

O COME O COME EMMANUEL

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Week 1: The Rod of Jesse

ADVENT 2022



Advent Reader 2022

*O Come, O Come,
Emmanuel*

Advent Reader: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Week 1: The Rod of Jesse

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Introduction

O COME

Red cups, holiday music, winter spices, and Christmas lights, all these symbols tell us the same message - Christmas is coming. Christmas, for sure, can be a joyful season. Each year, when November comes, our culture repeatedly reminds us that we are entering a holly jolly season and the “most wonderful time of the year.” With upbeat music, Christmas parties, holiday sales, and gifts exchanges, we are told that this is the season when all of us are to celebrate and feast. This is the time when we ought to gather with our families and friends over meals, gifts, and laughter; a time when we allow ourselves to relax a bit, forget about the calories, and indulge in fine food and treats; a time when we leave the sadness and hardship behind and simply soak in the holly jolly mood.

But something seems to be off. While meals, music, and friendship all bring us hints of joy, our deepest yearning for joy and satisfaction doesn't seem to be fulfilled by the holiday mood. There is this tension between wanting to be happy and, at the same time, feeling uneasy about what's happening in the world. We long to be at peace, yet that feeling seems to be so far away. What, then, shall we make of this?

According to the Christian tradition, Christmas, the season where we celebrate the birth of Jesus, begins after a season of anticipation known as Advent. Advent is a time of longing and waiting. During this period, Christians across various traditions practise the discipline of waiting. Through songs and meditations, we immerse ourselves back in the pre-Christmas era, join in the story and history of the Israelites, and share in their deepest longing and yearning for the coming of the Messiah - the Promised One who can bring true joy and satisfaction. For this Advent, as we learn and practise what it means to wait, we will be reflecting on the titles of the Messiah through the 19th-century hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” translated by John Mason Neale. Each week we will look at one of the many titles and reflect on its implication for us today.

My prayer is that as we meditate upon the titles of the Messiah, may our souls find peace, comfort, and hope in it. And may we encounter the living God afresh as our hearts sing and cry out, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...”

Isaiah 11:1-2 (ESV)

“O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”
John Mason Neale

*Reflection***ROD OF JESSE**

When it comes to Christmas hymns, there are often these lines that we are very familiar with, but their meaning puzzles us. For example, what is with “angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold”? What about “Mild he lays his glory by” or “Mary, Joseph lend your aid”? This is the same when we come to the second stanza of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” where the lyrics begin with this puzzling imagery “O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse.”

What is the “Rod of Jesse”? For many of us, I believe the first thing that comes to mind is likely an image of a shepherd’s staff or some kind of a wooden stick. And so, this image, when put under the context of the hymn, confuses us. Imagine our congregation gathering together on a Sunday morning. The worship leader comes on stage and invites us to cry out to God by singing together this line “O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan’s tyranny,” it won’t be long until we start wondering to ourselves why are we calling on a piece wooden stick for help?

This is when we need to go back to the source of the imagery and see what the “Rod of Jesse” points to. If we do a quick search, the closest reference of the “Rod of Jesse” is found in Isaiah 11, where the prophet declares that one day “there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse (or in the old KJV, rod of Jesse); and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.” Under the context of Isaiah, the rod of Jesse is best seen as a stump rather than a wooden stick. This stump signifies new life. Throughout Isaiah’s ministry, the prophet was tasked to announce God’s imminent judgment to the Israelites due to their pride and rejection of Yahweh. By borrowing a forest imagery, Isaiah announces that the once mighty forest, Israel, will soon be cut down and burned out. The former green paradise filled with crackling leaves and chirping birds will turn into a desolated ground covered with lifeless stumps and ashes. Death and judgment are coming and they are inevitable.

However, after chapters of judgment and bad news, when we come to Isaiah 11, the prophet envisions a change of scene: He sees a green “shoot” coming up from the dead stumps. From the very same land that is desolated and lifeless, a new “shoot” comes up and forms a new ‘branch’. This new “branch” continues to grow to a point where it bears new fruits. And Isaiah gives us a glimpse of what this new fruit would look like starting from verse 2. This new fruit will give life, hope, and peace. A fruit that is filled by the Spirit and marked by wisdom and understanding, counsel and power, knowledge and reverence. This new fruit will finally bring true rest and restoration to the world. And you might have guessed, this new fruit that rises from the “Rod of Jesse” is Jesus the Messiah. The new hope birth out of a stump.

The title “Rod of Jesse” thus reminds us of the hope of new life. In areas that we might feel desolated and lifeless, whether it is our careers, our families, our relationships, or even our own spiritual journey with God, “Rod of Jesse” calls us to anticipate the birth of something new. During this time of advent, as we sing the words “O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse,” this is when we come to Him with open hands, let our hearts long for and invite the Living God to come and restore those lifeless areas as we wait for the coming of a new “shoot”.

Daily Reading

As you read and reflect on each passage, what does hope of new life look like?
What are some areas you long to experience the birth of a new "shoot"?

Sunday Nov 27, 2022

Genesis 15:1-21 The Covenant with Abram

Monday Nov 28, 2022

1 King 19:1-18 A Fleeing Elijah

Tuesday Nov 29, 2022

Psalm 13 How Long?

Wednesday Nov 30, 2022
Isaiah 11:1-10 The Branch of Jesse

Thursday Dec 01, 2022
Ezekiel 37:1-14 The Valley of Dry Bones

Friday Dec 02, 2022
John 5:1-15 The Healing at the Pool

Saturday Dec 03, 2022
1 Peter 1:3-12 The Living Hope
