

Pastor Charley Reeb:

Well, hey there. Welcome to worship at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. We're so glad that you have joined us for this second Sunday of Advent. It's hard to believe we're already in the advent season, but we are and we appreciate you joining us. I want to remind you that we are still in the middle of our pledge campaign. And I want to thank those of you who have sent pledges in already so we can have a great 2021 year of ministry. We can't do it without you, so we appreciate it. Those of you who haven't pledged yet, we appreciate you doing that as soon as you can. Again, we need your help to be the church God has called us to be. So thank you. Let us be in attitude of prayer together. Eternal God, we do thank you for the gift of worship and the gift of being together.

We thank you for the weekly reminder that brings us all together as your church, reminds us what's most important because we always have a tendency to forget. So we come back to you and we are grounded by your presence and your promises and your truth. Now Lord, you've given me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching your word to these my friends and your servants. Lord, it's a task I need your strength in order to do. So lord, speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ name we pray. Amen.

G.K. Chesterton was a brilliant British poet and theologian. Some of the things I've read by him are some of the most profound I've ever come across. So Chesterton, he was known for his brilliance but he was also known for his absent-mindedness. Sometimes he will completely forget where he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to be doing. Well, one day he got lost and he sent a telegraph back to his wife that said, "Well, I found myself lost again. Where am I supposed to be?" And his wife sent a telegraph back to him that said simply, "Home." Well, during this advent season, that's exactly what I'd like to convey to you. Through each Sunday of Advent, is to bring you back home to the real meaning of Christmas, to bring you back home to the real promise of this season, to bring you back home to the most amazing event in human history. And I think I can't do a better job than reflecting and focusing on what I think is one of the greatest Christmas carols ever written.

Now, last week I mentioned that one of the greatest Christmas carols ever written was The Magnificat. In fact, I believe I said it was the greatest Christmas carol ever written, sung by Mary. The very first Christmas carol in Luke, where she praises and magnifies the Lord's name. And it's a beautiful hymn. But I think a close second that I want to focus on today that brings out amazing promises for us is O come O come Emmanuel. Now, it's the oldest Christmas carol that sung. We don't know who wrote it. All we know it was written by a priest or a monk before 800 AD, if you can believe that. Now, when this humble priest or monk sat down to write these words to this amazing hymn, little did he know that he was writing the words of the most powerful Christmas carol the church would ever see and the church would ever sing.

You see, today we sing this song by memory, most of us do. And we think it's a beautiful song. But I don't think we often realize the power in it, the profoundness in it. That if you really look at all the lyrics and the words to this Christmas carol, it is a concise history and message of who Jesus Christ is. You see back in the dark ages, Bibles weren't readily available to people, books were not readily available. Not many people could read, and so they would sing this hymn as a way to anchor them in their faith. They would sing this hymn as a way to teach themselves and their loved ones about the power of Jesus Christ. And as the unfolding story of the Messiah, it brought light and it brought education and freedom to a very dark and ignorant time. And the tone of this great hymn is very haunting.

That's one of the words that comes to mind when I sing it. It's a haunting tone because I believe it conveys a hunger, a haunting hunger that I think is front and center during this time of the year. A haunting hunger that expresses our desire for God Almighty to come near and to make things right, for God Almighty to come near and set the crooked path straight, for God Almighty to come and bring

peace to this very, very dark world. Emmanuel, O come O come Emmanuel, God is with us. That's what Christmas is about really. That's really what the promise of Advent and the entire Bible is about, God is with us. When you think of Moses and the fact that he stood between Pharaoh and the Red Sea, it looked hopeless. But Moses believed that God was with him and God provided a way.

You think of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they're in that fiery furnace. It definitely looked hopeless, but they believed God was with them in the midst of that fire and they were saved. And you think about David facing Goliath, the giant. How in the world could David fight off that giant? But David believed that the Lord was with him, and it made all the difference in the world. You see, when the writer of Matthews gospel thought about a way to convey the Christmas message, he did a very brilliant thing. He did a very wise thing. He reached deep back into the Old Testament and got a word out and dusted it off. And that word is Emmanuel, God with us, the Messiah, Emmanuel, Jesus, which means God is with us. So every year when we sing this haunting, hungering, yearning Him, we're singing, O come O come Emmanuel and do all the things that you've promised.

