



Prelude (Advent)

Week 1: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Brian Mattson - 12/07/2025

I'm going to sing a quick song. It's not a Christmas song or an Advent song. It's by one of my favorite songwriters, Randall Goodgame. It's a song about being in a position to prepare the way, to set the stage, for the headliner.

The Opener—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhY12TgVwpk>

This season is kind of like going to a concert and having a really great opener. Have you ever experienced that? I remember the very first concert I went to—Jars of Clay down in Branson. I don't remember a single thing about the concert except for how cool I felt going to see an actual concert with one of my friends. His mom dropped us off and we waited in line until they opened the doors. We were probably the coolest 6th graders in the entire world right there. Seeing a Christian rock band in Branson, Missouri. That sentence is the definition of cool.

I don't recall if they had an opener. If they did, I'm sure I didn't pay attention. I asked Jessica if she remembered her first concert—it was Amy Grant—and if there was an opener. She said she didn't remember if there was an opener or not, but the only thing she remembered from the whole thing was the song *Baby, Baby*, which let's be honest, that song was a banger.

When we go to concerts, we aren't buying the tickets to see the opener. Well, one time when we were dating, Jessica and I bought tickets to a concert just

to see the opener. We saw Maroon 5 open for John Mayer, so that was cool. But it's usually a lesser-known artist or an up-and-comer who's trying to make their mark. I've been to a few concerts, but rarely do I remember the opener.

I went to a concert where the opener enhanced the whole experience. I was in college and drove over to the Pageant in St. Louis to see an Icelandic band called *Sigur Ros*. The opener was a female quartet of strings players and vocalists. They were amazing! I'd never heard of them, nor do I remember their name, but they also happened to be a contributing artist on one of Sigur Ros's albums. Their strings and vocal harmonies helped set the mood for the entire evening. They were similar to Sigur Ros, but not the same. As the minutes ticked away and the anticipation grew, this opening act prepared the audience to fully engage with the main band. It was an incredible concert and the opener was a pivotal part of the overall experience. Had I arrived late or simply ignored them, it wouldn't have been the same. A great opener sets the stage for the headliner to be received well.

That's kind of what we are doing during Advent. We are preparing this building, this room, ourselves, to receive the gift of Christmas well. We have officially changed the church into her seasonal Christmas clothes. There are wreaths and ribbons, garland and greenery decorating the inside and outside of this beautiful building. This is done for three reasons: 1) it's fun and festive; 2) it helps us prepare for the arrival of Christmas, and 3) it marks the beginning of a new year. Yes, this is the first Sunday in Advent, which is basically New Year's Day in the Church Calendar. If you have no clue what I'm talking about, the church has its own calendar—one it's been using since the days of the early church. And the very beginning of this liturgical year is today, the beginning of Advent, the opening of the Christmas season.

Now, there are some very unique churchy words that I just used, so let's take a second to make sure we are all on the same page with the dictionary of the church. Liturgy simply means public worship services, so the liturgical

calendar just means the order and seasons of worship in the church. This is where we see words like Advent, Christmastide, and Lent. Just like our Gregorian calendar, the church uses a liturgical calendar to order its days and seasons.

The other new word, *advent*, derives from the Latin *adventus*, meaning *coming* or *arrival*. So this season is about the preparation and celebration of Jesus' incarnation on Earth, but also to the anticipation of his Second Coming. We look forward to celebrating Christ's birth and we look forward to the time when he comes again. These four weeks are a period of preparation for both "advents"—or arrivals—of Jesus. And an important thing to remember is that there is a very distinct difference between Advent and Christmas. Those are not interchangeable words in the life of the Church.

The season of Advent is meant to be savored and enjoyed. It's not meant to be rushed through or ignored, no matter how much our society wants us to focus on Christmas Day only. December 25th will be so much more meaningful if you take the time to enjoy the tension and suspense of the season of Advent. Then on Christmas Eve, we will gather to celebrate the culmination of our waiting and wondering by singing together about a Silent Night, which will then, ultimately, give way to a chaotic and crazy Christmas Day. But, if you try and soak up all the stories and songs of the season until that day, it just might mean more this year.

And it's easy to love the music this time of year. I love the hymns, the big-band hits from the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and I even love the new Christmas music and remakes. I'm not sure why anyone wants to listen to it in October, but for about 40 days, I'm here for it. I've been working in churches for almost 15 years, and every year people ask to sing more Christmas carols during Advent. We've been programmed by radio stations and the culture to skip Advent and sing the Christmas hits. But if we rush through this season, we might miss a more well-rounded Christmas experience. So that's what we're going to do over the next four weeks. We are going to look at some

specific Advent songs and how they prepare us for the celebration of Christmas. We *will* break these rules sometimes and sing classic Christmas hymns—especially on High Church Sunday—but the words in these Advent songs help set the stage for the celebration of Christmas day.

