

A TIME OF EXPECTATION**2 CORINTHIANS 6:10**

Have you ever noticed that Christmas is a time of great expectations? Maybe that's one reason it can also be a time of great disappointment. A boy by the name of Alfred was disappointed in Santa Claus, quite frankly. So he wrote Santa a letter like you're supposed to do. Here's what it said. "Dear Santa, You did not bring me anything good last year. You did not bring me anything good the year before that. This is your last chance. Alfred." Sounds a bit ominous, doesn't it? Apparently, Santa did not meet Alfred's expectations. Christmas expectations. You expect to spend time with family and friends. You expect to hear certain kinds of music and songs. You expect people to decorate their homes. You expect to enjoy certain kinds of food. For example, I dearly love egg nog. But this is the only time of year I can justify indulging in "a heart attack in a glass." I am looking forward to my rendezvous with egg nog! Expectation!

Expectations are an important part of the Christmas story. This Christmas season I'm trying to show how well-known, much loved Christmas carols underline or illuminate important aspects of the message of Christmas. Sing we now of Christmas! We'll look at the words of these carols and see how they support and promote the more important words of Scripture itself. The carols I want to feature today emphasize the fact Christmas is a time of expectation. The first one I want to talk about is...

"O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL"

If you enjoy history and stuff that's really old, you'll appreciate this Christmas carol. It's probably the oldest carol still sung today. It goes all the way back to the 800s – some 13 centuries ago. For that reason, it's been called one of the most important songs in the history of the Christian faith. Not just in the history of Christmas songs – in the history of the Christian faith itself. We don't know who the original author was. Most likely, it was a Roman Catholic monk or priest who lived before 800 A.D. The earliest version of this carol was written in Latin and used in Roman Catholic Advent worship services for one week before Christmas Day. Because it originally had seven verses representing different biblical views of the Messiah, one verse was sung each day before Christmas. Because it alludes to many of the biblical prophecies fulfilled by Christ's birth, it was helpful to many followers of Jesus centuries ago few of whom could read or had access to the Bible. It's kind of a condensed Bible study of the Messiah – who He was, what He represented, and why He had come to Earth.

John Mason Neale (1818-1866), an Anglican priest, is the reason this carol is known worldwide today. Neale was a brilliant man who could write and speak more than 20 languages, but Anglican Church leaders of his day and time considered him too evangelical, too progressive, and too much of a free thinker to be allowed the opportunity to pastor an influential church in England. So Neale was sent to the obscure Madeira Islands which belong to Portugal off the northwest coast of Africa. There, in addition to pastoring the Anglican congregation on the main island, Neale also began an orphanage, a school for girls, and a house of refuge for prostitutes. He eventually came across the Latin version of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." He was

the one who translated it into English. It was first published in the 1850s in England and within 25 years became very popular in both Europe and the United States. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" has now been translated into many languages and embraced by almost every Christian tradition and denomination.

We don't know the original melody for this carol. The earliest tune associated with it is called "Veni Emmanuel" and it's an example of what's sometimes called "plainsong." Although an Englishman by the name of Thomas Helmore was instrumental in the musical arrangement of the carol we sing now, the tune itself goes back to a worship service processional written in the 1400s in Portugal. The earliest Christian music wasn't accompanied with instruments. Plainsong was simple group singing that we'd probably say today sounds a lot like a chant. Or think of singing a song a capella or even in barbershop quartet style. Those styles evoke plainsong. Many Christmas carols have exuberant and upbeat melodies like the ones we featured last week - "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing" and "Joy To The World." The tune to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" matches the mood of the song very well. It has a kind of longing, aching, yearning, and hoping quality to it which matches its message. The second carol is...

"COME, THOU LONG-EXPECTED JESUS"

This carol was written by Charles Wesley (1707-1788) in 1744. We featured another, better known Christmas carol written by Wesley last week - "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing." Again, he was the youngest of 18 children and the brother of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Charles Wesley was an influential pastor himself and the author of some 3,000 hymns. It's clear Charles Wesley wanted people to remember Advent and Christmas as commemorating both the birth of Jesus, but also as a time when we think about and prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus. This carol has been set to a number of different tunes over the years. The tune most commonly associated with it today is called "Hyfrydol." It's a Welsh tune - one of my personal favorites, by the way - written in the 1800s by Rowland Hugh Prichard (1811-1887) when he was only 19 years of age. He lived a pretty obscure life, but he's remembered for having a great voice and being a choir director in the country of Wales, part of Great Britain.

Now, I put these two carols together today, because they're both about an important aspect of Christmas: hope, expectation, longing, and yearning. Being a follower of Jesus is an "already, but not yet" experience. Yes, God has already done some incredible things for us in and through Jesus. But His work isn't yet complete. These carols help us remember, first of all, that Christmas is about...

A LONGING ALREADY FULFILLED.

