

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(December 8, 2013)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: SING A SONG OF CHRISTMAS**

## **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

Study #1

### **Introduction:** 'Tis the season...

While retailers and on-line sellers have been gearing up for Christmas since late July (!), we, here at Northwest, are just now beginning the season that celebrates the birth of Jesus. And this year, I'm doing something different to direct our worship to God for sending His Son.

A few months ago, a good friend suggested (and that suggestion was "Amen'ed" by other good friends) that we should organize our Sunday mornings in December around Christmas themes that are highlighted in familiar Christmas carols.

Being the incredibly flexible person that I am, I immediately jumped on the bandwagon of this c-h-a-n-g-e in our approach to Christmas. (if, by "immediately" we mean roughly three weeks...)

Well, the more I thought about it, the more sense it made (yes, even to me) to go in this new direction, and with thoughts of, "*Who says you can't teach an old pastor new tricks,*" I began preparing messages that revolve around some of our favorite Christmas songs.

This morning, our theme song is the beautiful Christmas carol, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

The words of the song are ancient, dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (or perhaps even from the 8<sup>th</sup> century).

Originally written in Latin, the verses were translated into English in the mid-1800's.<sup>1</sup>

The text of the song is based, loosely, on a biblical prophecy that says, [*Isaiah 7:14*] *a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*

But the heart of the song is the desperate longing of the people of God for the arrival of the One God would send to save them.

The Old Testament referred to this One as the Messiah, and around the time of the birth of Jesus, Jewish hopes were running at a fever pitch for Messiah's arrival.

Hopes for a deliverer, for salvation always run high during tough times. And times were tough in those days.

### **Son of God to Rescue Us from Our Messes**

#### **Israel in the Years Leading Up to Jesus' Birth**

*Israel's sorry plight at the time of Jesus' birth...*

After a glorious past, Israel was living a humiliating present.

Out of Israel had come mighty judges like Samson and Deborah and Samuel. There had been God-fearing kings like David and Solomon and Jehoshaphat and Josiah.

Now, Israel was subject to another kingdom. The ruler of that kingdom was Caesar Augustus, off in Rome, hundreds of miles away.

His surrogate ruler over the land of Israel was Herod the Great, a tyrant who made life miserable for the Jews. Herod built luxurious palaces for himself while the people under him suffered with burdensome taxes.

Because of those Roman taxes, the Jews were generally poor. Because of the two hundred years of Roman domination, the Jews were oppressed and, as often happens to oppressed people, generally depressed.

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<sup>1</sup> By Mason Neale and Henry Sloane Coffin.

The leaders of the nation of Israel - leaders who were tolerated by the Romans to give the Jews the mirage of at least a bit of self-government - were uniformly corrupt. Sadducees and priests were in it for what they could get out of it, not at all shepherds guiding the people of God in the ways of God.

Added to these hardships was what would have been, for the God-fearing Jews, the most grievous hardship of all, the lack of communication from God Himself.

Historically, God had spoken to His people. He spoke to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob. He gave Moses the Law. He wrestled with Jacob, whispered to Elijah, and spoke to and through the prophets. But it had been over four centuries since there had been any communication from God to His people. Not since the days of Malachi (5<sup>th</sup> century, B.C.) had God spoken.

Honestly, as much as every Jew would have told you that being a Jew was a tremendous honor, being a Jew during the days of Caesar Augustus was hard.

There were virtually no freedoms, no rights, no political powers or privileges. All power lay with Rome, and Rome treated the Jews with contempt, giving them no justice and mocking their religion and their God.

Now, there are any number of ways to respond to suffering and hardship. Some people, faced with hard times, give up and lose hope. Others get angry, rebel and revolt. And some shrug their shoulders and become apathetic cynics.

The Jews living in the days of Caesar Augustus did none of that. They cried out to God for deliverance. They expressed their longing for the Messiah.

*Israel longs for "Messiah"*

Alfred Edersheim was a Jewish Bible scholar who lived in the 1800's. I've come to rely on Edersheim his scholarly insight into Scripture and for his knowledge of Jewish history. He writes about the high hopes for a Deliverer (the Messiah) at this low point for the nation.

The Jews courageously maintained hope for God to make all things right. Rather than throw in the towel, they begged God for deliverance.