That's one of the beautiful things about songs, if we are paying attention. They weave together words and melodies to make poetry that moves. There are dynamics—the loudness and softness of the songs—harmonies, chord progressions, and pauses that all combine to engage our emotions. We tell stories with songs. We remember moments and events in songs. We fall in love through songs. And the lyrics of the season are quite varied. Some songs are deep and emotional, like *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* or *O Holy Night*. Some are only surface level, but provide joy, nonetheless. Take for example *Feliz Navidad*. The simple melody and chord progression come together to create an earworm. The words basically just repeat the phrases *Merry Christmas* and *Happy New Year* from the bottom of the singer's heart. Deep? No. Fun? Yes.

Our Advent song this week is *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, one of the oldest songs in Christianity. The lyrics stretch all the way back to monasteries in the 9th century, and perhaps as far back as the 6th century. The words for the song were part of evening prayers, or vespers, for the monks during the final week of Advent. *On the final evenings of Advent, from December 17 to December 23, these services included special musical pieces, one for each evening, referred to as the "O" Antiphons.*¹ Another church word to define is antiphon, which is a short chant or chorus whose words are taken from the Psalms or other scripture.

Now, we have no clue what those first chants or melodies sounded like, as there are no recordings or notations, but in 1851, English hymnwriter John Mason Neale translated the Latin into English. His first translation began with the words *Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel*, but ten years later, he changed it

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/hymn-history-o-come-o-come-emmanuel>

to *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. Fellow musician, Thomas Helmore, paired Neale's translation with a 15th century French tune and the rest is history.

One last bit of interesting history is that the second letter of each Latin antiphon forms the reverse acrostic *ero cras*, which means "I shall be with you tomorrow," a nod to the forward-looking themes of Advent.

I think the best and most interesting thing about this hymn is its minor key. This song hints at the mystery and intrigue during this season of Advent, and in the life of faith. This one doesn't sound like our typical carols and songs. There's no jolliness to it, no carefree Christmas spirit. It's a little moody and dark. It sounds like it was written for Phantom of the Opera. But that's its charm, really. This is a song that's meant for this season of waiting and longing, hoping and praying.

Each one of these verses are built around the original seven antiphons beginning with a Messianic title for Jesus as referenced in scripture. Each is a prayer and a plea, but the chorus is the answer to our prayers: we rejoice as people of faith that Emmanuel shall come. This hymn is a theologically dense embodiment of the world we live in as people of faith—the already and not-yet.

Let's take the first line of the first verse. *O come, O come, Emmanuel*. This is a reference to the prophetic passage in Isaiah 7.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel.

- Isaiah 7:14

This passage is referenced at the beginning of the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew. There's a lengthy genealogy linking Jesus to King David and then finally to Abraham, the progenitor of the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. Following this family tree, we learn about the birth of Jesus.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

- Matthew 1:18-23

Then the verse asks for Emmanuel to "ransom captive Israel," a nod to Israel's past of God delivering the Hebrews from Pharaoh, but it's also a look into our collective future of Jesus appearing again to redeem us anew.

These verses, all seven of them, tell the story of the ancient Israelites and celebrate God's faithfulness. At the same time, they are a shared yearning of all God's people for the redemption in our future. They are a collection of Old Testament prophecy verses, embodied by Jesus in the Gospel stories, and carried by us now as hope for the days to come. We are all Israel, exiled here on Earth, longing for our heavenly homeland; awaiting redemption.

This is why it's important to soak Advent up. These four weeks prepare us for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we rejoice in a baby that changed the world. The inbreaking of God into mankind through flesh and bone. A moment that moves us today. But in Advent, we transcend one day. We journey back to the ancient Israelites' journey of exile and redemption. We recall those prophetic words made true

in the birth and life of Jesus. And we look forward to God's faithfulness yet again, when this world is redeemed by Jesus' second Advent. When he comes again to make all things new.

So don't rush past these four weeks. Let the songs and words seep into you. Take one of our Advent devotions—they're free!—and journey along to Christmas with a renewed expectation and appreciation of the Incarnation. This season is a setup to the main event. It's the prologue to a rousing symphony. It's like John the Baptist pointing the people to the truth of Jesus who is on the way. It's like the perfect opening act to the headliner. Advent prepares the way for the story to be understood and felt in more meaningful ways than you knew before.

So let's sing again, with fresh eyes, as we prepare our hearts to take in the entire season, not just one day.