***December 1, 2013 Norwalk***

**Pastoral Prayer**

God of Hope,

We give you thanks for darkness, for without it we would forget the blessing of light. We give you thanks for the blessing of winter, for without it we would forget the glory of spring. It is in that spirit that we offer to you the darkened cold of these days, taut with fear and heavy with gloom and huddled against the cold. You do not let us forget the insistent press toward a different kind of world in which human efforts and aspirations mirror heavenly intent; where ache is met with embrace; where the quest for your image among us is satisfied by the reflection in one another’s eyes. Fuel that living hope, we pray.

We give you thanks, as well, O God, for the myriad joys we know and name this day. (birthdays, anniversaries, accomplishments, etc.) and we take them as the nourishment they can be.

We likewise offer into your keeping the weighty concerns we feel. Heal these hurting, we pray; comfort these grieving; sustain these struggling, and animate the rest of us that we might be fleshy, very present instruments of your peace. And may these very personal needs among us connect us in larger, deeper ways with your entire creation, full in its own way, of ache and grief and need beyond our knowing; and may our fresh connection persuade us of the need for contagious reflections of your grace in all times and places.

These things we pray in the name of Jesus, and also with the words he taught us, saying: Our father in heaven…

**Scripture reading**

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-23

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 with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss 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 conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.”

***Advent Sermon 1 on “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” -- Emmanuel***

The TSA is rolling out a new Pre-screening benefit at selected airports -- including our own Des Moines International Airport -- for certain pre-approved frequent flyers. The program is intended to speed up the security screening process -- at least for those fortunate few who qualify; freeing them from certain onerous and slowing hassles like taking off shoes, jackets and belts, like extracting that 3-1-1 compliant bag from carry-on, and like removing laptop computers from their case. It’s not clear yet whether I might qualify for this special treatment -- I am, after all, a pretty suspicious character -- but I’m going to look into it. I’m not always the most patient guy pushing through those lines.

But then I suspect that my impatience locates me squarely in the mainstream. As a culture we aren’t too keen on waiting. Which makes the season of Advent, the very first day of which is today, quite possibly the most dreaded season in the Christian calendar because it is the season of waiting.

It’s hard to believe that it is already here. It seems like only yesterday that we were Trick or Treating; and wasn't it only yesterday that we were sitting around a table sagging under the weight of a turkey and its culinary accessories. All of a sudden it's “Advent” and its dreaded imploring to “watch and wait.”

Once upon a time waiting was higher on our list. Delayed gratification was a moral value. Any more, however, the real aspiration is “instant and total access.” On our mobile phones, on our tablets, on our DVR’s and any other pieces of electronica that we happen to employ. Most of us react to the idea of waiting as though it were a garlic and vinegar milkshake. The need for patience has been blunted by ever-faster technologies, easy credit, fast food, and streaming videos and seemingly all of life “on demand.” And we like it, because waiting is not our strength.

But that is what advent is for, because not everything happens at a keystroke. Bracketing off the four weeks anticipating the birth of Jesus, advent is more than just a time of preparation for the excitement of Christmas; it is a time to stand with empty and open hands, that we may be receptive to His coming. It is a time of quietness before the mysteries of God.

More, then, than just a time of thinking about presents we have not yet bought or candies we’ve not yet made, advent is a time to sharpen our capacity to perceive life and our lives in a new way.

But as I said, waiting is not our strength. There is an ache to the desire -- a creeping soreness about life lived leaning forward, italicized, in unrequited desire and aspiration. Perhaps this is why the metaphor of pregnancy is so appropriate for Advent – hope, expectancy, new life on its way, a rekindled vision to which we might give our lives. It is a time of waiting for what never seems to come. Finally, however, believing that God is God, it is a time of choosing to give up control and opening new possibilities for life.

During the four weeks of Advent we light candles on the Advent wreath as a way of marking time. And this year during these particular four weeks of advent we will be singing through the verses of an ancient and familiar advent carol, *“O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”*

It is a plaintive carol betraying a longing that is self-revealingly mournful. A prayer in form, there is an absence intrinsic to the petitions -- a distance. Something critical is missing. You can almost taste it in the words and the music as the prayer becomes our own. Perfectly embodying the spirit of this season, it, too, aches for that which seems to constantly dangle beyond our reach: presence, light, peace, wisdom. So I hope you will sing along with me this season as we watch, together, and wait.

The words are based on a medieval practice of devotion. Since at least the 12th Century and possibly longer, as the winter solstice drew closer, monks would gather in their monasteries for Advent vespers. On each of the seven nights before Christmas, one principal monk after another would take his turn singing what they referred to as "one of the ‘Great O’s’."

