

The Word in *Song*



Hymn of the Day Studies for

ADVENT

THREE-YEAR LECTIONARY



THE
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MISSOURI SYNOD

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Savior of the Nations, Come

Lutheran Service Book 332 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

Even before Thanksgiving is over, the world around us starts turning its attention to the Christmas celebration. Many people grow concerned that the holidays are coming quickly. Merchants are hoping that many shoppers come to their stores and that they are in a buying mood. Secular Christmas carols proclaim that Santa Claus is coming to town. We prepare our homes for relatives or friends who may be coming. Many people find that all of these preparations make them feel the effects of stress. Many people cry out, “I’m just not ready!”

Exploring the Scriptures

John’s Gospel begins by talking about the coming of Jesus and what this means. We will read this passage on Christmas Day. Anticipating that celebration, read John 1:1–14, 18.

- What title does John give Jesus? What does he say about Jesus that reveals His divine identity? What things do we receive from Jesus that we can find nowhere else?

But today is the beginning of Advent — the first Sunday of a new Church Year. We turn our attention to a different coming: the coming of Jesus.

- How do you prepare when you know that someone you care about is coming to visit?
- How can we prepare, both individually and together, for the coming of Jesus?

- Verse 14 speaks of Christ becoming human. The Greek word for “dwelt among us” comes from the word for “tent” or “tabernacle.” What would this have implied to John’s readers (see Ex. 40:34–35 and Rev. 21:3)?
- How is Jesus the light? What does that mean?
- What two reactions to Jesus does John describe? Do we still see these reactions today?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

In the fourth century, a lawyer named Ambrose was appointed Roman consul of Liguria and Aemilia. He moved to Milan, Italy, to take up this appointment, little knowing how his life would soon change. Not long after Ambrose’s arrival, the bishop of Milan died. Since this bishop had sadly allied himself with a group of heretics, there was great concern about who the next bishop should be. While a great crowd was debating what should be done, someone shouted out that Ambrose should be bishop. Though at the time he was a layman and a catechumen, Ambrose was elected as bishop of Milan and compelled to accept the position. He was consecrated bishop just a week after he was baptized.

This zealous man did much for Christianity. He introduced the Eastern Church’s custom of hymn singing into the Western Church and is known as the father of Latin hymnody. He also was very influential in battling Arianism, a heresy that claimed that Jesus was not fully God and not equal with the Father. This was the teaching that had beguiled his predecessor. Because of this concern, and his pastoral heart, Ambrose was very interested in the instruction of the laity. He combined his love of music and theology to craft songs that proclaimed Christian truths simply. His

hymn “Savior of the Nations, Come” tells the story of the incarnation of the Son of God, who is truly and fully God.

Nearly 12 centuries later, Martin Luther, like Ambrose, was concerned for the layperson’s understanding. He also joined Ambrose in thinking that music was a powerful tool for education. Luther said that he gave music the “highest place, next to theology” because he saw just what a beautiful and powerful thing it was. Luther probably translated this hymn into German for Advent 1523. His translation appears in the two earliest Lutheran hymnals of 1524.

To this day, Christians from a variety of backgrounds continue to sing this powerful Advent hymn that tells the story of the incarnation in a very straightforward way while reinforcing biblical teaching.

- How can music be a powerful tool to help people understand biblical teaching?
- What are your favorite Advent hymns? Do these help prepare us to meet our Savior?

Text

This hymn refers to Jesus as the “Virgin’s Son” and the “Woman’s offspring.” He was not conceived in the normal human manner but rather by the Spirit of our God (st. 2).

- Read Is. 7:14. How was the birth of Immanuel a sign? Read Luke 1:31, 34. When was this sign truly fulfilled? How do Mary's words indicate the truly miraculous nature of this event?

"Immanuel" means "God with us." This hymn picks up the very focused language of the Nicene Creed, calling Jesus "God of God" and also identifying Him as "fully man." The Creed calls Jesus "God of God" partly to combat the Arian heresy that Ambrose was also fighting against.

- Read 1 John 5:20. Why was it important to maintain that Jesus is truly God? Read Heb. 2:14–18. Why was it necessary that our Savior be truly human?

Making the Connection

Jesus, the Son of God, was born in Bethlehem and is called the king of the Jews. But God's eternal plan included more than the Jews. It was for all peoples. Read Is. 49:6 and Acts 26:23.

In Closing

We prepare for many things in this season, but the most important thing is to prepare to meet Jesus, our Savior and King. He is the Savior of the nations — and He is our Savior. By faith we now live in His light and rejoice in His gifts.

- Sing or read together *LSB 332*, "Savior of the Nations, Come."

Stanzas 3 and 4 of this hymn describe Jesus in kingly terms. A king's presence transforms the place where he is. So God was on His throne in Mary's womb (st. 3), and she was God's "pure and kingly hall" (st. 4). Read Luke 1:42–44. When did the incarnation of Jesus begin? Why is this important? What does this suggest about the beginning of human life?

- Stanza 7 describes Christ as the light shining in the darkness. Read Matt. 4:16 and Luke 2:32. Who is that light for? What effect does it have in the world?

- What does Isaiah say is "too light a thing"? Why?

- How is Jesus the Savior of the nations? How will these nations hear of His work?

Prayer

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the First Sunday in Advent).

On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry

Lutheran Service Book 344 | study by Bruce E. Keseman

Introduction

Plenty of false prophets have spilt ink predicting the exact date of Christ's return. In Martin Luther's day, Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489–1525) was sure it would happen in 1525. More recently, Harold Camping (1921–2013) insisted the end would come on a succession of different dates — including in May 2011 — before admitting that Scripture says we cannot know the time. Several years ago, a billboard near Scott Air Force Base in Illinois gave the exact date of Jesus' coming (and was taken down after the date passed). While it is useless to try to predict the precise time,

it is certainly true that Christ will descend “with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16). Perhaps it will happen today.

Today's hymn reflects on — and prays about — the coming of our Lord.

- Should the imminent return of our Lord change the way Christians live? Or should confidence that the day is coming mean that we are constantly ready without altering our daily lives? Discuss your answers.

Exploring the Scriptures

The story of John the Baptizer's preaching is told in all four Gospels. Read the account in Matt. 3:1–12.

- Where is the most unusual place you have heard a preacher proclaim God's Word? Why might John preach way out in the wilderness, far from the homes of his hearers, many of whom had to trek all the way from Jerusalem (vv. 1 and 5)?
- Heaven's kingdom arrives when heaven's King arrives. In what sense, then, is the kingdom of heaven at hand for the people in John's day? For us?
- The people confessed their sins when they were baptized (v. 6). Why is confession still essential as we remember our Baptisms and await the coming of the King of kings?

- What part of John's message is Law (exposing sin)? What part is Gospel (forgiving sin)? Why are both still vital in preaching?

Now read Is. 40:1–5, part of which is quoted in the passage we read from Matthew.

- What “warfare is ended” (v. 2) with the arrival of the Messiah? In what ways did our warfare end with the work our King did at His first coming? In what ways will it not end until His final arrival?
- How does it change the lives of us guilty people when we hear that our “iniquity is pardoned” (v. 2)?
- List some ways “the glory of the Lord” (v. 5) was revealed at the King's first coming. Are there any additional ways it will be revealed when He returns?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

“On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry” was penned in Latin by Charles Coffin (1676–1749). While many hymns were translated from Latin, “On Jordan's Bank” is unusual because it wasn't written until 1736, long after Latin ceased to be used (except in ecclesiastical and academic settings). The first English translation of the hymn appeared in *Hymns of the Primitive Church* (1837). The title of that hymnal along with the fact that the hymn originated in Latin probably led many to assume — incorrectly — that the (then) one-hundred-year-old song was at least one thousand years old.

- Why do you think Coffin might have chosen to write “On Jordan's Bank” in a “dead” language? Can you think of any advantages?

Text

Read stanza 1. Notice how it simply recounts the events of Matthew 3 but uses the present tense to retell those historical events from the first century. For example, the hymn says John “announces” rather than “announced.”

- In what ways may the present tense be useful when recalling past events?
- What makes the coming of the King of kings “glad tidings”? For whom might His arrival be bad tidings?

Read stanza 2. The words could repeat John's message to people in the first century. On the other hand, they could be addressed to us today. The ambiguity helps us both to

understand the original context and to apply John's words to ourselves.

- How can we cleanse our lives from sin — or can we?
- What should Christians do to prepare “For Christ to come and enter”?