And I tell you, when we believe the lyrics and the message of this hymn it changes us because the Lord does come near. And when the Lord comes near, He saves us. If you look at the fourth verse of this great hymn, we sing, O come the root of Jesse's tree. This is a reference to Isaiah chapter 11, a prophecy of Jesus Christ, it says, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of council and power." This is Jesus, and the spirit of God is with Jesus conquering evil, conquering death, and giving everyone the banner of life. This Jesus comes and brings us life and saves us.

Dr. Will McClain was the professor of preaching at Wesley Theological Seminary. And he talks about the time when he was in Seoul, Korea, and he met a South Korean tailor named Smitty Lee. And when he met Smitty, he thought to himself, now that's a rather odd name. He wondered, is that a Korean name? It doesn't sound like a Korean name. And so curiosity got the best of him and he had to ask, "Smitty, is that a Korean name?" And the tailor said, "No, it's not." Then he proceeded to tell McClain the powerful story of during the Korean War a very courageous American soldier had saved his life. Then he went on to tell of an old Asian custom. And he described it in two short sentences, "He saved my life. I took his name." And that's exactly what we have done as Christians. Jesus Christ, Emmanuel has come and has saved us. And when we surrender our lives to Jesus, He saves us. And when He does that, we take His name of Christian. The one who is of Christ, the one who belongs to Christ, the one who serves Christ, The one who has the spirit of the living Christ, breathing and living within us. He saved our lives, He saved our souls, and we take His name. No other religious figure in history claims to save us. No other figure, Mohammed never claimed to save, Buddha never claimed to save, Moses never claimed to save. Only Jesus Christ claims to save us. One time there was a conference of comparative religions at a big city. And all the great theologians and scholars gathered around to debate and present papers and lectures. And there came a point in a conference where they were debating the uniqueness of Christianity, what makes Christianity unique among all the world's religions. And one scholar piped up and said, "Well, it's got to be the incarnation, that the divine, that God would take on flesh." And another person piped up and said, "Well, no, there are other religions that claim the divine takes on flesh."

Then another said, "Well, then it has to be the resurrection. The divine comes back from the dead." And someone said, "No, in other religions it talks about the divine or someone coming back from the dead." And they kept debating and debating and debating. And then C.S. Lewis walked into the room late disheveled, papers in his hands, and he sat down and said, "What are y'all debating about?" They said, "Well, Dr. Lewis, we're debating about what makes Christianity unique." And he said, "Oh, that's easy."

It's grace." The room fell silent. Then they all had to agree that Lewis was right. No other religion claims that God's love is free of charge with no strings attached.

Buddhist have their eightfold plan. There is no free ride. Hindus have their sense of karma, which means everything you do and everything you think affects how the world treats you. Islam has a strict code of ethics and requirements. Only the Christian faith dares to claim that God's love is free, unconditional. We call that grace. Emmanuel comes to save us. And that loving, saving power, we call grace. O come O come Emmanuel, when we sing that we're not only singing that Emmanuel comes to save us, but we're also singing that Emmanuel comes to enlighten us. If you look at the hymn in verse six, it says, "O come now dayspring, disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight." This is a powerful verse that many don't understand or know about. It actually is a reference to the morning star in Malachi. The morning star that comes and disperses the darkness and brings the light of truth, and honor, and honesty.

Encourage that light that comes and disperses the darkness will enlighten us. And oh, how we need that. Don't we need that? O come O come Emanuel and pierce our darkness, penetrate our darkness, disperse our darkness. When we think about the hatred in this world right now and the division in this country, when we think about what the coronavirus has done with all the pain and all the misery, oh, has there ever been a more powerful time for Advent where we sing, O come O come Emanuel and disperse our darkness. We need it now more than ever. Emmanuel will do it if we let Him. And we see glimpses of the darkness being dispersed and the light coming in. If we have the eyes of God and we look closely...

I recall seeing the darkness being dispersed and the light coming in, if only for a brief moment one time when I went to the Atlanta Airport of all places. Talk about irony. The Atlanta Airport which sometimes can be a very, very dark place. Lots of stress, lots of anxiety, people rushing, people really not thinking about others, people thinking of only themselves. It can be a rough place. But I was there to pick up a friend, and on the way there it was thundering and lightning and raining. It was a very, very dark day. And for some reason I decided to go into the airport and wait for my friend at the top of the escalators.

