

**“Singing in the Season: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”
Psalm 130
First Sunday of Advent
Sunday, November 27, 2011**

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Music moves and touches us in strange and mysterious ways. Even if, like me, you are relatively non-musical, there is still music that touches you. A song from your high school or college days, the song that was played as the first dance at your wedding, the music you fell in love to, the music you fell out of love to, the lullabies you sang to your children, the hymns you sang growing up. We hear this music and we are transported. When I was a little girl, my father would sing “How Great Thou Art” as a solo in the church choir, and there are times when just hearing that hymn can make me tear up. Music touches something deep within us.

Anne Lamott writes of the power of music in her book *Traveling Mercies*. She tells the story of Ken, a gay man dying of AIDS, who had been coming to her little Presbyterian church in Marin City, California. She writes, “Ken has a lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant!” Ken is a new Christian, and despite the ravages of his disease, he says he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus and his church.

Lamott goes on to say that Ranola, a large, beautiful, jovial black woman in the choir, was standoffish with Ken. She grew up Southern Baptist and she had been taught that someone like Ken, a homosexual, was an abomination. And—this was about 20 years ago—she had a visceral fear of catching AIDS, which in those days was a death sentence.

One Sunday morning during worship, the congregation was singing “*His Eye Is On The Sparrow*” and Ken, too weak to stand, was seated, singing with all his heart “why should I feel discouraged, why do the shadows fall?” when suddenly Ranola’s heart melted. She got up out of the choir, went to Ken’s side, and embraced him, holding this white scarecrow of a man against her like a child as they sang together.

Lamott writes, “I can’t imagine anything but music could have brought about this alchemy. Maybe it’s because music is about as physical as it gets: your essential rhythm is your heartbeat; your essential sound, the breath. We’re walking temples of noise, and when you add tender hearts to this mix, it somehow lets us meet in ways we couldn’t get to any other way.”ⁱ

There is extraordinary power in music, and particularly in the music of this Advent/Christmas season. What would Christmas be without Christmas music? It would as bare and blank as a Christmas tree without lights or ornaments—naked, diminished, so much less beautiful than it was meant to be. Christmas without music scarcely bears thinking about. But like much that is beautiful and precious to us, we rarely stop to think about the meaning that lies behind the carols that we love. Why DO they touch us? Why do they move us? And what do they teach us about this holy season?

So this year our Advent and Christmas sermon series is *Singing in the Season*, an exploration of carols old and new, an opportunity to look at these songs that, without our even knowing it, profoundly shape the way we understand this season.

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we begin with the ancient Advent carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” The words are a Latin hymn from the 12th century, while the music is French, dating from the 15th century. Now we typically think of Advent and

Christmas music as joyful, like “Joy to the World” or “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, or perhaps gently reverent, like “Away in a Manger” or “Silent Night”, but “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is...sad, a somber, mournful lament of longing for God’s coming.

Play phrase

This carol is not an exclamation of joyful anticipation, it is not a tender sighing over the baby in the manger—it is an expression of deep longing for a better world, for deliverance, for God’s presence. It is a cry from the heart, from exile; from a place of near despair that God will come and save.

Sing “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear”

Part of the somberness of this medieval carol is that it reflects the original meaning of Advent. Advent, which means “coming”, is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ. It was originally a kind of mini-Lent, a time of fasting and spiritual introspection. In the middle ages, the feasting and parties didn’t start until Christmas Day, followed by the twelve days of Christmas.

Even though our own Advents are far from times of self-denial or spiritual introspection, this carol reminds of what we would just as soon forget—what we DO forget in the hectic rush of parties and shopping and decorating, what we try to drown out in Christmas music playing merrily in shopping malls and on car radios and I-Pods—that Christ was born because we need to be saved. Because we are in exile from God, from one another, and from our own best selves.

This carol captures the deep human longing that lies underneath all the trappings of the season, the realization that we are not who we want to be, we are not where we are meant to be. Christians have sung this carol for nearly a thousand years because it

says something deeply, deeply true about the human condition. You hear it even in some of the secular music of the season, where this truth is expressed as a deep longing for home.

“I’ll be home for Christmas,” we sing, and we sing that every year because there is a part of us that knows we are in exile, that we are far from home. Even if we go to our own houses every night and sleep in our own beds, we may feel we are far from home. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is also about going home, going home from exile, going home to God. Secular or sacred, we long to go home.

The home we long for is not a place. It is a metaphor for our longing to be made whole, and to live in a world made whole. We are not talking about a soft, silly, sentimental notion of home, but home in the face of homelessness and war and violence and separation and fear and all the other forces of darkness in our world. In the secular song, home is “where the love light gleams.” In the carol, home is also that place where the love light gleams—the light of peace and harmony and justice.

Sing “O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease, fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.”

The question, of course, is how to we get there. How do we get to where the love light gleams? How do we get to a place of peace and harmony and joy? How do we become the person we were meant to be? How do we go home?

The good news of the season is that we don’t have to go home because home comes to us. It is the promise of the prophet Isaiah, it is the promise of the gospel of Matthew, “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him ‘Emmanuel’ which means, ‘God-with-us.’” (Mt 1:23) It is indeed the promise even of that crazy book

Revelation, “See, the home of God is among humanity. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. (*Rev 21:3*)

This lovely, sad, haunting carol reminds us that we worship Emmanuel, God-With-Us. Not God-Up-There, Out-There, somewhere else who answers our prayers by lifting us out of our lives, but the God who comes to us in the midst of our lives—however far from home we are, however less than ideal our circumstances, however much or little our lives reflect the peace and joy and hope and love we sing about. This is where God is lives, right here; born in any cradle we will offer him, on any pile of straw we can pat together with our uncertain, hopeful hands.ⁱⁱ

Sing: Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

ⁱ Anne Lamott *Traveling Mercies* 1991. p. 64-65

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, p. 24