



# East Central Synod of Wisconsin

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

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December 2017

*...the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'* (Matthew 1:23)

Grieving is a much bigger part of life than any of us want to acknowledge. We usually talk about grief and think about mourning when there has been a death in the family. Indeed, the loss of a family member is a profound loss, something I have learned in new ways with the death of my parents two years ago.

But there is grief and loss in all of life--in major life transitions from children growing into adulthood to job changes and moving to another community. Communities and the culture around us change, sometimes in profound ways. Aging itself brings with it change and loss, gradual though much of it may be.

When Anita and I traveled to Russia some years ago I remember someone saying "to be Russian is to grieve." I think the person was saying there had been so much turmoil in Russian history, so much death and dislocation in the Bolshevik revolution and the 70 years of communist rule, as well as struggle in the harshness of daily life, that grieving was constant and a way of life.

Advent puts me in touch with my grieving, with deep longings for some of what was in the past but will never be again. But Advent also prompts deep longings for what might be in our life together. Advent centers me in the journey of faith and reminds me that life is lived deathward. We are but a pilgrim people here on earth. And yet Advent keeps me hopeful and alive to the possibilities that God has promised, here and now as well as hereafter.

So I find that singing the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" strikes a deep chord within me.

In monasteries as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century the "O Antiphons" would be sung on the seven days prior to the celebration of the Nativity of Christ. It was a practice meant to help focus the minds of Christians on the coming celebration of the birth of the Savior. Each antiphon also enriched the meaning of the incarnation with references to biblical images.

These "O Antiphons" gave rise to the hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Take a look at the hymn in **Evangelical Lutheran Worship** (No. 257) and meditate on these powerful images, a verse for each day, listed at the bottom of the page:

Dec 17	O Wisdom (2)
Dec 18	O Lord of might (3)
Dec 19	O Branch of Jesse (4)
Dec 20	O Key of David (5)
Dec 21	O Dayspring (6)
Dec 22	O King of nations (7)
Dec 23	O Emmanuel (8)



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I am struck by how powerfully these words speak to us, as they probably did to our ancestors during the struggles of the Civil Rights era, or when loved ones were dying in World War II or as they eked out a living during the Great Depression.

The “mourning in exile” evokes images of former times and places with joyful, life-giving relationships and experiences. We know we can’t go back to our childhood and we can’t recover a culture that has moved on to a different day. This sense of dislocation hits people in different ways – economic uncertainty with the loss of a job to a new business model, the refugee literally exiled from one’s homeland, a death of a child, a community that has lost population and an economic base, and, of course, our congregations that remember days of large numbers, life and vitality.

On an even deeper level we can acknowledge our exile from God. Our life of prayer and meditation is not what it ought to be. We have turned our backs on our Creator and gone our own way. We have not trusted God as we ought nor loved our neighbor as we have been called to do.

But Advent reminds us we are not forever lost in exile, a people without hope. God has not forsaken us. Advent call us to trust that God will come in Emmanuel and be born in us again.

We are an Advent people who rejoice in Emmanuel, God-with-us. We trust that God is with us in our exile and will lead us to a joyful homecoming on the other side of gloomy clouds and dark shadows. As the liturgical calendar rolls around once again, we rejoice in the birth of the Child.

“Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel ... shall come to you, O Israel.”

A blessed last week of Advent and a Merry Christmas to all.

The Rev. Gerald Mansholt, Bishop  
East Central Synod of Wisconsin