

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Luke 1:39-45

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Rejoice!

There are many ways that Scripture describes our original state because of sin: “in darkness” (Matt. 4:16), “a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1), “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). These are all halves of dualities: the opposite of darkness is light! The opposite of slavery is freedom! The opposite of death is life! And all of these differences we can find developing throughout the history of the world.

Before God’s Word came to the world, “darkness was over the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2). Then God spoke, sending his creative Word into the world: “‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (1:3).

Before a deliverer came to Israel, the people of Israel were made to “work as slaves” (Ex. 1:13). Then God said to Moses, “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt” (3:10).

Before the Savior came, mankind was cursed because of sin: “for you are dust, / and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Then, one man died, and “God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death” (Acts 2:24), and therefore “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death...in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4).

That composes the basics of our salvation story, and all those things, those dualities, will have been running through the minds of Mary and Elizabeth as they heard the news of their savior's incarnation. They knew the story of the creation of the world by God's Word, bringing light into the darkness. They celebrated each year the Passover which marked the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt. Soon they would even see the most certain conclusion in the world, death, itself turned into life! The yearning for this deliverance, for this Savior, for all these negatives to be turned into positives, were called out by God's people for thousands of years. As we daily near the end of the world, we, too, can share their cry: **"O come, O come, Emmanuel!"**

I. Hear that He Comes – Rejoice!

Just imagine the anticipation that had built for thousands of years. And now, suddenly, Mary is told, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33). Not only would these anticipations be fulfilled, but Mary hears that she herself would give birth to the Savior! It's understandable that once she heard this message she "arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth."

We can imagine that she was probably just trembling with excitement and joy. When you receive exciting news—you got promoted at work, you're having a baby,

you've won a competition—it's simply natural for you to run and tell your closest loved ones. That's exactly what Mary did. She had faith that what the angel had told her was true, and that faith caused her to hasten to her cousin Elizabeth and share the news with her.

Then Luke tells us, "when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb"! This miraculous occurrence should not be taken lightly. Just as the word of the angel came to Mary and she trembled with joy and hastened to her loved ones, so the word of Mary came to Elizabeth and to John in her womb and he leapt at the joyful news that was coming along with that greeting! John, the unborn baby in Elizabeth's womb, had faith at even the slightest word, and his faith made him leap in joy!

Simultaneously, when Elizabeth heard the word of Mary, she "was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'" Elizabeth, like Mary and like John, had faith that her Savior was incarnate within the womb of her cousin, and this faith, borne by the Holy Spirit, caused her voice to leap in a beautiful pronouncement of her faith, of her joy!

Each of these three characters in our Gospel lesson heard the same wonderful news—Emmanuel had come!—and they all three reacted with the same rejoicing. No, each one's joy did not *look* the same. Mary "went with haste," John "leaped," Elizabeth "exclaimed with a loud cry." But these are all the same joy. So you, when you hear that your Savior has come, that he was born of Mary, that he lived perfectly according to the

Law which we sin against constantly, that he died for our crimes, that he rose again to stamp his righteousness onto us through our faith, that he ascended to heaven to prepare a place, that he is coming again to bring us to glory on the Last Day, can you help but react with joy at this news? But your joy will not *look* the same as everyone else's. Maybe your joy will be shown in the offering you place in the plates at church each week. Maybe your joy will be shown in singing along with the hymns. Maybe your joy will be shown in sharing the news happily with your neighbors. Maybe your joy will be shown in preparing a meal for visitors. But the point is, the joy that is more than just a feeling, the joy that comes because of our salvation, is the inspiration for us to do works of joy, works of love.

That is our sanctification. We are blessed to have faith in this Christ, this Savior, this God-with-us, because of the Holy Spirit coming into our hearts as he came to Mary, John, and Elizabeth, and that same Holy Spirit has set us "free from sin," so that now we "have become slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18), and therefore we do the works of righteousness and grow in holiness.

II. Know that You Are Blessed in Faith – Rejoice!

This hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," has it ever struck you how very sad it is? The ones who sing it are in the very depths of despair: "ransom captive Israel, / That mourns in lonely exile here."¹ And yet it is also very joyful, for even while each verse cries desperately, "O come!" the refrain always follows: "Rejoice! Rejoice!"

¹ ELH #110:1.

Emmanuel / Shall come to thee, O Israel.”² Thus this whole song comprises the essence of faith: even while we are in the deepest despair, even though we can see no light, no joy on the horizon, we yet cry out to God and are encouraged to Rejoice, because we have sure faith that he hears us.

Elizabeth, likewise, told her cousin, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” Before rushing to Elizabeth’s house, Mary had professed this faith verbally: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Her Lord was coming, whether she wanted him or not, but by submitting to the will of her Lord in becoming the Mother of God, that faith meant that when her Lord came to her, it was for her salvation as well.

Elizabeth could have been speaking of any of us, when she said, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” Throughout God’s Word we have been told things — “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16); “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:15); “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be any mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former

² ELH #110.

things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4) – “And blessed [are we] who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to [us] from the Lord.”

This is not just a blessedness for Mary, but it is “for all the people” (Luke 2:10). Even in this one text we see Mary, a young girl betrothed, and we see Elizabeth, an old barren woman who after so many years has finally conceived a son, and we see an unborn child, all three blessed with the exact same faith, moved by the exact same Spirit, holding onto the exact same hope. As Jesus would later say, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This may seem to be a terrifying prospect, for what does it mean for those off in third-world countries who have never heard of Christ? What does it mean for the people trapped away from the access of the Gospel? The fact that there are such corners of the world and such peoples ought to motivate us all the more: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). And this always comes with the promise, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20).

Mary didn’t go looking for this blessed promise from the Lord. Elizabeth and her husband had doubtless done all that was God-pleasing in trying to conceive a child. John was a helpless, wholly dependent infant in the womb. None of these could accomplish the great blessings they had been given. It was only when God’s promises came, as a part of his good pleasure and mercy and grace, that Elizabeth conceived in her old age, that John was conceived and dedicated to a holy purpose, that Mary conceived miraculously the one who was God himself, “the Son of the Most High,” “called holy – the Son of God,” “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 1:32, 35, 2:11).

It is likewise by God's unlimited grace, by the merciful moving of his Holy Spirit, that this same Savior, Christ the Lord, enters into our hearts and is wrapped in the swaddling cloths of our faith, where his unlimited merits serve to forgive us of all our sins, and to make us holy before the Lord. It is because this Emmanuel, this God, is truly with us that we are brought into the light, we are freed, we are made alive — we are saved, now and for eternity. Because of this, we can unabashedly rejoice!

Amen.