Each sung response began with a long drawn-out ‘O’ expressive of deep yearning for the coming of Christ, who in each was addressed by a different Old Testament title. Some time around the 13th century an unknown poet selected five of the antiphons and turned them into a Latin hymn, adding a refrain to be sung after each verse. The Latin original was translated by John Mason Neale in 1851, and a few years later augmented by Henry Sloane Coffin, then-President of Union Theological Seminary in New York.

The first verse, from which the carol takes its name, prays for the coming of Emmanuel -- a word that, literally translated, means “God with us.” It isn’t too big of a stretch, then, to render the verse, “O Come, O Come God and be with us.” As a title the word Emmanuel comes from a little skirmish that God was having with the Hebrew King Ahaz during the time of the prophet Isaiah. Jerusalem was being threatened by foreign armies, and the King was biting his fingernails and fretting about what was to become of his people and, perhaps more likely, his rule. Through the prophet, God assures Ahaz that all will be well.

Ahaz, however, doesn’t seem too sure. And who can really blame him? You know how it is with the voice of God -- how do you know it’s really GOD and not just indigestion from last’s night burrito? Plus, it’s a little hard to stand out on the balcony and share with the crowd of nervous citizens waiting in the courtyard anxiously wringing their hands that “there’s no need to worry. God has spoken to me and reassured me that everything is going to be fine.”

"Right," they say. "So what about all those foreign armies?"

So God tries again. “Ask for a sign. Anything that will convince you.”

But Ahaz demurs, digging his toe into the sand with an “aw shucks” kind of avoidance. “Oh no. That just wouldn’t be right -- putting God to the test and all that. I couldn’t possibly ask for a sign.”

And so God, by now a little on the impatient side, says “fine. I’ll just GIVE you a sign.

Look over there. See that young pregnant woman? Before very long she is going to give birth to a son. And she is going to name that son Emmanuel -- which just happens to mean ‘God with us’ (get the connection?). And before that little boy is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong the threat of war will be over. Relax, those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture.”

It was that sign that was recalled centuries later as a way of understanding the birth of another baby boy that would likewise be a sign of God’s presence among us. Emmanuel. God with us.

There were, of course, times between and times ever since when we have longed for that physical confirmation of sustaining presence. You have no doubt heard the cute little story about a little boy who was frightened one night during a great thunderstorm. He called out to his father from his bedroom and said, “Daddy, I’m scared. Come in here.”

His dad, who had settled in for the night and wanted to go to sleep, told the little boy, “Son, it’s all right. God is with you in that room right now. You’re OK.”

There was a moment of silence. Then the little boy shot back, “Dad, right now I need someone with skin on.”

We get that, I think. All things being equal we, too, would just as soon our reassurance be more on the physical than the abstract side. Which strikes at the core of the Jesus story. Tony Campolo, in the book we have been reading in Sunday School, observes that “My Latino friends have taught me that the word incarnation shares the same root as en carne or con carne, which means ‘with meat’.” (Tony Campolo, in Red Letter Revolution).

Flesh. Meat. God-with-us in a way we can hold onto.

So when the prayer goes on to press God to “ransom captive Israel...that mourns in lonely exile here…” we “get” the sense of lonely abandonment. It doesn’t have to be a literal exile like that which befell the Israelites sometime after that initial sign was given. Whether it is corporate or personal, my guess is that we don’t have to squeeze our eyes very tight to picture some version of captivity and exile of our own:

* Like when we are held captive by the dominant culture's preference for size over character; for popularity over integrity; for comfort over purpose.
* Like when the holiness of the Christmas season is held captive by commerce.
* Like when estrangements exile us from those whose company has been oxygen to us.
* Like when physical distances keep us apart.

I think of the story of Elijah in the Bible, running away from the queen who was out to kill him, feeling like everyone had abandoned him and turned against him, holed up in a cave and feeling like that narrow crevice represented pretty much the size of the world. Captivity and exile.

O Come, O come Emmanuel and ransom we captives, mourning in lonely exile here.

It is to people like that -- people exactly like us -- that the chorus comes proclaiming the good news of holy hope: the insistent and reassuring invitation to “Rejoice! Rejoice. Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.”

At the very conclusion of scripture as we have received it is a vision of a “new heaven and a new earth, where...

*‘the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them...’* (Revelation 21:3-4)

Perhaps way-more than “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” or even “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire”, that celebratory anticipation might be the best song of the season.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel.