

**Christmas in Seven Carols, Part 2: O Morning Star
December 9, 2018**

by Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander

Scriptures: Revelation 22:12-17; John 17:20-26

I. Guidance through the Predictable

Scripture: Revelation 22:12-17

In our review of seven carols as we move through the Advent and Christmas seasons this year, we are literally taking a kind of journey together. The carols were chosen specifically with this sense of direction in mind, that we might move together, recognizing how the past has shaped us, where we are and the state of the world in which we are presently living, so that we might struggle our way through, allowing for the possibility of stepping into a new future.

Last week, Eric walked us through the history of the Jewish tradition of Hanukkah that we might be aware of events leading up to the Maccabean Revolt. This year, Hanukkah is being remembered and celebrated at exactly the same time we, as Christians, step into a new church year with Advent, yearning together toward the promise of Christmas. The Jews endured the occupation of the Babylonians who destroyed their temple and forced their people into exile, only to be “liberated” again and again by the Persians, Alexander the Great, and the Romans who continued to rebuke their traditions, limit their spiritual practice, and oppress their identities throughout their history.

This history of struggle continues into our present realities as well, allowing us to see why candles lasting eight days when there is only enough oil to burn for one, is a miraculous in-breaking of God to their world. As God is present with the Jews in this way, they experience a renewal of their living covenant with God, fueling their anticipation for the coming Messiah. Stepping into Advent in this same time of remembrance, we Christians, too, yearn for the coming of a Messiah to renew our covenant with God. In Advent, we wait for God, who breaks into our lives through miraculous participation within our ongoing struggles.

Our hymn *O Come O Come Emmanuel* is a reflection of that yearning for the in-breaking of God. We seek to experience, most keenly, God’s presence with us in our struggle. Through this hymn we are asking where God is, and inviting God’s presence among us in the muck and the mire of our everyday. In our everyday experience of God, the reality of the miraculous gift of the Messiah becomes real, granting us hope in our darkest days.

This week our hymn *O Morning Star* presents us with some ideas for where we can be looking for God among us, and how we might be attentive to the signs of God’s presence to guide us along our journeys together. Each of the three stanzas of this hymn offer different images of how God relates to creation.

The first stanza tells the story of the Magi and the guiding star that led them to the event in Bethlehem where God was doing something new in the world.

*O Morning Star, how fair and bright!
You shine with God's own truth and light;
Aglow with grace and mercy!
Come shine on us O heaven's sun;
Our only Savior, you have won our hearts to serve you only!
Lowly, Holy!
Great and glorious, all victorious, rich in blessing!
Rule and might o'er all possessing.*

God's love acts as the guiding star that stops over Bethlehem and directs the Magi to the manger where Jesus rests. The Morning Star is the star that lasts throughout the morning dawn so it is the first star the sailors see. Using this star, navigators on the ships could wake up in the morning, find this star, and set their track, righting their direction from whatever drifting may have taken place in the night. This star is a constant guide, one that is predictable and therefore reliable. What is unique in the story of the star and the Magi is that the star actually stopped. As you know, stars seem to be constantly in motion since the earth is constantly revolving. But in the Magi story, the star stops long enough over Bethlehem for those with eyes to see to find the place where God is present. This activity of God is new and unexpected, which is why it caught the attention of the Magi.

In our scripture from Revelation, Jesus is referred to as this Morning Star that shows us that God is both steadfast and predictable, guiding us to safe harbors or safe spaces of God's love. But through this story of Jesus's birth, God pauses to do a new thing, widening the safe harbor of love for all creation to share in and share together.

The second stanza compares God's activity to sustaining the creation:

*Come heavenly brightness; Light divine,
And deep within our hearts now shine;
There light a flame undying!
In your one body let us be as living branches of a tree;
Your life our lives supplying.
Now, though daily earth's deep sadness may perplex us, and distress us,
Yet with heav'nly joy you bless us.*

Through being the living branches of a tree, God's body supplies us with sustaining love that endures, surrounds, and blesses us, even when everything around us distresses us. Philipp Nicolai, the composer, lived between 1556 and 1608 and wrote this hymn during the blitz of the black plague in Europe. In his hometown, more than thirteen hundred people died within seven months. For Nicolai, the devastation of death was all too clear, and expected. What was unexpected was the blessing God grants in breaking through our misery with love and sustaining joy. This hymn is a statement of faith in the richness of God's faith in us, even when death is literally at our door.