You know where that is for most of you been to the airport? You're not allowed to go to the gate anymore, of course. But you can wait at the very top of that steep escalator. And everybody's waiting for other people to come off their plane. Excuse me. And so I waited there for my friend and I got to talk to this young mother who was standing next to me who had two children, eight and 10. And as we talked, she told me that her two boys were expecting their grandma to come off that plane and come up those escalators. And she whispered to me, "No, but instead it's my husband who's been in Iraq for a year serving, and my kids haven't seen him for a year. They think it's grandma, but their father is coming home from Iraq today." But the kids didn't know it.

They had a sign that said, grandma, grandma, so grandma would see them. Well, I waited, I waited. They waited, they waited. I couldn't wait to see this. I'm glad my friend was late coming in so I could see this reunion. And those kids were on their tiptoes waiting for grandma, waiting for grandma, when all of a sudden their daddy showed up coming up that escalator, and they dropped that sign. And they looked back at their mommy with a painful look of joy, and they ran to their father, and they almost tackled him. And I tell you folks at that moment, that stressful, anxious, sometimes hateful airport became a source of light and joy. It's like everybody stopped what they were thinking and what they were doing. And it seemed like that area was a little bit lighter, a little bit more joyful.

And it continued for a little while because there was a stranger that I saw, and many of us saw right there who went up to the daddy and said, "I want to thank you for what you've done for our country." And then he bent down and took out of his wallet two \$100 bills, and gave it to those boys and says, "Listen, you go do something nice for your father." The darkness for a little while was dispersed, but you

know what? I know someone who comes and can disperse our darkness today, tomorrow, and the future. His name is Emmanuel, God with us, the morning star, the light. So we sing this hymn O come O come Emmanuel, and we sing it and we know that as we sing it, Emmanuel comes to save us and Emmanuel comes to enlighten us. But when we sing it, we also understand maybe most profoundly that Emmanuel comes to free us.

In verse five we sing this, "O come thou key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home. The captives from their prison free and conquer death's deep misery." This is a powerful reference to Isaiah 22, that tells of Emmanuel, the Messiah, having the keys to the kingdom, the key that sets us free. And this is perhaps the most important verse of the entire hymn because it touches us at our most vulnerable place. To those things which enslave us, those things which imprison us, and the promise of this hymn and the promise of Emmanuel is that Emmanuel has the key to set us free. To set us free from our anger. To set us free from our resentment. To set us free from our addictions, to set us free from our sin. To set us free from our small mindedness and ignorance. To set us free from that which enslaves us. Emmanuel has the key to set us free if we want it. And you know what that key is? Quite simply, love.

We all know the poem, "Love came down at Christmas. Love all lovely, love divine; love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign." There's an old French story about a millionaire who spent most of his days just counting his gold. That's all he did, just count his gold. And he lived in this big palace. And next to the palace was a poor cobbler and his little shop, who spent most of his days just repairing shoes. And as he did, he would sing rather joyfully. Well, his singing irritated the rich man. And one day that rich man decided to give that cobbler some gold coins. And of course, at first, the cobbler was overjoyed. And he took the coins and he hid them in the ground.

But then he worried that they weren't there. And so he would often check back to make sure they were still there. And then he worried that someone saw him hide them. And so he took them and he would hide them somewhere else. In the midst of all this worry and anxiety, he realized that he stopped singing. The gold coins had kept him from singing. And so finally he went back to the rich man with those coins and said to him, "Here, take back your coins and give me back my songs." This advent season as we sing, O Come O Come Emmanuel, what we are doing really is taking all those things that enslave us and giving them away. And getting back a song that tells of a king that saves us, that enlightens us, that frees us. Don't ever stop singing.

Let's pray. O come, O come Emmanuel, and set us free. Well, Lord, perhaps there has never been a more earnest prayer than that right now. O come, O come Lord and bring healing to us. Bring healing to this country and world. O come Lord, and provide a vaccine in a way to disperse the darkness of COVID. O come Lord and free us from our hatred and divisions and our resentments for those who think differently than we do. O come Emmanuel and free us from those sins and those obsessions and those idols that honestly if we're honest with ourselves, have greater importance to us than you at times free us. Free us for joyful obedience, as we say. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Receive this benediction. And now may that mind that was in Christ Jesus being you also. May the love of God, our Heavenly Father abide with you this day and through this week. And the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit fall fresh upon you. And the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ go with you and sustain you both now and forever more. Amen.