

The Sunday Missive – December 19, 2021
The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Hymn 56 O come, O come Emmanuel

O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Wisdom from on high, who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show and teach us in its ways to go. Rejoice!
Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem, unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save, and give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Bright and Morning Star, and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night and turn our darkness into light. Rejoice!
Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O King of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease and be yourself our King of Peace. Rejoice!
Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iO7ySn-Swwc>

Lighting the Advent Wreath

Holy One, we praise you for your child Jesus Christ,
who is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples, the wisdom that teaches and
guides us, the Savior of every nation.

Let your blessing come upon us as we light this wreath.
May it be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation.

Eternal God, in the psalms of David, in the words of the prophets, in the
dream of Joseph your promise was spoken. At last, in the womb of the
Virgin Mary, your Word took flesh. Teach us to welcome Jesus, the
promised Emmanuel, and to preach the good news of his coming, that every
age may know him as the source of redemption and grace. We ask this
through the same one, whose coming is certain, whose day draws near:

your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Blessing the Linens

Antiphon (said by all)

This is the offering which you shall receive from the people gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet cloth, and finely woven linen.

Verse. O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness:

Response. ***You are clothed with majesty and splendor.***

Let us pray. O glorious God, all your works proclaim your perfect beauty: Accept our offering of these linens, and grant that they may adorn this sanctuary and show forth your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(All repeat Antiphon above)

Hymn S280 Gloria in Excelsis

Glory to god in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory. Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God, You take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us; You are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer. For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, In the glory of God the Father, Amen.

Micah 5:1-5

Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live

secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

Canticle 15 The Song of Mary, The Magnificat

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior* ***For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.***

From this day all generations will call me blessed* ***The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.***

He has mercy on those who fear him* ***In every generation.***

He has shown the strength of his arm* ***He has scattered the proud in their conceit.***

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones* ***And has lifted up the lowly.***

He has filled the hungry with good things* ***And the rich he has sent away empty.***

He has come to the help of his servant Israel* ***For he has remembered his promise of mercy,***

The promise he made to our fathers* ***To Abraham and his children for ever.***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9naa5YvyDU>

Hebrews 10:5-10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)." When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the

second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hymn 265 The angel Gabriel from heaven came

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
"All hail," said he, "thou lowly maiden Mary,
Most highly favored lady," Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
"To me be as it pleaseth God," she said,
"My soul shall laud and magnify his holy Name."
Most highly favored lady, Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say--
"Most highly favored lady," Gloria!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pliqObTHxUQ>

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our

ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Crossing the Threshold -- Advent 1C

Adventism, the attitude of expectancy, is of course far older than Christianity as a spiritual frame of reference. The Holy Scriptures contain many resonant phrases that point towards what’s going to happen, for instance, “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!” “Let us go to the house of the Lord and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, when all shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” Or, in a more secular vein, “You’d better watch out; you’d better not shout.”

All kinds of greatnesses will come about: the Lord’s mountain will be highest of all, folks will come from all over to learn, and all will pray for peace. And we can start behaving as if we expected this to happen, despite the fact that we cannot know or predict when it will all come about. If we don’t know when it will be vital to be ready, we had better start getting ready now.

How different this kind of expectant life is to the one we might lead without Jesus, just keepin’ on keepin’ on, faking it ‘til we’re making it; waiting for retirement and demise. Even if we ‘live for the moment,’ ‘one day at a time,’ and carpe the daylights out of our diems, along with all that immediacy there is always a finality: “If that’s all there is, my dear, let’s keep on dancing.” Contrast that with the sure and certain knowledge of a day to come when all will be made well, when God will be revealed in God’s glory, and sorrow and sighing will cease. For Mary the mother of Jesus, this knowledge is so sure and certain that – evidence to the contrary -- she speaks of it as if it has already happened: “He hath exalted the humble and meek and filled the hungry with good things.”

It is not so surprising that this expectation time of ours, this practice of having happy waiting as a frame of reference, arose in ancient times as a response to the days getting shorter and shorter. People were struck with the fear that the days would just keep getting shorter until one day the sun would fail to rise at all. “Irrational,” we say, we with our electric lights and furnaces and TV’s. We don’t know what dark is. Yet we do feel it when the nights draw in earlier and earlier. People repeat the phrase, “It’s always darkest just before the dawn” to get help them get through uncertain times, hoping it might be true that the next moment will be better. But in Advent,

we are in the realm of 100% certainty. Just after the darkest night of the year comes Christmas, the dawn of Christ among us. Every time. No matter what's going on, whatever we're going through, howsoever we respond to the invitation, that one truth is always present: "Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun doth his successive journeys run; his kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more." Just ask Isaac Watts.

Contrary to another cliché, we can't effectively live for today if we think there might not be a tomorrow. Maybe there really is no life after death, maybe (as Rich Anderson has cruelly posited) it's all just more Los Angeles. Although we have Jesus' word on it, nobody else has come back to tell us. But we can only behave the way we want to behave if we have the expectation of peace coming to pass sometime, somewhere in the history of creation.

In anthropology, liminality -- from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold -- is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during sacred rituals when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet achieved the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous ways of understanding their identity, their time, or their community, and the new ways which the ritual establishes.

Advent is one such liminal stage. We are on the threshold between one life and another: a life of instinct and a life of faith. Although we say the word of God existed before all other worlds, who knew it at the time? It is only when we become aware, when hearts and minds are opened to the possibilities, that humankind can move towards cooperation with God's benevolent intention. The process is an individual one, and far from universal. But slowly, if we're lucky, we come to believe that God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and do for the world what seems impossible. Advent is a space of time, a space both in and out of time, a birth canal wherein we can, if we will, experience the coming into being of Christ in the flesh, in our very own flesh. When we experience it in ourselves, we become convinced that the world can also be healed and transformed; we are born anew.

