

For this Advent season, our sermon series is built around the theme, “The Story in Song.” Each Sunday, we will be led by a hymn that moves us through Advent and brings to mind the story we love to tell.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, I want to focus our thoughts on the Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

In our hymnal, we have only three verses to sing. The original hymn was based on seven verses which were chanted in medieval monasteries, a verse each day beginning a week before Christmas.

Those seven verses were reduced to five in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when John Neale, who wrote the carol, “Good King Wenceslas,” translated this hymn.

And now we sing just three verses: a solemn, sober hymn that reminds us of the darkness of which Isaiah wrote.

The darkness was real for the people of Israel as war loomed over them and around them, and they feared for their existence as a nation: what’s going to happen to us?

People who walk in darkness ask that kind of question.

The darkness is real for many of us. Maybe you literally tossed and turned during the night.... what’s going to happen to us...hungering for the light of day.

Whatever the darkness is in your life, whatever the worry is, the anxiety, the difficult decision, whatever the burden, it is always tougher to deal with when the sun goes down, isn’t it?

The darkness was real for Mary and Joseph some 2,000 years ago. Maybe you saw the movie, “The Nativity”, a few years ago.

A very real telling of the story.

I remember particularly the scene where Mary and Joseph are on their way out of the village of Nazareth to make the one hundred mile trek to Bethlehem, because the law had come down that everyone had to return to their family’s city of origin to register, to get their legal papers for their ID, to be registered with the government.

In this scene, Mary was riding on a donkey and Joseph was walking alongside her. By this time the citizens of Nazareth have shunned Mary because they thought she had been promiscuous.

She was going to have a baby and was not married. They would not talk to Mary or have anything to do with her anymore.

And because Joseph stuck by her side, his good name and reputation tumbled just like Mary’s.

In this departing scene, the people watched as Mary and Joseph slowly made their way out of town.

As they passed the people, most of them looked at Mary with contempt and deliberately looked away after catching a glance of her. No one waved or said goodbye or offered words of encouragement for the long journey.

As they passed the last person and headed out of town, Joseph said to Mary with a twinkle in his eye and a bit of sarcasm in his voice, “These people are really going to miss us.”

Everyone in the theater laughed.

But as I watched this scene in the movie, it dawned on me that the best way to reach out to someone that you love who is struggling in their own darkness, the best thing you can do for them is to walk alongside them.

This is what Joseph did for Mary. He was with her.

Who has done this for you?

Who has walked with you “through the valley of the shadow of death so that you would fear no evil”?

Who has been with you in the dark times of your life, to give you light, to give you some peace of mind?

You will never forget them, will you?

Even more, who needs you to do this for them now? Who do you know that is struggling in the shadows and needs companionship?

Who is it that has been shunned and bullied and abandoned and needs a warm embrace, an encouraging word?

Who needs you to walk alongside them when others turn away, to give them a light to see a way out, some peace of mind as the world tumbles in on them?

What would it take for you to give that gift to someone this Christmas? What did it require of Joseph as he walked alongside Mary?

It took a lot of courage. He was traveling upstream in uncharted waters and was as frightened as Mary.

There was another scene in the movie when Mary and Joseph were alone around a camp fire while on this long journey to Bethlehem.

Mary confesses her fear at having a baby, especially this one in whom the hope of the world resides.

She looks at Joseph and asks, “Joseph, are you scared, too?” He simply replies, “Yes, Mary, I am.”

To walk with Mary required a lot of courage from Joseph.

It required patience as well. Answers were not going to come quickly. Solutions to their growing needs were not going to magically appear.

Joseph, as well as Mary, was going to have to be comfortable with mystery, just what God was doing with them and through them.

That means it also would require faith.

Joseph knew that on his own he could not fix their problem and satisfy everybody’s morality. To do that would mean to accuse her of unfaithfulness and have her stoned to death.

No, he listened and prayed and listened and obeyed. He entered Mary’s world of being with child, and Joseph needed the kind of wisdom, strength, trust, generosity, patience, and courage he did not have.

But Joseph was a man of faith, and he knew the source of his courage: Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us’.

Emmanuel, for all who walk in darkness.

I think Paul is painting the picture of Emmanuel in these verses from Romans, and he gives us the promise of Emmanuel when he says, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.”

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel” ...God with us, here and now...to walk with us as we walk alongside each other in the darkness.

For you and me to have that courage, that patience, that faith, to be the presence of Christ in a broken, dark world; as Brian McGowan wrote, “Discipleship is all about living out Emmanuel.”

The refrain of this hymn reflects that promise of redemption which Paul proclaimed in the person of Jesus Christ, reveals the light which Isaiah had prophesied, and reflects the person who walked with us: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!”

When we sing this hymn at the close of the service, note that each phrase of that refrain is punctuated with an exclamation point!

The exclamation point that is the good news:

- *a light has shined on the people who live in darkness...EXCLAMATION POINT!*
- *a new day is dawning...a day filled with joy...EXCLAMATION POINT!*
- *a time when God will break the chains that bind his people...EXCLAMATION POINT!*
- *when there will no longer be any need for battle gear or weapons...EXCLAMATION POINT!*

This hymn is the prayer that gives voice to the zeal of the Lord to see that all this happens as Isaiah prophesied, as Joseph and Mary walked together, as Paul proclaimed, and now you and I to carry the light of God's love which we find here, where it is expected to be found, but even more:

- to carry it home with us, to make our family life stronger
- to build every relationship with trust and loyalty
- to give us hope for the future of the world
- to help us believe that sorrow can be turned into joy; that hunger, poverty, injustice, hatred can be done away with.

That the people who walk in darkness, who are asking, "What's going to happen to us?" hear us and see us share that story, to be filled with that exclamation point of living out Emmanuel.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.