As Edersheim puts it, "...*despite national apostasy, the disappointing failure of the Maccabees, the tyrant rule of Herod, and the administration of a corrupt priesthood, the people still intensely longed for Messiah. In fact, they longed for Him in direct proportion as it seemed unlikely for Him to come at all.*"

Now, fast forward two thousand and thirteen years. Having seen the sorry plight of the ancient Jews at the time of Jesus' birth, what about our world...?

### **Fast Forward Two Thousand Years**

*Our sorry plight, 2013*

- You and I listen to the voice of the woman on the news who speaks of gunfire being a commonplace in her neighborhood.
- We listen as LeRoy Jacobson tells stories of the warring "tribes" in our NISD High Schools.
- We read of the growing use of hallucinogenic drugs, now made by outlaw chemists rather than grown by outlaw farmers. They are flooding the markets and taking lives.
- We see the evidence all around us of the toxic effect of wicked addictions - to controlled substances, to alcohol, sexual addictions, Internet addictions.
- We see the wreckage of lives ruined by sexual and physical abuse.
- We listen to stories of people who struggle because of a broken family.
- We read of corruption and injustice in high and low places.
- We witness the damage done by oppressors of the weak and powerless.
- You could take a drive through neighborhoods not far from your own and see poverty and blight and neglect.
- You could walk the floors of any hospital and look into the faces of pain and despair and wasting disease.
- And, on top of all of this, we see the growing absence of God in the lives of people you know and rub shoulders with every day.

The wreckage in our world today is overwhelming. The wreckage in the lives of people we love is overwhelming. It's enough to break your heart.

So, let it. Let it break your heart.

Take it all in. Absorb it and don't deny it. For just a moment, don't retreat to a safe bubble and pretend the ugliness isn't there. And what will you do with the ugliness you see?

*We long for God's intervention*

Will you become angry and rage against the machine and against "the man"?

Will you become withdrawn, throw in the towel, become depressed and morose, shrug your shoulders and retreat to an apathetic cynicism?

It's tempting to go there.

The ancient Jews, living under the tyranny of Rome, give us a better model for how to respond when living in tough times. They expressed their longing for the direct intervention of God.

Today, despite how bad things are, we're in a far better place than those Jews were, living under Caesar and Herod, because Jesus has already come! Emmanuel is here!

We don't cry, "*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*" in the way that ancient Jews did because two thousand years ago, God sent His Son. He intervened in history in a way He never had before. He barged right in and changed everything.

And having sent His Son, God isn't finished directly intervening in His world. The arrival of Jesus was the most astounding intervention, but it wasn't the last intervention. The arrival of Jesus is the foundation for His all other interventions.

And what the crises of our world need, above and beyond anything else, is the intervention of God.

One of the former elders of our church, a man named Konrad Kern, was fond of saying, "*There is no problem here that a little miracle wouldn't fix.*"

Konrad was right! An intervention from God would fix everything. All we need is for God to barge in, to meddle. And the good news is that our God is still very much an intervening, meddling God.<sup>2</sup>

It takes courage to boldly pray for God's intervention because He intervenes according to His own time table. He doesn't respond to our demands, But He does respond to our prayers.

I wonder if *desperation* is a word we don't toss around as much as we should. But given the desperate condition so much of our world is in, doesn't it make sense to *desperately* long for and to *desperately* pray for God to do the things that only He can do?

This morning, let's agree to join with the ancient Jews and ask God for break-throughs for ourselves, our loved ones, and our friends, and our world. Let's ask Him to do the things that only He can do. We hear that desperate longing in the words of our song for today:

**O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to Thee, O Israel.**

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<sup>2</sup> Some fall into Deistic ways of thinking, believing that God no longer intervenes. Peter encountered that same type of thinking in his own day, and quoted them: [2 Peter 3:3] *Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, [4] and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."* But God does get involved! Hear Paul, writing to the church at Philippi: [1:6] *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.* To the church at Rome, [8:28] *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* Or, James, writing to persecuted Jewish Christians, [5:16] *Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.*

There is another theme I want us to see from our song this morning. As the author writes of a desperate longing for Emmanuel's arrival, he mentions Emmanuel's lineage. In the second stanza we sing:

**O come, Thou rod of Jesse...**

Think with me for a moment about the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah. It is, first of all, a royal genealogy.

### **Son of David to Save Us from Our Sins**

#### **Messiah's Line**

*A royal genealogy*

Abraham and kin (Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22)

Biblical genealogies are goldmines. Poring over them will bring great insight into God's sovereign plan, the generational development of character (or not) - and more.

