

***Song of Hope***©

Isaiah 7:10-25; Matthew 1:18-24

December 1, 2013

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

Today's theme for this first Sunday in Advent, is Hope. You will have these special inserts in your bulletin, one for every Sunday in Advent and one for Christmas Eve. Besides the reading for the lighting of the Advent candles, these advent inserts are a devotional to take home with you to read through and reflect on through the week. I hope you will use it to help you stay grounded and calm during this busy and often times, stressful season.

I have also decided to have a particular Advent or Christmas carol as a focus for us this year. I'm using as my study, a bible study written in 2009 from a resource called *The Thoughtful Christian*. This study is titled ***Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns.***<sup>1</sup> Today's hymn is the Advent hymn *O Come, O Come, Immanuel*.

Unlike so many Christmas songs, this hymn is one of those haunting, quiet hymns that is almost like a dirge in its tone and temperament.

It was originally composed around the eighth century as a processional hymn. It was meant to be sung during evening Vespers in the last week of the Advent season. There were seven verses written, one for each day leading up to Christmas. It's narrowed down to just three verses for us to sing today.

The hymn has a very contemplative and soothing tone. The words are inspired by Isaiah 7, verse 14, which we heard Carlee read this morning. Those words about the "sign" God would send to Judah: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman (or virgin) is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel," which means "God is with us."

What a sad time it was for Judah. King Ahaz was an ineffective king; they were at war with Assyria. There was much corruption. The poor were treated with disdain and injustice. Nothing looked promising. The outlook for all of Israel was very grim indeed.

To make a long story short, the people ended up at war and then were captured and exiled out of their beloved country and away from Jerusalem.

If we watch the news we know that times haven't changed a great deal in the Middle East. Countries are still at war with each other. Land is fought over. Bombings happen sometimes daily. We hear of Israel and Pakistan at war and Syria being a threat.

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright 2009, [www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com](http://www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com), Rejoice! Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns, 1, Erik Kolbell, author and minister of the United Church of Christ.

We, who live in this country, have a difficult time grasping what life there is really like and understanding the thinking that is behind all the fighting. I think that today, life for many is still very tense.

But in Isaiah's day the people who had been God's chosen people, the same line of people whom God had rescued from Egypt with Moses leading the way; the same people who had been given the land of Canaan and the holy city, Jerusalem ... these people, the Israelites, had split into two countries at odds with each other – Israel (or Ephraim) in the north, and Judah in the south.

They had been eager to embrace their special status as God's people, but they had been reluctant to live up to what God expected them to do. They began to worship idols instead of God. They ignored the poor.

They found themselves in exile and believed that God had left them; that God was far away from them. But the truth was, they were the ones who had turned from God; they had distanced themselves from the one who loved them and who was continuing to watch over them, in spite of their disobedience.

And because of the distance they had created, God says through Isaiah the prophet that God will send Immanuel. "God with us."

In Advent, we have the opportunity, if we will take the time to be quiet and reflect, to think about what it means to be in exile. The hymn says "O Come, O come Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear."

The word *exile* means *to wander away*. Sometimes we physically wander away from family or community, but it doesn't have to be just physical. It can be mentally and emotionally as well.

As we fill our minds with prideful thoughts; as we think more of our own needs and desires, and less of what others might need or be experiencing; as we harbor angry feelings and refuse to forgive; as anger takes the place of patience and judgment trumps mercy – we begin to feel distanced from those whom we love, and perhaps *especially* from God.

We might find ourselves feeling agitated, stressed, anxious, overwhelmed and having a hard time sorting it all out. We might come to church and sing the hymns but we are not moved, we might recite the prayers along with others but our heart is not in it. We may listen to the sermon but our ears are not really open. We might have feelings of despair and a sense of hopelessness, wondering how long God will turn his face from us.

We can easily find ourselves in exile. Sometimes – oftentimes – it is from our own wandering away – away from our faith, from our prayer time with God, from that soft

place in our hearts where we are pliable to the Lord, where he is able to mold us and make us into that vessel he can use.

We feel lonely and angry and depressed and alone, wondering how we got here and feeling a sense of hopelessness in the situation.

And what about those situations that were not of our own doing? A young mom dies, leaving children alone. An elderly man is sick and alone, longing for a call from his children. Another has cancer and the prognosis isn't good, the waiting keeps them anxious and afraid. A child gets sick; a car accident suddenly changes everything. A divorce devastates a woman emotionally and financially.

We really don't have to go to the Middle East to know what it feels like to have chaos and grief and despair in our lives. True, it is not the same thing as being held captive or being a refugee, it is not the same thing as living in the midst of war ...

But the despair felt by those chosen people who found themselves exiled and distanced from God is the same despair we can often find our modern selves in even today. And that despair can be just as lonely and frightful and empty.

The second verse of our hymn says "Come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here." Advent means "coming." We are singing, "Come, come like the light of the new dawn, and cheer our spirits with your coming here."

"Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to Thee, O Israel."

These are words of longing; words of beckoning and hoping for help. There is no rejoicing in the exile, but there is rejoicing in the promise that God is coming. There is rejoicing in even the slightest glimmer of hope shining through the darkness.

And the last verse that we sing is a hope for community, for peace, for unity.

"O come Desire of Nations. Bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife and discord cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace."

We are reminded in this verse that while faith is personal, it is not private; what we wish for ourselves must expand to the entire community; it must embrace all of humanity. It is really the only way we can be set free from our captivity – the only way we can be saved from ourselves.

Erik Kolbell, who is the author of the study I'm using as a resource," writes this powerful statement:

“This last verse is particularly important because it anticipates a great collective weakness we have. All too often it is our tendency to use religion – or nationalism, or patriotism or family values, or political affiliations, or pedigree, or race, or gender, or orientation – to assert our supremacy over other communities, and by including this verse at the end of the hymn the authors are reminding us that when the Christ child comes he comes to free us from all that imprisons us, including the arrogance that drove “captive Israel” into “lonely exile” in the first place.

Just as he is born in humility, so too must we be humble, approaching that little manger not with an air of entitlement but with a sense of gratitude.

Let us remember, this last verse is suggesting that the only way to really see this tiny, tiny baby born into the cool, dark night and laid deep in the straw is to get as close to the Christ as humanly possible.

And the only way to get close to Christ is on our knees.”

Rejoice! Rejoice! There is hope for us all! Immanuel shall come to us – He doesn’t just come – he comes to *us*. To *you* and to *me*. He comes *personally* and *corporately*.

One of my favorite authors – Anne Lamott, author of many books, the latest being: ***Stitches, A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair***; shared a post on Facebook about how she did not feel like going to church one Sunday after 2 weeks of travel, having a disagreement with someone, being physically and emotionally tired – in her words, feeling “self righteous, victimized and isolated.”

But she said she went, and as she was driving there she remembered her pastor talking about how we don’t get ourselves together BEFORE coming to God and community; you may not be ABLE to get it together before coming to God and community.

She wrote: “I was enveloped by the love energy of the 30 or so people who are at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church. I sang, danced, listened, and could breathe again. I got my sense of humor back. I got my 'joice back, as Veronica (her pastor) put it once. I rejoiced.”<sup>2</sup>

This Advent season, let us bring ourselves fully to God who gives himself to us in Immanuel. It is only then that we will find our *'joice* again. Let us *Rejoice!*

Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to us. Amen.

© Copyright 2013. All Rights Reserved.

---

<sup>2</sup><https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott>