

The Inn: A Room With A View **Micah 5:2-5a; John 3:16-17**

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As I've grown older, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" has become one of my favorite Advent and Christmas carols. As a child, the words were mysterious and confusing and the tune was haunting and a little bit sad. It seemed like such a strange song to sing during a season that was so fun and exciting. Why would we sing such a sad song?

Of course, that was a child's perspective. I hadn't yet realized that Advent isn't always joyous for everybody or that, from the beginning, Advent has been a time of preparation that includes acknowledging our hurts and embracing God's promise of healing. Hear these words: "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."

During Advent, we remember the story of Israel. How God's people were exiled in Babylon, oppressed, isolated, and grieving their broken relationship with God. And we remember the prophets - Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah - who spoke to them for God and promised, over and over again, that God would send a savior. A savior who would heal them and comfort them, lift them out of the oppressive circumstances of their lives, bring peace - peace within and peace in the world. The savior whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. Those promises, that vision of hope, kept them going through a long season of brokenness.

Of course, Jesus was born into a time of great difficulty, too. His homeland was under the control of the Roman Empire. Poverty and oppression were the norm in a society in which most people had very little opportunity or power. Again, the words of the prophets rang out as hope for a new way, a new world, a new beginning.

And now, centuries later, we find ourselves living in a time of great uncertainty, of fear and anxiety, of racism and white supremacy, of global pandemic and ongoing conflict over vaccinations and masks. All of that is the backdrop - even as we put up Christmas trees, sing carols, and see signs of Christmas wherever we turn.

Advent has always been a season of contrasts, filled with dissonance as we juxtapose what we see with what we experience with what we feel. I'm not sure I've ever been as conscious of this as I am this year as I talk with friends, colleagues, and folks in the congregation. In the last few weeks, I've become increasingly aware of how many of us are struggling during Advent this year. Those who already deal with mental health problems seem to be having an especially hard time right now. Marriages are ending. Single adults seem especially lonely and isolated. Almost everyone seems anxious and weary, short-tempered and scattered.

This Advent is filled with contrasts between how we wish life could be and how it is. Between twinkling lights and a teenage boy shooting his classmates on a December afternoon. Between the promise of a healthy, new baby born into this world and the fast-spreading omicron variation of a virus that has already killed so many. Between holiday traditions that we love and the limitations forced on us by nearly two years of pandemic.

So, on this last weekend before Christmas, I want to make space for the contrasts and the dissonance and to remind us that the miracle of Christmas is that we are not alone. Throughout the Advent season, we have been talking about preparing for a place for Jesus to be born again in our hearts, our church, and our world. Today, I'd like to focus on preparing a place for Emmanuel, Emmanuel whose name means God with us.

This week, as we move ever closer to Christmas day, we come to the real heart of the Christmas story - God's tremendous love for us and for the world - a love so great that God took human form and came to live among us. Micah foretold his coming, describing him not as a warrior or even a king, but as a shepherd who offers us security and peace.

Centuries later, after Jesus's birth, life, death, and resurrection, John spoke of why God sent Emmanuel, why God came to live among us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son not to condemn the world but to save the world through him."

The message of Christmas is that God is with us and God's love can save us from all the powers of the world that seek to destroy us, all the trials that keep us from fully embracing our lives. God came to live among us, a tiny child born in a stable, to show us what real love is and to teach to love ourselves and each other. Our task is to open our hearts and let that love in.

But, how? How do we make room for that love, such great love that when it settles in our hearts, it calms the anxiety, soothes our fear, and offers us a view into our own worth and the worth of all of creation? A view so wide and compassionate that it encompasses all of the contrasts we're experiencing, all of the dissonance we feel? Love so deep that it embraces our fears, our despair, our anger and anxiety AND our hope, our joy, our anticipation for this season? How do we open our hearts when they feel so vulnerable and claim the assurance of God's love?

There is no one answer to that question. Each of us is unique, each has their own story. Yet, we all can begin with prayer, but rather than telling you how to pray, I would rather do it with you. So, for the rest of the sermon time, I would like to teach you a prayer I recently learned from my friend and colleague, Amy Miracle. A prayer you can use this week, as the stress builds and the joy and anticipation of clash internally with the anxiety and hurt we all are living with. A prayer that invites God's love into your life and reminds you that indeed Emmanuel is coming, to ransom us from all that keeps us captive.

As we prepare for the coming of Christ, we do that work with our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. Most of the time when we think of praying, we think of using words. We like words. Words are familiar. They come easily. But, there are times when we get overwhelmed with words. We hear so many words in the course of the day, through other voices, through television and social media, surrounding us with noise that can get to be too much.

So, this is a prayer without words. First, I'm going to walk you through the movements of the prayer. You can do this sitting or standing, whatever you are comfortable with.

This prayer begins with a posture of humility - a reminder that God is God and we are not. We are God's creations but we are limited and broken and in need of God's love and care. So, we begin our prayer acknowledging our need. Then the next movement is upward and is a celebration of God's glory and majesty. Think of God the creator and the giver of so many

beautiful and wonderful things in our lives. The giver of all of creation. The giver of snowflakes and waterfalls, a blazing sky at sunset, mountains reflected in the stillness of a lake. The giver of all the people we love. The giver of music and laughter. And, of course, the giver of unconditional love that sustains us, comforts us, and heals us. In this position, we not only acknowledge these gifts, but we receive them.

In the next movement, we take those gifts into our lives, into our hearts, into the fabric of our days. We receive God's gifts. Now, we could end our prayer there, but we don't just receive God's gifts. We are also called to share God's gifts. And so that is the next movement in our prayer, a movement of giving.

Now, the final movement in this prayer is one of grounding - a reminder that we walk always, always with God and that no matter what circumstances we face, no matter what is happening out in the world, we are grounded, rooted, in God's love for us and in our call to love one another.

So, let us now pray this prayer. I invite you to do it with me and we will do it twice.
Amen.