The Messiah's line can be traced all the way back to the beginning of the human race. In the Garden of Eden, God promised the fallen Adam and Eve that the offspring (seed) of the woman would one day crush the serpent's head (the serpent being a stand-in for Satan).<sup>3</sup>

That was God's promise that Satan doesn't get the last word. In the end, God wins. Eve's "seed" will have the final victory. And we are able to trace the path of that promised "seed" from Adam and Eve forward in time.

Among the more prominent historical ancestors of the Messiah was Abraham, the father of the Jews.

God called Abraham out of the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans and promised him great blessing. Abraham's assignment was that having BEEN blessed, he would BE a blessing to those in his world.<sup>4</sup>

He was promised on at least four different occasions that from his descendants would come a people and that from that people would come a Savior, a Deliverer - the One the Jews would later call *Messiah*.

Further, God said that this Savior wouldn't come through Ishmael<sup>5</sup>, Abraham's first son, but through Isaac, the offspring of Abraham and his wife, Sarah.

In the next generation, Isaac was promised that the seed would pass through Jacob and NOT through Jacob's first-born twin brother, Esau.

And in the next generation, Jacob, who had twelve sons, prophesied from his own deathbed that his son, Judah, would carry the seed of the Savior forward with this:

***[Genesis 49:10] The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet***

David, Solomon (2 Samuel 7)

From Judah, hundreds of years of Jewish history pass with little mention of the coming Savior. But His story becomes an important part of the unfolding drama of God's redemption around the time of the story of Ruth (the period of the Judges).

At the end of the book of Ruth, the author gives us the line of Ruth and Boaz, going backward and then forward.

***[Ruth 4:18] Now these are the generations of Perez*** (Perez being the son of Judah): ***to Perez was born Hezron, [19] and to Hezron was born Ram, and to Ram, Amminadab, [20] and to Amminadab was born Nahshon, and to Nahshon, Salmon, [21] and to Salmon was born Boaz, and to Boaz, Obed, [22] and to Obed was born Jesse, and to Jesse, David.***

Eve's seed was a royal seed, finding its way to David, the man after God's heart.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:15

<sup>4</sup> That is definitely the sense of Genesis 12:3.

<sup>5</sup> Ishmael's mother was Hagar, Sarah's maid. Ishmael is the father of the Arab peoples.

Then, the seed went forward through Solomon and then through every last one of the kings of the nation of Israel who sat on the throne in Jerusalem!<sup>6</sup>

The line of Messiah (“the rod of Jesse”) is indeed a royal line. But the line of Messiah also has a dark side. There is scandal in the genealogy of Emmanuel.

In most everybody’s family tree that lowlights along with highlights. You might have thought that God would have protected the line of the Savior, the line of Emmanuel, from ugliness. He did not.

And the ugly parts of the story of the Savior’s line are every bit as important as the kingly parts.

#### *Messiah’s scandalous genealogy*

Read Genesis 38 and you’ll discover the horrible way in which Judah became the father of Perez.<sup>7</sup> It involves gross sin on the part of Judah!

The line of the Savior includes a prostitute named Rahab, the harlot who spared the two Jews who were sent to spy out the city before Israel marched around Jericho for seven days. (See Joshua 7)

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<sup>6</sup> That means every king of the southern kingdom of Judah, the rebel northern kingdom being ruled by Jewish kings of different lines.

<sup>7</sup> Judah had married a Canaanite woman, who had borne him two sons, Er and Onan. When Er, his older son, came of age, Judah gave him a Canaanite wife named Tamar in marriage. In short order, both Er and then Onan died by the Lord’s hand because they were sinful. Then, Judah, the father-in-law, promised Tamar, who was now a widow, that he would give her his third son, Shelah, to be her husband when Shelah grew up. Well, the years passed, and Shelah grew up, but Judah didn’t keep his promise. He did not give Tamar to be Shelah’s wife. So, she took matters into her own hands. She dressed herself as a prostitute, and stationed herself by the side of the road as prostitutes did in those days. She waited until Judah passed that way. When Judah walked by her, he paid her for sexual favors, not knowing who she was. Later, when Judah was told that Tamar, his daughter-in-law, was pregnant, he became indignant at HER immorality! But, she was exonerated when she revealed that HE was the father of the child!

Yes, of course Rahab was a woman of great courage and faith. But are you surprised that God allowed her to play a role in the eventual birth of Messiah?