Both carols take us back to the centuries before Jesus was born when the people of Israel longed and hoped for their promised Messiah. When we sing, "O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel" with the great chorus, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel," we recall how Jesus fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies to the people of Israel. When we sing "Come, thou long-

expected Jesus” we celebrate how we, too, are included in the blessings of God’s fulfilled promises. The nation of Israel had to wait a long time for God’s promises to come true, but when the time was right God proved Himself to be faithful. Each and every one of us here today has benefitted from the fulfillment of those great promises as well. We know in the same way God will be faithful to us as we was to Israel.

Each verse of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” highlights an Old Testament title for the coming Messiah that Jesus fulfilled. When we sing each verse of this hymn, we acknowledge Christ as the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies. Verse one starts out, “O come, O come, Emmanuel.” That takes us back to Isaiah, “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God is with us’).” (Is. 7:14 NLT). The angel that appeared to Joseph about 700 years later applied that verse specifically to Jesus, “All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet: ‘Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means “God is with us.”’” (Mt. 1:23 NLT) Emmanuel means Jesus is both fully God and fully human. Sin had so completely separated us from a holy God that no mere human being could have ever brought us back together. God Himself has to come down to us because no mere human being could bring us up to God. Only God could defeat death. Only God could conquer sin’s power and penalty. By the same token, Jesus also had to be fully human. God can’t die. Only human beings can die. God can’t die for our sins. Only a morally perfect human being could be a substitute for us. Jesus was and is Emmanuel.

The second verse begins, “O come, thou Rod of Jesse.” That’s another title for Jesus found in Isaiah, “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.” (Is. 11:1 KJV) Jesse was the father of David, Israel’s greatest king. The Lord had promised David that the Messiah would be one of his descendants. David’s family was pictured as a great tree, but the tree had been reduced to just a stump by Isaiah’s time – some 300 years after King David’s reign. But Isaiah said the story wasn’t going to end there. There was still life in that stump – God’s life waiting for God’s time. A newer translation brings out the message more clearly, “Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.” (Is. 11:1 NLT) Out of that “good as dead” stump would grow a Branch (Jesus) that would produce wonderful spiritual fruit. The carol spells it out: “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.” You find that same idea strongly emphasized in Wesley’s carol. “Come, thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free; From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in thee.” Jesus freed us forever, His people, from being Satan’s slaves through His birth, death and resurrection.

The third verse says, “O come, thou Dayspring.” The word “dayspring” is an ancient word that refers to dawn or the light from the rising sun. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, used that title in his prophecy about Jesus. “Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Lk. 1:78-79 KJV). A newer translation brings out the essential meaning of that title

“dayspring.” “Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light (dayspring) from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.” (Lk. 1:78-79 NLT) Now we understand the rest of the carol’s third verse: “O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer, Our spirits by thine advent here; And drive away the shades of night, And pierce the clouds and bring us light!” Jesus was, is, and always will be the Light of the world.

The next title for Jesus is an interesting one. “O come, thou Key of David, come.” What’s that about? It also comes from Isaiah, “I will give him the key to the house of David—the highest position in the royal court. When he opens doors, no one will be able to close them; when he closes doors, no one will be able to open them.” (Is. 22:22 NLT) We’re back to God’s promise to King David that the Messiah would be his descendant. Jesus Himself identified with that title in the Book of Revelation when He said, “This is the message from the one who is holy and true, the one who has the key of David. What he opens, no one can close; and what he closes, no one can open” (Rev. 3:8 NLT) The fourth verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” says, “O come, thou Key of David, come, And open wide our heavenly home; Make safe the way that leads on high, And close the path to misery.” Jesus is the One who rescues us from Hell, then unlocks the door into Heaven, and brings us to our eternal home with Him. And, by the way, Jesus also is the One who holds the key into God’s Kingdom and there’s no way to get into that kingdom but through Him.

The last verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” was apparently translated by another gentleman, Henry Sloane Coffin, in 1916. It used a title for Jesus that Wesley also used in “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” In both carols, Jesus is called the “Desire of nations.” “O come, Desire of nations, bind, All peoples in one heart and mind; Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease; Fill all the world with heaven’s peace.” Wesley wrote, “Israel’s strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth thou art; Dear Desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.” That title goes back to the Old Testament prophet Haggai who wrote, “For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.” (Hag. 2:6-7 KJV) It makes us think of God’s promise to save people out of every nation, every culture, every race, and every ethnicity the world over. It reminds me of what John saw in his vision in Revelation, “After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb.... And they were shouting with a great roar, ‘Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9-10 NLT)

When Jesus was born, it was a longing fulfilled. “Born thy people to deliver, Born a child and yet a king, Born to reign in us forever, Now thy gracious kingdom bring. By thine own eternal Spirit, Rule in all our hearts alone; By thine all-sufficient merit, Raise us to thy glorious throne.” Emmanuel arrived! The rod of Jesse sprouted! The Dayspring rose on the horizon! The Key of David unlocked the door! The Desire of nations was revealed! Our longing for salvation was satisfied. It was and is a longing already fulfilled. Because of Jesus, the necessary blood was shed. The debt was paid.