Read stanza 3, which is our response to John's message, as the very first word — “We” — indicates. We address our soon-to-arrive King as “Savior,” “refuge,” and “reward,” realizing that without His intervention our future will be like that of fading flowers. The imagery of stanza 3 comes primarily from Isaiah 40, which, as we saw at the beginning of this study, anticipates the ministry of John the Baptizer. Read Is. 40:6–11.

- Without Christ's coming, why would we “waste away” like fading flowers? When does that happen?
- What is John's message according to the verses you read in Isaiah 40? To what extent should the church's message be the same today? Why?
- In Is. 40:10, what brings comfort to the people? Who does the verse suggest that Jesus is? What does verse 11 say that Jesus will do?
- From what specific threats does our “Savior” save us?

Making the Connection

- What specific things will you do this Advent so the Lord can cleanse your life from sin in preparation for His arrival?
- What problems in this world lead you to beg the King to come and restore creation so that neither we nor flowers will ever again “wither and decay”?

In Closing

False prophets wrongly predict the end of the world. But Jesus says, “Concerning that hour, no one knows” (Matt. 24:36), so we do not concern ourselves about precisely when our King is coming. Instead, we live our lives with repentance and with faith that Jesus already arrived once to remove the sins that would cause us to fear His final coming. We plead for the King to come into our lives now, and we plead for Him to return in glory. His imminent arrival is not a reason for fear. It is a reason for anticipation.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 344, “On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry.”

- What might it mean for Jesus to be our “refuge”? Our “reward”? See Ps. 91:4–6 and Gen. 15:1–6.

Read stanza 4. It continues our prayer, now begging our King to come and help with the difficulties in our lives.

- What specific troubles in your life make you feel like you are sick, falling, or in need of help? What struggles face some of the people you love? In a sense, this hymn is your prayer, pleading with Christ to come to your aid.

When our Lord knows it to be best, He grants our requests for relief already on earth. When our King returns, He will provide permanent healing for our bodies that now struggle.

- The hymn says the King's arrival “is nigh” (st. 1) and prays for it to happen (sts. 3–4). Are we talking about His first coming (to offer His life for us), His current comings (to deliver His forgiveness in Word and Sacrament), or His final coming (to judge and restore creation)? Explain your answer.

Read stanza 5. Most doxological stanzas begin with praise to the Father and then add the Son and the Holy Spirit. This hymn begins with praise to the Son.

- Why might Coffin begin with praise to Christ here?

- Why was the first coming of Christ necessary before the current and final comings of Christ could be of any benefit to you?

Prayer

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent).

Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding

Lutheran Service Book 345 | study by Steven P. Mueller

Introduction

“Hear ye, hear ye!” the town crier yelled, drawing attention to himself. He then began to proclaim the news that he was commissioned to bring.

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” yelled the person selling newspapers on the street, calling customers to buy a copy.

“Act now!” “You may already be a winner.” “Click here for details.” Such bids from the media of our day seek our attention and action.

Though the methods change, many different voices call out for our attention. They all ask us to listen to them and follow their counsel. But in the midst of all the voices we

hear comes a different voice with a more significant message: “Prepare a way for the Lord!”

The hymn we study today brings together many of the themes of Advent, including the message of that herald John the Baptist.

- There are many voices we hear, some of which we should listen to. What voices threaten to distract us from God’s call? How can our attention be focused so that we hear what God wants us to hear?
- How are the themes of Advent different from what we hear in our society’s “holiday” celebrations?

Exploring the Scriptures

One of the themes addressed by this hymn is the contrast between light and darkness. Read Eph. 5:8–14.

- What does this passage mean by darkness? What are the “unfruitful works of darkness” (v. 11)? What place do darkness and its works have in our lives?

- What does it mean to be “children of light”? What is the source of our light? What effects does this have in our lives?
- Read part of the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah, in Luke 1:76–79. While praising God for the gift of a son, what does Zechariah say about the Light which John will proclaim?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Following customs developed in the early Christian Church, many generations of Christians adopted a detailed pattern of worship each day. A system of seven services was developed. These services were used at various times of the day and night. Many thought that this pattern was reflected in the psalms. For example, Ps. 119:164 says, “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules.” Though not everyone would participate in all of these services, they were diligently followed in monasteries. The Lutheran Confessions rejected the “babbling of the seven canonical hours of prayer” that turned worship into a work (LC preface 3) and cautioned that such a system was a human invention and it was not sinful to omit such services (AC XXVIII 41). Still, Luther urged that Christians be involved in daily worship and devotions, and Lutherans have continued to use several of these offices, including Matins, Vespers and Compline.