This Rahab married a man named Salmon and they had a son named Boaz. And then Boaz himself married a member of the cursed race of the Moabites, Ruth, who became the great-grandmother of King David.<sup>8</sup>

And for a final ugly, consider this.

The seed of the coming Savior passed from David to Solomon. Solomon’s mother was a woman named Bathsheba, the already-married woman David forcibly took from one of his choice soldiers, Uriah the Hittite, whom he then murdered to cover his sin of adultery.

You may wonder why God would have allowed such atrocities in Messiah’s line. Why not protect Him from such shame as Judah’s hypocrisy, Rahab’s harlotry, Ruth’s foreignness, and David’s sin?

I believe that God purposefully allowed such things in Messiah’s line to highlight His grace and to highlight His heart for the world.

The atrocities committed by those who are in Messiah’s lineage may not initially appear to be any great encouragement - but they are.

No, Jewish nationalism is not enhanced by the stories of the Canaanite Rahab and the Moabite Ruth. But through their stories we are reminded that, just as the Lord promised Abraham, the Messiah will not be for the Jews only, but for the whole world.

And Judah’s Tamar-sin-story and David’s sin-against-God-with-Bathsheba-story highlights that human sinfulness and failings will never thwart God’s purposes.

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<sup>8</sup> Both the Ammonites and the Moabites were mongrel races which had their beginnings with the immorality of Lot, Abraham’s nephew. And, for hundreds of years, they had been nothing but thorns in Israel’s side. Yet, as recorded in the Scriptures, God orchestrated a wonderful love story so that Salmon and Rahab’s son, Boaz, came into contact with a **Moabite** woman named **Ruth**, and bore a son who figures prominently into the line of the Messiah.

God will use sinful, failing men and women to accomplish all His will, and to bring blessing to the world.

So, the Messiah's genealogy is a ROYAL and a SCANDALOUS and a REDEMPTIVE genealogy.

The truth is that the kinds of people mentioned in the genealogy are precisely the kinds of people God sent the Messiah to save.

His genealogy proves that God can turn any mess - including your messes and my messes - into something beautiful.

Messiah, Emmanuel, David's Son, the Rod of Jesse has come. And His arrival brought the most wonderful combination of royalty and humble servanthood the world has ever seen.

The prophet Isaiah predicted, hundreds of years before Jesus was born that the Messiah would be a great and mighty king.

### **Messiah's Saving Work**

*A Mighty King (Isaiah 9:6)*

***“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”*** (Isaiah 9:6)<sup>9</sup>

This is not surprising. Study the genealogy and see His royal lineage and we expect that He will wear a crown. And one day, He will certainly wear a kingly crown!

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<sup>9</sup> The birthplace of Messiah was also predicted in Micah's prophecy to be the hometown of King David, the tiny village of Bethlehem. ***[Micah 5:2] But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.***

We would not have expected that the only crown the Messiah would wear when He came in the days of Caesar Augustus was a crown of thorns. But that is what happened, because the role of Emmanuel when He came the first time was to be a *suffering servant*.

*A Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53)*

In Isaiah 53 we discover that the Messiah will suffer cruelly at the hands of men, and will not receive the honor that is due Him. The words “pierced” and “crushed” and “chastened” and “scourging” speak of a terrible suffering.

And when the prophet writes of bearing our griefs and sorrows, and of the Lord laying our iniquities upon Him, we realize that we are reading a description of a redemptive suffering.

This is a prophecy of the fulfillment of the promise made in the Garden of Eden. Emmanuel will reverse the curse. He will take away the burden of sin and guilt and will free us to live to the glory of God.

Remember the theme of our song for today: desperate longing; desperation for the arrival of Emmanuel at a time of great need.

This is exactly the story of Jesus, who came to earth to redeem us BEFORE we had solved our problems, PRIOR to getting our acts together, and IN ADVANCE of our getting good. He arrived when we were in desperate need.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans.

***[Romans 5:6] For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...[8] But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.***

Or, as he says in his letter to the Galatians, God sent Jesus just in the nick of time.

***[Galatians 4:4] but when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law***

**[5] so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.<sup>10</sup>**

He came to us while we were lost.

Now, here is my story. I am still a mess. People who know me well will affirm that. I've got failings of all sorts. On any given day I will struggle with failure of nerve, lack of resolve, prayerlessness, impatience, and/or selfishness.