Forgiveness was purchased. God's awful anger against our sin was set aside. Our adoption into God's family was secured. The down payment who is the Holy Spirit was given. The future is sure. The joy is great. Case closed. No more to say about it. End of story, right? No. Not at all. Both carols suggest to us that there is in Christmas...

A LONGING NOT YET FULFILLED.

God has yet to finish what He started. God wasn't done with our salvation on Christmas Day. God wasn't done with it on Good Friday or Easter Sunday either. What He's done for us so far is magnificent and marvelous beyond description, but He's not done yet. Christmas is a time to remember that God's salvation has still only just begun. We live in an "already, but not yet" world as Jesus' followers. For example, death still snatches away people we love. Did you know about 3 and ½ million people will die this Advent season all over the world and half a million of them will be children? That's about 105 persons every minute. Most of them die without any hope. A small fraction make the news – like some of the victims of terrorism or mass shootings. The vast majority of people who will die this month will be unknown except to a few others close by.

Disease still makes our lives miserable. Mass shootings still terrorize us. Satan still prowls around wrecking people's lives. Our sinful nature still fights against the Holy Spirit's control of our lives. Even with Jesus, life is hard. How does the Bible put it? "We long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us." (Rom. 8:23 NLT) We still long for Jesus' Second Coming, because we know this world can't be fixed without Him. The Bible says, "You eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:7 NLT). Following Jesus goes back and forth between the already and the not yet. We rightly experience overflowing joy because of what God has already done for us. Of course, rejoice! At the same time we yearn and long for God's complete victory. Scripture captures the tension when it says, "Our hearts ache, but we always have joy." (2 Cor. 6:10 NLT)

It's good to have Christmas carols that capture both ends of the spectrum. Of course, rejoice and celebrate! There's every good reason to do so. So, sing "Joy To the World" with all the fervor you can! But let's not think Christmas must be all about jolly jingle bells. It's also wonderful we have Christmas carols like the ones we consider today, because they're right in line with Scripture, too. When we sing, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" we're saying, "Lord Jesus, please come quickly. Sometimes I feel like I'm just hanging on for dear life. Lord, I long for You. I hope for You. I expect You." You hear the same thing in the "O" that begins every verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel": "O come, Emmanuel... O come, Rod of Jesse... O come, Dayspring... O come, Key of David... O come, Desire of nations." This is the "O" of longing. It reminds me of the next to last verse in the Bible where Jesus says, "Yes, I am coming soon!" (and the answer comes back) Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20 NLT)

When it comes to God, eternity, salvation, what are you longing for? Is it OK to expect, to anticipate, and to yearn for what you don't have yet? Absolutely! I love the Scripture

that says, “For he (Jesus) must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Ac. 3:21 NLT) God isn’t done yet. His plan is to restore all things! What does that mean? It means God has never given up on His original plan: to dwell with human being on this Earth. The climax of God’s plan is the creation of something the Bible calls the New Heaven and the New Earth. The Bible teaches our future and eternal home will combine Heaven and a completely transformed Earth. Right now, Heaven is God’s home and Earth is our home. But one day in the future, God will make this Earth into Heaven and Heaven into Earth. You will be in Heaven as you live on the Earth in a new physical, supernatural body free forever from disease and death. How many here today are ready for that? Are you longing for it? You can! You should!

The Bible says, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.” (2 Pt. 3:12 NLT) Listen to how it’s further described, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.... ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.’” (Rev. 21:1, 3-4 NLT) How many of you are looking forward to that? God has promised Jesus’ followers an endlessly joyful life, an endlessly meaningful life, an endlessly God-filled life. Christmas points to a spiritual reality that is both already, but not yet. Yes, we have a restored relationship with God made possible through Jesus. The original relationship was broken by our sin and rebellion, but it was restored through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But perfect fellowship with God this side of Heaven is still partial, still obstructed, and still hindered. We still live in a sinful, fallen world and we still carry around within us a sinful nature that resists God. But one day, every barrier between God and us is going to be gone.

Dale Cooper, a former Calvin College chaplain, recalls a moment when he was traveling home to his young family after having to spend the whole summer away from them. They’d been apart for so long. He was calling his wife from Chicago’s O’Hare airport to arrange his pick-up in Grand Rapids when Dale’s 4 year old son asked for the phone. His only words to his long absent daddy sounded like a sigh, “Daddy, when am I going to be where you are?” It’s right and good for you and me to say, “Abba Father – Heavenly Daddy – when am I going to be where you are?” It’s that sense of longing we can express when we sing carols like “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” or “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Even though we know Jesus goes with us and before us every day, we still can long for the day when we are with Him in all of the fullness and glory He will bring. We long for the day when we are with Him in a New Heaven and a New Earth, when all things are made new.

Already. But not yet. Has God already fulfilled many glorious promises? O, yes! So, rejoice! But are we living on the New Earth with new bodies and no sin? Not yet. So, it’s OK to sigh, too. At Christmas we can be full of confidence, but still cry out, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.”