the father, and the very act indicated the father's affirmation that he accepted the child as his own—an act particularly significant in the birth of Jesus.

"You are to name him Jesus," the heavenly messenger instructs Joseph, "for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). "You are to name him *Yeshua (God saves)*, for he will save." Jesus' identity or mission, like that of the ancient Moses and his successor, Joshua (*Yeshua*), will be the salvation of his people. "His people," Matthew will go on to demonstrate as men from distant lands seek the baby out, will include other nations. It will include all the world.

God is with us. Again reaching back into Jewish history, Matthew makes note of a second name for the baby: Emmanuel, God with us. Given through the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz as Judah trembled on the brink of annihilation, Emmanuel (Immanuel in Hebrew) had no messianic overtones. It spoke to the immediate future. Syria and Israel, called "Ephraim," are pooling their considerable resources to overtake tiny Judah, and Judah's King Ahaz is afraid. Doubtful of God's protection, Ahaz is seeking instead to build an alliance with the mighty Assyria—a decision that will eventually come back to bite him. Feigning piety "as little faith often does, Fred Gaiser observes, the king dismisses the prophet's offer of a sign, which the exasperated prophet gives him anyway. Pointing perhaps to a young woman within their range of view, Isaiah tells the king, "The young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (7:14). Before the child is weaned, the prophet informs the king, the threatening nations will themselves be destroyed; but, sadly, Assyria, Ahaz's supposed salvation, come as invited and raining down destruction and death, make Judah a vassal of the Assyrian Empire.

Isaiah and Matthew draw upon the one source of security that Israel and God's people of all time have ever known. Again and again the prophets of Israel warned against any other security. The security of good times, of wealth, political clout, horses and chariots, and powerful allies all pale before the fundamental awareness that we live in the presence of God. Warned against presuming upon all the accouterments of wealth and power in times of peace and prosperity, we are called to the source of real strength and endurance in times of want and tragedy. Sounding within our personal crises and over the ghettos of our cities and the war zones of our world, the hope of Emmanuel strengthens us and enables us to endure. God is with us.

The sign of Emmanuel forms a parentheses around Matthew's Gospel. Spoken at the point of Jesus' birth, it is also placed on Jesus' lips at the conclusion of his ministry. "Remember," Jesus urges his fearful disciples as he is about to leave them, "I am with you always." Emmanuel, God with us, is the source of hope and strength. More than enabling us merely to endure the darkness, it raises our eyes and focuses our lives on confronting pain and evil and working for their elimination. Hunger, poverty, hatred, violence, warfare—all are forms of darkness that come up against a light they cannot overcome. Remember and live out of the promise, Matthew counsels us, "I am with you."

The sign of the child—how tragic that Ahaz could not see it. But how about us? I groaned this week when I opened the newspaper and read the article about yet another confrontation brewing in our community. Remembering the bitterness and self-righteous division and finger pointing that accompanied placing "In God we trust" signs over the court houses in our county, I sighed to think of what this round would be. And then it struck me, rather than insisting that everyone seeking justice in the courts pass under the religious sign of our choosing and rather than insisting that everyone who attends City Council listen to our prayers, what if the sign that we most sought to honor was the sign of the child? What if as a community we judged ourselves less by the words we post or our praying on street corners (and council chambers)? What if we gauge the goodness of our community and ourselves by the way we care for our children?

In our day as much as Isaiah's, we are tempted to look for short cuts, for the next sure fix, the next most unbeatable alliance. But what if the sign God gives us is the fragile sign of a child in need of our care—a child in need of access to good medical care, a child in need of the assurance of good nutrition, a child living in a household where parents can earn a salary adequate to her care?

Be sure of this, the message still holds. There are no shortcuts. "I am with you," the God who comes in Christ assures us. And, "Tomorrow I will come." And that's enough. Thanks be to God!