

Christmas in Seven Carols
Part I: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
December 2, 2018
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Scriptures: Isaiah 7:10-16; Micah 5:1-5a; Matthew 1:20-22

One of the many benefits of our participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative is that we get to know each other's faiths in ways that help expand our understanding and appreciation for our own faith, deepening our relationship with God and the world. Case in point: Hanukkah.

Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish festival commemorating the rededication of the Temple in 165 BCE by the Maccabees after its desecration by the Syrians. It is marked by the successive kindling of eight lights. The dates of Hanukkah shift around a bit from year to year since they are based on a lunar calendar, but this year the first day of Hanukkah corresponds with the first day of Advent.

I find this year's overlapping of holiday celebrations poetic. This being our last Advent in our present location before moving to the Tri-Faith Commons, it's almost like the Jewish community is extending its hands to welcome us already, and to teach us an important lesson about our own celebration of Advent.

So, let me tell you a little about Hanukkah.

In order to fully appreciate the original Hanukkah in 165 BCE, actually, we need to step back another four centuries to the time of the Babylonian Exile.

According to the Book of Deuteronomy, God made a covenant with Israel, choosing Israel to become a special, holy people and priestly nation through whom the world would ultimately be blessed. As part of this covenant, God promised to reward Israel with abundant blessings when they obeyed God's commands. Yet, when they did not obey, God warned that Israel would be punished. God would never abandon Israel – for Israel was God's special people – but God would punish Israel like a parent punishes a child to bring that child back into a healthy way of life.

Whether or not you agree with the belief that Israel is God's "chosen" people, or whether God rewards and punishes people according to their fidelity to God's commands, this is what Israel believed, and understanding this belief is critical to understanding both Hanukkah and Advent. So set your judgment aside for the moment.

Given Israel's understanding of the link between covenant fidelity and reward and punishment, it should come as no surprise, then, that when the Babylonians swept down from the north and destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 BCE, and hauled its inhabitants into exile in Babylon, the Israelites didn't simply shake their fists at the Babylonians and blame them. They turned inward. Many interpreted their exile as God's punishment for infidelity to God's commands. Their belief was founded upon more than just the Book of Deuteronomy, too. A number of

Israel's prophets – including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Zechariah, and Haggai – had excoriated Israel for years for not following God's commands. Chief among their complaints were Israel's over-reliance on military power instead of faithfulness to achieve their goals, and an utter disregard for doing the most basic of things God asked of them: namely, that they care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned – in other words, the most vulnerable in society. Over and over Israel is denounced for the impact that greed and indifference had on the poor and vulnerable. Good thing we don't have these problems today, huh?

As a result of Israel's infidelity, many of the prophets predicted exactly what would eventually happen to them. The Babylonians would come and, though sinful pagans, would be the instruments through whom God would exact God's judgment upon Israel.

For 45 years, Israel suffered in exile, vowing to live more faithfully if they were ever released. In 539 BCE, their prayers were answered. From Persia (modern-day Iran), a military leader named Cyrus emerged on the scene, conquering the Babylonians and freeing the Jews from their long years of exile.

Those who returned to Israel were determined to make good on their vows and never stray so far from God again. With great enthusiasm, they devoted themselves to studying the ancient scriptures and rebuilding the Temple that the Babylonians destroyed. In 450 BCE, the Second Temple was complete, the Torah was read in its entirety to the people by the prophet Ezra and they celebrated like it was 1999. Only good times lay ahead! Or so they thought.

Those good times proved to be short lived. Despite their renewed faithfulness and zeal for following God's commands in the Torah, Israel's Persian overlords proved to be not much better than their Babylonian ones. When the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, their hopes may have been raised for a moment, but things actually got a whole lot worse.

Alexander the Great divided up his new empire into various administrative districts. He handed the territory of Israel, Babylonia (modern-day Iraq), and Anatolia (central and western Turkey today) to one of his favorite champions, Seleucus I of Syria, who became the first leader of what would become known as the Seleucid Empire.

Like his Greek counterpart, Seleucus I was a big fan of the god, Zeus. So much so, in fact, that he and those who came after him saw themselves as incarnations of Zeus on earth. Thus, they demanded to be worshipped as a god, requiring a yearly, documented sacrifice be made to them on pain of death.

As you might suppose, this practice didn't sit well with the Jews. They pushed back so hard that eventually one of the Seleucid emperors, Antiochus Epiphanes, sent an army to Jerusalem, seized control of the Jewish Temple, planted statues of Zeus in the sanctuary, and commanded that pigs be sacrificed on the Jewish altar as a deliberate act of desecration. Oh – and he outlawed Judaism throughout the Empire.

This act of terror and aggression is what sparked the Maccabean Revolt, led by a man named Mattathias and his five sons. "Maccabee" comes from the Hebrew word for "hammer" – and

hammer the Seleucids is what they did! In 165 BCE, the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem, purified the Temple, and rededicated it with a celebration that we know as Hanukkah. Hanukkah comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to dedicate.”

The reason why candles are lit for eight days is because, according to legend, they only had enough consecrated oil to burn in a special lamp for one day out of the seven days they needed to re-consecrate the sanctuary. Yet miraculously, the oil burned for eight days. Incidentally, the reason why Jews eat jelly donuts, known as *sufganiyot*, and other foods fried in oil during Hanukkah is in remembrance of the miracle of the oil. It's the only holiday I'm aware of where eating donuts is considered a sacred act!

This is where the story of Hanukkah ends and the Christian story of Advent begins.

With Israel finally freed from outside occupation, the Second Temple re-consecrated and re-dedicated, and its people striving to follow God's commands with more zeal than ever before, there was great expectation in the air that another of God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. Not only would Israel be rewarded for its faithfulness with peace and prosperity, but God would send a Messiah – a Savior – to make this peace and prosperity last forever.

Based on scores of documents found in ancient clay jars in the cliffs of Qumran, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, we know that many in Israel were busily preparing for the advent of the Messiah. They felt like a pregnant woman about to give birth. Israel's labor pains began with the oppression they had experienced under the Seleucid dynasty where they grew quite intense, but soon Israel's labor would be over and the advent of the Messiah would not only bless Israel but the whole world, thus fulfilling not only the covenant found in Deuteronomy but the most ancient covenant God made with Abraham. Compared with everlasting peace and prosperity, their years of oppression under the Babylonians, the Persians, and the labor pains induced by the Seleucids, would seem like nothing.

“Everlasting” peace and prosperity ended in 63 BCE. The Romans arrived, not the Messiah. Almost overnight Israel went from “expectant mother” whose child was about to be born, to terrified mother whose child was breech.

The Romans moved quickly to capture and hold their territory, building ten major pagan cities – known as Decapolis Cities – along one of Israel's two critical trade routes known as the King's Highway in the east. With control of the King's Highway came control over a large part of Israel's economy. In terms of magnitude, it was a bit like taking over the New York Stock Exchange.

Still, Israel's western trade route, known as the Via Maris (“Way of the Sea”) was still largely under Israel's control, allowing Israel at least a modest ability to resist the pressure of Roman occupation – kind of like losing the New York Stock Exchange while retaining the Exchange in Chicago. The reason why the Via Maris was harder to occupy and control was that Israel's coastline had no major port that could safely harbor a navy to dominate the region.

This relative freedom changed with the invention of a new technology: namely, concrete that could harden underwater. This new technology allowed an Israelite puppet leader you've heard

of – named Herod the Great – to build the Romans an enormous naval port at Caesaria Maritima. The port was finished just 6 years prior to Jesus’s birth.

Israel experienced the creation of this port like a dagger thrust into Israel’s side. It allowed the Romans to pour in from the Mediterranean, take control of the Via Maris, then quickly build major military roads between the Via Maris and the King’s Highway so they could move an army around anywhere in Israel with incredible ease and speed. In other words, not only was there a dagger in the side of Israel, but control of both trade routes was like two Roman pincers gradually squeezing the life out of both mother and child before that child could be given birth. Israel’s spirits had not been so low since the Babylonian Exile.

It is in this context that our Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” gives voice to Israel’s pain in a most visceral way:

*O come, o come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel [a captive in her own land!],
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appear ...
O come, though Day-spring come and cheer
our spirit by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night
and death’s deep shadows put to flight.*

The situation seemed utterly hopeless. Israel had done her best to follow in God’s ways but, in the end, it seemed that her labor had been in vain.

As Christians, we may look back and affirm Israel’s labors were not in vain. God really was with Israel as Emmanuel (“Emmanuel” means “God with us”). God’s promise of the Messiah was fulfilled just when all bets were off and all hope was lost. In so doing, God had confounded everyone. A Messiah was born into the world that not even the people who gave him birth were expecting.

Of course, our Jewish friends would not affirm our conclusion. This is one of the places of fundamental difference between us. I doubt this difference will ever be resolved – at least in this life. Yet lest this fundamental difference seem *too* fundamental, consider the time in which we find ourselves:

Many in our day are losing hope in the world’s future. On the one hand, we’re faced with conclusive scientific evidence that climate change is not only real but is threatening the future of life on our planet if things don’t change more rapidly than we seem to have the political and spiritual will to achieve. On the other hand, the broad array of scientists who are primarily concerned with nuclear proliferation and warfare, who created the so-called Doomsday Clock in 1947 to represent their best estimate of how close we are to creating a man-made global catastrophe, recently moved the clock’s hands from 5 minutes to Midnight to 2 minutes to Midnight.

I don't know about you, but I find that even those who used to be bullish on the world's future, who believed that progress has been gradually moving humanity toward a New Age of human consciousness, are feeling a bit less bullish; like we have somehow come under the grips of forces beyond our control; feeling like Israel would have felt 2,000 years ago with a breech child in her womb, a Roman dagger in her side, and Roman pincers squeezing the life out of both mother and child.

In this context, however, our Jewish sisters and brothers provide us with a significant word of hope. They're still waiting for the Messiah. They still believe that God is not only capable of saving the world, but fully intends to save the world – to save us from ourselves.

While we may believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah, I find it curious that the majority of Christians – and the majority of Muslims – believe in the Messiah's eventual return when the world needs it most. In other words, all three of the world's leading Abrahamic faiths are currently in a sweeping period of Advent, waiting for the Coming of God's Messiah (Advent means "coming"). We're all singing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!"

Isn't it funny how our deepest disagreements resolve into a single, larger agreement?

Truth-in-advertising: All my life I have disagreed with all three of these faiths about God sending (or re-sending) a Messiah in the future. I have believed that Christ's so-called "Second Coming" already happened – on Easter Sunday. And I have smirked at the fact that the faithful in every age have been convinced that the end of the world was near and that Christ would come the day-after-tomorrow, only to be sorely disappointed.

Yet in recent years, I have started to question my own certainty that they're all wrong. I still don't believe that God would ever want to bring the world to an end. But I do see that we seem to be doing this without any help from God. So, whether it's God's ending the world that we need to be saved from, or our doing it, I'm beginning to agree that we need a Savior right about now.

I still doubt that a Savior is coming, however. At least, not if it's a single Savior you're talking about. Yet there is a way that even I might affirm that a Savior is coming. Maybe, instead of God sending a Savior in the form of one man – or even one woman this time – maybe God is sending a Savior into the world in the form of many people – a great many people. People of all nations, races, and ethnicities. Male and female people, and those who identify as neither, or both. Jewish people, Christian and Muslim people, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs. I've seen God's Spirit work through agnostics and atheists, so I would guess they would be part of the Savior's coming as well. Maybe, just maybe, even you and I were born at this particular time and place to collectively put flesh and bone on the Spirit of the Living God once again – to be God's Emmanuel.

When I conceive of God's Messiah in these collective terms, I still don't know if I believe that a Savior is coming soon. I start to wonder if the Savior might already be here.