



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

The Story

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December 24, 2019 – Christmas Eve

“O come, O come, Emmanuel.” We began our series of lessons and carols with that hymn of longing. “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.” It’s a solemn and mournful Advent hymn that gives way to the joyful hymns of Christmas. There was some discussion about whether or not we should tone down the joyful nature of our Lessons and Carols service this year. These last weeks have been a time of mourning for many of us. Yesterday we held a funeral service for Mike Goodchild. But, Brothers and Sisters, the things that have been going on in the life of our parish are in stride with the season. Through the course of Advent, we hear Israel crying out for deliverance and we read the prophets and hear the assuring promises of God: You are still my people. I have heard your cries. I know your pain, your grief, your sorrow. I will visit you again. I will deliver you. In the midst of grief, the Lord gives his people hope. As he said all the way back at the time of the Exodus: “I am your God and you are my people.”

Advent and Christmastide are, I think, the part of the Church Year that puts the biblical narrative, the story of redemptive, right in front of us. It’s a reminder that abstract and universalised theological ideas aren’t capable of getting the job done. In fact, when we separate them from the story, they can often lead us astray. We need the story and here it is. Israel cries out to the Lord for deliverance. He’d rescued her from slavery in Egypt over a thousand years before. He’d made her his people. He’d given

her his law. He’d made that promise: I will be your God and you will be my people. But Israel was unfaithful. On the honeymoon at Mt. Sinai they made and worshiped a golden calf. Later they brought foreign gods into the temple. They made alliances with the pagan nations around them. They trusted in horses and chariots rather than trusting in the Lord. He called and called and called to his people, but they refused to listen. And so he brought Babylon’s armies down on them. The nation was destroyed. The temple was demolished. The people were exiled to a foreign land. Again, they cried out for deliverance and the Lord heard them. They returned to the land, they rebuilt Jerusalem and they rebuilt the temple. But nothing was ever the same. Their short period of self-rule came to an end. They were covered by pagan Greeks and then by pagan Romans. They’d rebuilt the temple, but the Lord had never returned to rest in the holy of holies in a cloud of glory as he had in the past. And so they cried out to the Lord again. For many, like the Zealots, the problem was politics: Defeat the Romans and all of Israel’s problems would be solved. For others, like the Pharisees and the Essenes, it was spiritual: Israel was still being disciplined for her failure to be the truly holy people the Lord had called her to be.

The Lord heard those cries and he came himself. In Jesus, he took on our flesh. He was born one of us. Of course, he wasn’t the messiah, the king that most expected. He wasn’t born in a palace. He spent his days a poor itinerant preacher. He attracted no one famous to his entourage of disciples. And when he did attract the attention of those in power, they nailed him to a cross and killed him as an upstart troublemaker. And yet, in that very cross, we see that he died the death faced by his people. A generation later, the powder-keg that was Judea exploded. The Romans quashed that rebellion and thousands upon thousands of Jewish rebels were crucified—so many that the Romans

ran out of crosses. Jesus had died the very death he had warned his people about should they continue on their path. And there we see Jesus revealed as both Israel’s saviour and Israel’s judge. The old Israel was destroyed, but in Jesus a renewed Israel was born.

And yet, if Jesus were merely Israel’s saviour, we wouldn’t be here this afternoon celebrating his birth. The lessons we read remind us that while Israel had a host of problems, both spiritual and political, those problems were part of a bigger problem. The first lesson we read was from Genesis, from the story of Adam and Eve. It was the story of humanity’s rebellion against our Creator, it was about our rejection of what the Lord created us to be and our rejection of the life he offered in his presence. We read there not just of humanity’s rebellion, but we also read the Lord’s promise. One day he would set to rights what we had corrupted. Israel’s story fits within that larger story. Israel was the means for setting the world to rights. Abraham had no sense of that grand narrative when the Lord called him. Israel had no sense of it either when she cried out to the Lord from Egypt and later from her Babylonian exile. But all along, through this stiff-necked and rebellious people—a people who represent the whole human race—the Lord was working. And when the time was right, his Son was born of that very people. He was born, he died, and rose from the grave in fulfilment to the Lord’s promises to Israel. He was born, died, and rose from the grave as Israel’s saviour. But as he redeemed his people and created a renewed people of God, this “Root of Jesse” as Isaiah refers to him, giving birth to a new tree, sprouting from the stump of the old, felled tree, in that Jesus did something that attracted the attention of the Gentiles—something that brought them back to the Lord. In Jesus the faithfulness of the God of Israel was has been put on full display and that display of faithfulness drew the nations and has made you and I a part of the renewed people of God.

You see, the Lord wasn't just fulfilling his promises to Israel. Through Israel, the Lord was fulfilling the promises he had made at the very beginning of the story, the promises he made that day he called Adam and Eve out from their hiding places in the Garden, the day he cast them out on account of their sin.

In Jesus the promises have been fulfilled. In Jesus the rebellion and sin have been forgiven. In Jesus the exodus from our slavery to sin and death been accomplished. And in Jesus' gift of God's own Spirit, his people have been given a down payment on the life of the age to come.

Brothers and Sister, in our Epistle on Sunday, St. Paul urged us to rejoice. Not a simple rejoicing that turns a blind eye on the sin and pain and grief around us, but a rejoicing that knows the Lord has seen our pain, has heard our cry, and has sent his own Son to set all to rights. We began the story crying out, "O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." Having been reminded that the Lord has heard the cries of his people, we read of Jesus' birth. We will come to his Table and be reminded here in the bread and in the wine that God is truly with us. Here he reminds us of our baptism, when he led us through the water into new life. Here at the Table he reminds us that in Jesus he truly is Emmanuel—God with us—God walking with us, leading us into the age to come. And so we will close in a little while with hope-filled rejoicing, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come: Let earth receive her King." Think on those words as we singing them after the Lord's Supper. They're meant to be a joyful response to this story that reminds us once again of the goodness and faithfulness of God.