In the Middle Ages, as the community gathered for one of the morning offices known as Prime, an Advent custom emerged. On the First Sunday in Advent — the first day of the new Church Year — they would sing “Hark! A Thrilling

Voice Is Sounding.” From then until Christmas Eve, at each service of Prime, they would sing this hymn because it summarized the themes of Advent and called the singers to prepare themselves for their Savior.

Though we do not know the author of this old hymn, it continues to call people to hear the Advent message. Today, many Christians hear this hymn as one of the songs often sung in the famous Service of Lessons and Carols that is broadcast worldwide from King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, England, every Christmas Eve. It remains a powerful witness to the message of Advent.

- While the chief service of the congregation is the Divine Service, why is daily worship important? How can we make worship part of our daily lives?
- What value do you see in helping people see the themes and purpose of the seasons of the Church Year? What can our congregation do to bring greater awareness?

Text

This hymn opens by talking about a “thrilling voice.” Read Is. 40:3–5 and Luke 3:2b–9.

- What is the thrilling voice? What message does it bring? How would the words of Isaiah's prophecy have heightened excitement when people saw and heard John?
- John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the Messiah. How did he prepare people for the Messiah's first arrival? Does he prepare us to be ready to receive Christ as He comes to us today? Does he help prepare us for the Savior's second coming?
- This hymn describes our natural spiritual state as "works of darkness," "earthbound," and spiritual "sloth." If we were reliant on ourselves, would the coming of the Son of God be good news? How does Jesus take care of us in this situation (see John 1:29)?

Making the Connection

The world's "holiday" celebrations, even those called Christmas, can distract from Advent's preparations for us to truly receive the gift of our Savior. The message of Advent, and of this hymn, does not always line up with the experiences of other aspects of our lives.

In Closing

The Baptist calls us to prepare ourselves by acknowledging our sin and lifting our eyes to see the Savior. This is the greatest thing we can do in Advent — or any day of the year. We remember who we are, we look to our Savior. And because of His work, we receive His mercy, love and heavenly pardon.

- Sing or read together *LSB* 345, "Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding."

- How does this hymn describe our spiritual state without Christ in stanzas 1 and 2? Do these things still characterize us today?

Advent reflects on all of Christ's comings: His birth in Bethlehem long ago, His coming to us today through His Word and Sacraments, and His coming at the end of time. Read Matt. 25:31–34, 41 and Luke 21:25–28.

- What two responses will there be to His glorious return? What makes the difference?
- This hymn concludes with a powerful doxology. How is this an appropriate response to Christ's comings?

- How can we keep Advent as a time of real preparation, with our focus on things that truly matter?
- Crowds of people went out into the wilderness to hear John's message, repent and be baptized. Where do we go to hear his message? What is our response?

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect of the Day, Third Sunday in Advent).

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Lutheran Service Book 357 | study by Kim L. Scharff

Introduction

The question is often asked, “Did the faithful in Old Testament times really understand the prophecies of the Messiah?” As we examine those prophecies many centuries later, it is hard for us to see how they could have understood. We find those ancient words difficult to comprehend. We need to remember, however, that the language used by the prophets was not as foreign to them as it seems to us. And of even more importance, the same Holy Spirit was at work then as now. We comprehend the Scriptures only because the Spirit enables us to hear them and receive them in faith. The very same was true of the faithful of those earlier days.

Exploring the Scriptures

LSB identifies the core texts for this hymn as Is. 7:10–14; 11:1–5, 10–11; and Matt. 1:23. Isaiah 7:14 and Matt. 1:23 are intimately connected. Read both.

- What is the purpose of a sign? Why could the sign in Is. 7:14 be received only by faith? How does Matthew tell us the sign is fulfilled? What great truth about Jesus is taught by the words “God with us?”

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” grew out of a series of antiphons sung from Dec. 17 to 23, one each day, at Vespers, prior to and following the Magnificat. These antiphons, which came to be known as the “O” Antiphons, date back to at least the ninth century. At a later date, probably the twelfth century, they were collected into Latin verse by an unknown author. It was in 1851 that the English divine and poet, John Mason Neale (1818–1866), translated the Latin verse, drawn from a 1710 German collection of psalms and hymns, into the English we now know as this hymn.