The third stanza speaks of God being the nourishing food that not only fills us, but also brings us pleasure:

*Christ, when you look on us in love,
At once there falls from God above a ray of purest pleasure.
Your Word and Spirit, flesh and blood,
Refresh our souls with heav'nly food.
You are our dearest treasure!
Let your mercy warm and cheer us!
Oh, draw near us!
For you teach us God's own love
Through you has reached us.*

The heavenly food with which God nourishes us is God's own love, through the birth of Jesus, and this love reaches us in a way that brings the fullest pleasure of God's Kingdom. The incarnation of God into human flesh and blood reconnects us to our creator so that nothing can tear this connection between us. Jesus comes into this world so that God's love can reach us, guiding us, nourishing and sustaining us, as well as warming and cheering us, buoying us up to take our next best steps into our abundant lives. This is God's promise to us, fulfilled yet again in this Jesus, born in Bethlehem, with a resting star overhead.

Let us meditate on these images of God with us as we hear another anthem that uses the image of a tree to speak of how God nourishes us through the coming of the Christ:

Musical Offering: *Jesus Christ The Apple Tree*

II. Steadfast through the Unexpected

Scripture: John 17:20-26

When we call to God through hymns like *O Come O Come Emmanuel*, we hear and see God's response in exactly those places that are known to us and predictable. But, the activity that is happening within these places is altogether new and unpredictable. God's love is like this morning star that is predictable in its steadfastness and guidance, but is also something that surprises us by carrying us through inevitable events that deliver us into new and unexpected pathways bringing boundless joy.

Through our biblical stories, God is continually delivering God's people from inevitable captivity and the loss of their greatest treasures, like the temple the Babylonians destroyed in 586 BCE. The covenant that God made first with Abraham that set this relationship in motion was itself a questionable and unexpected event. First, what kind of God would bend far enough to be in relation to its creatures in the first place? There were many stories of gods in Abraham's time, and none of them behaved in a way that showed their yearning to participate with creation. This is what raised the God of Israel above all other gods. Yahweh acted in, and through history, by entering the story of us.

Not only were God's actions unexpected, but the people with whom God chose to share this covenant with all of creation, were quite unexpected as well. Over and over again, our scriptures reveal to us the stories of misfits, and people with little to no imagination, being chosen to carry God's covenant of Love into the world. Abraham and Sarah had no children and yet they were the ones chosen to begin a new nation. Ishmael and Isaac were the successors, only their stories became separated out of fear and mistrust of God, setting God's people in many different directions, confusing the message, but somehow sustaining the love for all. Within our branch of history, it was then left to Jacob and Essau to fight it out as they moved forward, through theft and deception, into God's calling.

Then came the kings that would reunite Israel and ensure their future by rebuilding the temple and holding the people to their side of the covenant with God. But these kings were not chosen for their strength and formidable powers, but rather through their quiet wisdom and meekness. Saul, Solomon, and David were not known to strike fear in the hearts of their enemies, yet it was through them that God rebuilt the nation of Israel and helped them to remember their identity as those chosen to share God's message of love to all nations.

It was through King David's line that God renewed the covenant with God's people in a whole new way: a baby in a manger in a barn in some small rural land where no one would expect to see a king. And this king was born to a young woman with no lineage or claim to any inheritance. Through these unexpected people, God's *Morning Star* was given to the world, renewing the bond between Creator and creation in a whole new way. Instilling in all of us this unshakeable yearning to continually create through love with one another, making us all reflections with Christ of God's boundless love and mercy in the world.

O Morning Star, you have shown us where to look for our Emmanuel: God with us. You tell us that you have made God's name known to us, and that you will make it known, so that the love with which God has loved you, may be in us, and you in us: *your life, our lives supplying*. To see God, we only need to look with your eyes into the eyes of our neighbor, into the fields of lilies adorned in God's grandeur, or into the hearts of those who reach out beyond themselves, making connections with all that is. Our yearnings to meet God face to face, rest in the morning star that directs our paths, and gives us the solid ground of love, that we might step out into unknown territory, happily expecting abundant life. *You are our dearest treasure!*
Amen.

Congregation Sings: *O Morning Star*
Communion