

Other Peoples' Prayers

Matthew 3:1-12

It's the most wonderful time of the year. Everywhere you look, you see brightly colored decorations. Lights on houses, displays in yards, the big tree across from Beardshear covered in lights. Special coffee cups across the street, and special drinks and meals available wherever you eat. Festive displays in stores entice you to buy more. Everywhere you look, people are preparing for Christmas.

But one of the best ways we prepare for Christmas is singing familiar songs and sharing in familiar traditions. We do that at other times, too, such as when a crowd full of children sing along to the newest Disney song, or the crowd at Jack Trice sings along to Sweet Caroline. But as we get ready for Christmas, we can say the lines along with Linus in the Charlie Brown Christmas movie, or grumble along with the Grinch as he plots to steal Christmas, or predict the plotline of the next Hallmark movie on TV. We have words and songs and traditions that help us prepare for Christmas.

That's how we prepare for Christmas in the church, too. We have traditions that we follow. We decorate the sanctuary and the rest of the building. We put up the Advent wreath. The Sunday School children practice sharing the Christmas story through the special service next week. We hear familiar readings about John the Baptist, and hear the words of Isaiah and others pointing to the coming Savior. We have words and songs and traditions that help us prepare for Christmas.

The most important thing we do to prepare for Christmas, though, is to pray the prayers of those who came before us. We pray along with the generations praying for a Messiah. We pray along with the generations waiting for Jesus to

come again. We pray along with the generations that came before us, and we pray with the generations that are yet to come.

Anglican priest Tish Warren writes, "For most of church history, Christians understood prayer not primarily as a means of self-expression or an individual conversation with the divine, but as an inherited way of approaching God, a way to wade into the ongoing stream of the church's communion with him." That's what so much of this season is about. We join in familiar words and songs to join with Christians throughout time and space in preparing for Christmas. All of the O Antiphons we just read and sang are ancient verses that serve as the basis for the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." They're not just a song, though. They are prayers. Prayers for Emmanuel to come, for God to come down and be with us. Prayers that use seven different names of Jesus. Prayers that remind us of all that God has done in the past and what God has promised to do in the future. Prayers for God to come and redeem us as He redeemed the Israelites. Prayers to rescue those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, for us to be brought out into the light.

The prayers were written to be used as antiphons, to be sung before and after the singing of the Magnificat in the monasteries of Europe, in the days leading up to Christmas. But hidden in those old prayers is a message and a promise. We find not just our prayers to God in these prayers, but God's answer to these prayers.

The secret code the monks wrote into the O Antiphons some 1500 years ago as they sat in cold chapels chanting in Latin during the longest nights of the year leading up to

Christmas, ending on December 23rd. The Benedictines arranged these antiphons with a definite purpose. If you take the first letter of each one looking backwards—Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia—the Latin words *ero cras* are formed, meaning, “Tomorrow, I will come”. Therefore Jesus, whose coming we Christians prepare for in Advent and whom we have addressed in these seven titles, now speaks to us: *ero cras* “Tomorrow, I will come.”

The tomorrow that the prayers speak of is Christmas Eve, the celebration of God coming down into the world as a baby. C.S. Lewis once said that the Incarnation was the greatest miracle, because all the other miracles flow from it. Without the incarnation, there would be no turning water into wine. There would be no walking on the water. There would be no giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, no giving speech to the mute or making the lame walk. There would be no feeding of the four thousand or five thousand with only fishes and loaves. There would be no raising of Lazarus. If God had not come down into the world as Jesus, there would be no crucifixion, no resurrection, no Easter. The prayers Jesus answered throughout his ministry would go unanswered.

Jesus came down into the world to be Emmanuel, God with us. His coming didn't make the mountains shake or the nations tremble. Instead, his coming was something few ears heard and few eyes saw.

Throughout his ministry, he would work in the same way, not calling down fire from heaven, but instead coming down to be among those who were seen as the low and unclean and unworthy. He talks to the Samaritan woman at the well, the fishermen on the lakeshore, the cripple by the pool. He gets Zacchaeus to come down and take him to eat with other tax

collectors and sinners. He comes down and kneels at his disciples' feet to wash them.

The baby lying in a manger is the first step of God's plan to come down and fix our world, the answer to the prayers of so many over such a great span of time. Jesus was born to die for our sins, to begin God's awesome work of fixing the world from all of the ways it's been broken by sin. And as he did so, Jesus prayed other people's prayers on the cross. He prayed the psalms, the prayers he learned as a child. He prayed the words of prophecy. He answered the prayers of those who prayed for God to come down.

Jesus' death on the cross defeated death once and for all, and saves us from our sins. But sin, death, and the devil don't realize they're defeated yet, and so we continue to struggle against them. Prayer helps us when we struggle this time of year, when circumstances and memories darken the joy of the season. We pray along with the distraught father, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Prayer shapes us. It works back on us to change who we are and what we believe. Praying the prayers of those who have gone before us give us words when we don't have the words to say.

We don't know when God will answer our prayers and come again. It may be tomorrow, it may be in a thousand years. But we know that God is coming, to lead us out of darkness into light, to end sin and death and sadness forever. Until then, we pray with the church throughout the world and throughout the centuries, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

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