Amongst the Jews, there are two mitzvahs – good things to do -- relating to the doorway of one's home and thereby of one's heart. A scroll is mounted on the doorpost of Jewish homes, containing this verse from the Book of Deuteronomy "*Shema, Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God; the Lord is One." The scroll is inside a little holster called a Mezzuzah; it serves to identify the home as a place of divine

presence, as if to say “God is here and we know it, and you too will be in the presence of God when you cross this threshold.” The Mezzuzah is usually small and unobtrusive, but beautifully decorated. One reaches out a few fingers when passing through the doorway and kisses them once they’ve made contact with the word of God. This mitzvah is a personal, unobtrusive, habitual way of literally keeping in touch with God.

The other doorway-oriented tradition is the Menorah. Especially at Chanukah time – now ended for this year -- the lights of a Menorah shining out from the doorway of a house (they didn’t have windows) served to light up the street, to light up the world beyond one’s house, so to shine before others that they might give glory to God themselves.

In Advent, we might do very well indeed to heighten our awareness of the doorways and thresholds, the liminal timespaces of our hearts, our minds, our homes and our purses. Perhaps a mezzuzah of our own. Maybe not mounted on our doorpost, but in the form of a daily reminder of the existence and imminent presence of God. Before dashing into the day’s activities we might pause with God for a moment and say “God show me the way; give me the strength to do and to be what you would have me do and be.” Or perhaps when we’re done for the day, and ready to retire, we might make sure to pause for ten seconds’ silence while reorienting ourselves with thoughts of gratitude and purpose. Ten whole seconds!

As for lighting up the street, yes indeed our Christmas decorations count. But remember, the Menorah has only nine lights, not ten thousand, so moderation might be a good way to go. And of course there are other ways to light up the world and spread the good news of God’s love, by letting “them” see our good works, by being the change we want to see. Advent is a time of intentional, heightened observation of ourselves: our motivations and accomplishments, our failings, large or small, and also the dreams and plans we’re making to change things; to change us.

We hear about, wonder about and talk about being born again as Christians. Now, keeping in mind the shopkeeper’s wisecrack, “In God we trust, all others pay cash,” we do well to acknowledge that declaring oneself ‘born again’ does not guarantee just, ethical, virtuous behavior. Nor does it entitle anybody to special rights, privileges or liberties. But through the sacrament of our baptism, through the experience of spiritually awakening to the power of love, and through the story of Jesus, we can relate to and revel in a sense of transformative newness, of rebirth. We can cross the threshold with excitement, joy and good purpose.

The Prayers of the People

I ask your prayers for God's people throughout the world; for this gathering; and for all ministers and people. Pray for the Church. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for peace; for goodwill among nations; and for the well-being of all people. Pray for justice and peace. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all those in need of healing and strength, especially the family and friends of Nöelle Valentine. Pray for the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison and all those in any need or trouble. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or deeper self-knowledge and faith. Pray that they may find and be found by Christ. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for the departed, especially Nöelle and others we name now, silently or aloud_____. Pray for those who have died. *Silence*

I ask your prayers of thanksgiving for the blessings of this life, especially those we name now, silently or aloud_____ *Silence*

Praise God for those in every generation in whom Christ has been honoured. Pray that we may have grace to glorify Christ in our own day by ordering our lives according to his Word. Amen.

O God of love, you are the true sun of the world, evermore rising and never going down. We pray you to shine in our hearts, that the darkness of sin and the mist of error being driven away, we may this day, and all our life long, walk without stumbling in the way you have prepared for us, which is Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God in glory everlasting. **Amen**

The Collect of the Day

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Now may the One who loved the world enough to send the first and only child to live among us in great humility, open your eyes to look for the day when that child comes again. And thus, the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer be with you today and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Hymn 61 "Sleepers wake!" A voice astounds us

"Sleepers, wake!" A voice astounds us,
The shout of rampart-guards surrounds us:
"Awake, Jerusalem, arise!"
Midnight's peace their cry has broken,
Their urgent summons clearly spoken:
"The time has come, O maidens wise!
Rise up, and give us light; the Bridegroom is in sight. Alleluia!
Your lamps prepare and hasten there,
That you the wedding feast may share."

Zion hears the watchmen singing;
Her heart with joyful hope is springing,
She wakes and hurries through the night.
Forth he comes, her Bridegroom glorious
In strength of grace, in truth victorious:
Her star is risen, her light grows bright.
Now come, most worthy Lord, God's Son, Incarnate Word, Alleluia!
We follow all and heed your call to come into the banquet hall.

Lamb of God, the heavens adore you;
Let saints and angels sing before you,
As harps and cymbals swell the sound.
Twelve great pearls, the city's portals:
Through them we stream to join th' immortals
As we with joy your throne surround.
No eye has known the sight, no ear heard such delight: Alleluia!
Therefore we sing to greet our King; for ever let our praises ring.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu8uDIAr7LM>

Winter Time

Late lies the wintry sun a-bed,
A frosty, fiery sleepy-head;
Blinks but an hour or two; and then,
A blood-red orange, sets again.

Before the stars have left the skies,
At morning in the dark I rise;
And shivering in my nakedness,
By the cold candle, bathe and dress.

Close by the jolly fire I sit
To warm my frozen bones a bit;
Or with a reindeer-sled, explore
The colder countries round the door.

When to go out, my nurse doth wrap
Me in my comforter and cap;
The cold wind burns my face, and blows
Its frosty pepper up my nose.

Black are my steps on silver sod;
Thick blows my frosty breath abroad;
And tree and house, and hill and lake,
Are frosted like a wedding-cake.

Robert Louis Stevenson