I'm a mess. But I'm not lost. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Jesus saved me when I put my faith in Him. What our song begs has become my story:

**O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny  
From depths of Hell Thy people save  
And give them victory o'er the grave  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.**

It is my hope and prayer that this is your story, too. Or, if it hasn't yet become your story, that it will be your story **TODAY**, when you place the treasure of your trust in God's Son, Jesus, Emmanuel, the Messiah who has come to save your eternal soul.

The theme for this morning is desperation for God to do what only God can do. Desperation for the coming of Jesus.

Eagerness for Christmas morning is easy for six year olds. Eagerness for God to show His power and strength is beautiful to behold in young and old alike.

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<sup>10</sup> When we read that Christ came "*in the fullness of the time*" we understand that there was a timeliness to Jesus' appearance. He came during the *pax Romana*, a three centuries long season of unparalleled peace and world stability that dominated the Indo-European world. At the time of Jesus' birth there were good Roman roads and a common language (Greek). Paganism's decline created a vacuum into which Christianity easily slid.

And as we wrap up today, we'll see an oldster who is the very picture of eagerness. To take in this scene, we move eight days past the birth of Jesus.

### **Son of God to Bring Us Eternal Life and Joy!**

According to the Mosaic Law, the eighth day was the day that Joseph and Mary were required to bring their Son to have Him circumcised and to dedicate Him to God, complete with a sacrificial offering.

So, we watch them walk into the Temple in Jerusalem. They have brought an offering - the offering approved for the poor, two turtledoves and a gift of five shekels.

Off to the side, there is an old man. His name is Simeon.

Simeon isn't a major player in the New Testament, but he is an intriguing man. He's righteous and devout. Luke tells us that the Spirit of God had revealed to Simeon that He would see the Messiah before he died.

Can you imagine receiving that kind of a promise from God?

If I were told by God that I would see snow in San Antonio, I'd be getting up every morning all winter long and looking out the window to see if, just maybe, today was the day!

I believe Simeon woke up every day, looking at every man he met, asking God, "*Is that the One, Lord?*" He was always on the lookout, was always searching crowds of fervent young men to see if THAT guy might be the Messiah.

On this particular day, Jesus' eighth day, Simeon walks in as Joseph and Mary have brought their Son to be dedicated.

The Spirit prompted Simeon to know that, on this day, somewhere in the Temple, was the Messiah!

Can you imagine the thrill going through his soul? Can you see Simeon looking around, waiting for God to reveal to him which one of these fine young men, worshipping fervently in God's Temple was THE ONE?

Then, just as the priest dedicated the infant Jesus, just as Simeon heard the priest say His name, “*Yeshua*” (Jesus/Savior), the Spirit lets him know (by what means, we don’t know) that the Messiah is the child in Mary’s arms.

Simeon sees Messiah as an eight day old infant!

And in what must have been unfettered joy, Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his own arms, blessed God, and said:

*[Luke 2:29] “And now Lord, You are releasing Your bondservant to depart in peace*

*According to Your word*

*[30] For my eyes have seen Your salvation*

*[31] Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples*

***[32] A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES***

*And the glory of Your people Israel.*

Simeon knew that the promise that he would see Messiah was fulfilled when he saw that Baby. He knew that the infant he was holding was the key to his own and every other person’s greatest need.

So, who will Emmanuel be for you this year? Will you allow the Messiah - the One descended from Abraham and Judah and David, through Tamar and Rahab and Bathsheba, the Kingly Redeemer - to be your life’s solid foundation? Your soul’s salvation?

### **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
Shall come to Thee O Israel!

O Come, Thou Wisdom, from on high,  
And order all things far and nigh;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
Shall come to Thee O Israel!

O Come, O Come, Thou Lord of might,  
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai’s height  
In ancient times did give the law,  
In cloud, and majesty, and awe.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
Shall come to THEE O Israel!

O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse’s stem,  
From ev’ry foe deliver them  
That trust Thy mighty power to save,  
And give them vict’ry o’er the grave.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
Shall come to Thee O Israel!

O Come, Thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heav’nly home,  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
That we no more have cause to sigh.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
Shall come to THEE O Israel!

O Come, Thou Dayspring from on high,  
And cheer us by thy drawing nigh;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death’s dark shadow put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
shall come to Thee O Israel!

O Come, Desire of the nations, bind  
In one the hearts of all mankind;  
Bid every strife and quarrel cease  
And fill the world with heaven’s peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,  
Shall come to Thee O Israel!