



## From the Desk of Pastor Meyer

As our calendars turn the page from November to December, the church year calendar also changes. While your calendar hanging on the kitchen wall still has a month to go before its warranty expires, the church year begins anew with the season of Advent. Happy New Year, people of God!

While the world around us is celebrating pre-Christmas, the church celebrates Advent. The word “advent” means “coming.” We remember Jesus’ coming in time in the Nativity, we celebrate His coming among us in Word and Sacrament, and we look forward to His coming again “in glory, to judge the living and the dead,” as we say in the Creed. Traditionally, the season of Advent was very penitential in nature, almost like Lent, with rather somber tones and notes in the services of the season – so much so, in fact, that the third Sunday in Advent was set apart with a different colored candle (not the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent, as many think) and the title “Gaudate Sunday,” or “Sunday of Joy.” Today, Advent is less serious and usually has a more joyful, celebratory nature and tends to focus on a pre-Christmas theme.

Although Advent begins on Sunday, December 1, this year, that is not always the case. Advent always begins on the Sunday closest to November 30, the Feast of St. Andrew, the first disciple Jesus called. The connection is as Andrew followed Jesus as a disciple, so the church follows Jesus through the liturgical pattern of the church year. While there are always four Sundays in Advent, because it’s not a fixed date (ie, Dec. 1), the actual number of days in Advent can vary from as few as 22 to as many as 29.

I enjoy the music of Advent. I love the rich hymnody of the season and the theology of our three-fold anticipation of Jesus’ coming. Take a few moments each Sunday before or after church and flip through the Advent section of the hymnal. Look at the words, the texts, and see how the hymn writers convey one or all three “levels” of anticipation of Jesus’ coming.

One such hymn is “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” number 357 in our Lutheran Service Book. The history of the hymn is rather unique. It’s a musical rendition of a medieval musical setting called the “O Antiphons.” In some churches, an antiphon is a selection of Scripture or a prayer that is changed responsively by the pastor and the congregation. An antiphon helps to set the focus of the pericopes (readings) of the day with the theme of the Sunday in the church year.

The “O Antiphons” were to be used during the evening Vespers service in the week prior to the celebration of the Nativity, from December 17 thru December 24. Each Antiphon focuses on a prophetic title of Jesus from the Scripture, mostly drawn from Isaiah 11, and a petition for Christ to fulfill that promise and title.

The traditional order of the seven antiphons is

- (1) *Sapientia*: "O Wisdom" Isaiah 11:2-3,
- (2) *Adonai*: "O Lord of Might" Isaiah 11:4-5,
- (3) *Radix Jesse*: "O Root/Branch/Rod of Jesse" Isaiah 11:1, 10,
- (4) *Clavis David*: "O Key of David" Isaiah 22:22,
- (5) *Oriens*: "O Dayspring" Isaiah 9:2,
- (6) *Rex Gentium*: "O Desire of Nations/King of Gentiles" Isaiah 2:4; 9:6; 11:10-12,
- (7) *Emmanuel*: "O Emmanuel" Isaiah 7:14.

The basic progression of themes can be understood this way: The framer of the Universe (Wisdom) Who gave the Law (Adonai) promised through David's throne (Radix Jesse) to set free the captives of sin (Clavis David) and bring the Light of salvation to dawn (Oriens) not only on His chosen people but all nations (Rex Gentium) and dwell with us eternally (Emmanuel).

In the twelfth or thirteenth century, these antiphons were paraphrased into poetic verses which became the hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." This hymn includes the text of the O Antiphons on the facing page, making it easy to see the correlation between the stanzas of the hymn and the antiphons. One alteration in order occurred: The final antiphon (O Emmanuel) became the first stanza of the hymn instead of the seventh. I'm not sure why that change took place, but it is common among English hymnals and is not unique to Lutherans. While that changes the thematic progression slightly, the overall beauty of the hymn remains.

Because we don't have a Vespers service, during Advent, we use the verses of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" in place of the Hymn of Praise in the liturgy, a "nod" to the ancient practice of the "O Antiphons." Use these as part of your Advent devotions and part of your pre-service meditation when you enter the sanctuary.

There are lots of things happening this month, so make sure, at a minimum, to check the calendar. We will have midweek Advent services at 7pm on December 4, 11 and 18, culminating with Christmas Eve service on Tuesday, December 24 **at 6pm. NOTE THE TIME!** We made that time change a couple years ago and it was well received. Add in the other sundry events, plus your own family calendar, and it can be a bit overwhelming.

May I encourage you to deliberately plan to set aside time in these busy weeks and be intentional in your prayers and personal devotions. Read Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2. Use Advent hymns as part of your prayers. Include the "O Antiphons" or "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" as part of your anticipation – not only of Christmas, but of Christ's return. Above all, amidst the hustle and bustle of the world around us, follow the footsteps of Mary who, Luke records, after Jesus was born "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

God bless your Advent preparations and Christmas celebrations!

  
Pastor Meyer