Neale’s short life of 48 years, due to chronic poor health, was a life of accomplishment. It was said that he was one of the great Latin and Greek scholars of his time. Through this expertise, he provided translations of numerous Latin and Greek hymn texts used in the Church even to our day.

- In the Creed we confess “the communion of saints,” which means, among other things, that there is a communion, or unity, we share with Christians of all times and places.

Today’s hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” is rich in the imagery used by the prophets of old to speak of the Anointed One to come, the promised Savior who is Jesus Christ.

- Do you ever find yourself confused by the language the Bible uses? Recall Luther’s explanation to the Third Article of the Creed. How does he describe the work of the Holy Spirit? In particular, what do you think he means by “enlightened me with His gifts” (*LSB*, 323)? How does that apply to comprehending the meaning of biblical texts?

Read Is. 11:1–5, 10–11. This is one of Isaiah’s many prophecies of the Christ.

- As you read verses 1–5, what picture is the prophet drawing of the coming Messiah? What words describing the character of the Messiah strike you as significant? In verses 10–11, the concept of a sign is raised once again. To what great blessing does this sign point? What work of the Messiah is described in verse 11?

How does a hymn like “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” reinforce that great truth? What comfort do you find in this?

Text

Since the antiphons are the basis for the hymn verses, we will focus our attention on the antiphons themselves.

- **December 17: “O Wisdom ...”**

What does Solomon say in Prov. 1:2–7 about the value of wisdom? Read 1 Cor. 1:18–31. What is the great wisdom (v. 23)? How does that wisdom seem to the world? What comes with having the wisdom that is Christ (v. 30)?

- **December 18: “O Adonai ...”**

Read Ex. 3:1–15. What does the Lord call Himself (v. 14)? What does that name tell us about Him? What, therefore, is Jesus claiming in John’s Gospel when He frequently identifies Himself as “I AM” (John 10:11; 11:25; 8:12; etc.)?

■ **December 19: “O Root of Jesse ...”**

Read Jer. 33:15–16. What name does Jeremiah give to Jesse’s descendant? What will He do? Read Rom. 15:12. Do Judah and Jerusalem refer only to the children of Israel? Who is the true Israel (Rom. 9:6–8, 22–24)?

■ **December 20: “O Key of David ...”**

Read and compare Is. 22:22 and Rev. 3:7. What do keys do? Why would David have keys? Now, read Matt. 16:13–19. What has been entrusted to the Church? What great privilege and responsibility has Christ given to His Church?

■ **December 21: “O Dayspring ...”**

Read Is. 60:1–2. What does the Messiah bring with Him when He comes? What was, and is now, the condition of the world to which He comes? Read Luke 1:78–79. What do you think of when you see the word “sunrise?” What

other great events, besides the coming of Christ, might be described as “sunrise?”

■ **December 22: “O King of the nations ...”**

Read Is. 32:1–3. There were many kings in the line of David who preceded Christ. Why do Isaiah’s words ultimately describe only Christ? Read Matt. 21:1–9. “Hosanna” means “Save us now!” What were the people confessing at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem? Why is “Hosanna” an appropriate word to sing in the Liturgy of Holy Communion?

■ **December 23: “O Emmanuel ...”**

Read Ex. 13:17–22. How was the Lord “with” His people in the Exodus? What do you think was the significance of “cloud” and “fire?” In what ways does our Lord stay with us now (Luke 24:28–35; John 8:31–32)? What ransom did our Lord pay (Matt. 20:28)?

Making the Connection

The richness of this hymn, in its witness to Christ, is something that will be more evident each time you sing it. There is truly much in this hymn that feeds and sustains your faith in Christ.

■ This hymn is appointed for use on the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Why is that so appropriate? How does this hymn prepare you for the return of Christ at the end of the age?

■ Which of the “O” Antiphons, and their hymn verses, have the most meaning for you, or bring the most comfort to you, at this point in your life? Explain why.

In Closing

The Season of Advent, with its themes of waiting and anticipation, is, perhaps, the one season of the Church Year that is most closely related to our daily lives. We are, even now, waiting for the Lord’s return. Each time we gather for worship, each time we receive the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, we are proclaiming Christ until He returns (1 Cor. 11:26). This wonderful hymn will be a welcome companion as we live out our days, anticipating the return of Emmanuel, that He might be with us, and we with Him, forever.

■ Sing or speak together *LSB* 357, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

Prayer

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Advent 4).