



O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

ADVENT DEVOTIONS

INSPIRATION FROM

Henri J. M. Nouwen

O come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture
and the sheep of his hand.

Psalm 95:6-7

Psalm 95 is a beautiful call to come and worship the Lord. I've often thought how extraordinary it is that its writing predates by generations the shepherds who heard the angelic choirs and their heavenly invitation to seek and find the newborn Christ Child in Bethlehem. What a gift it was for them to adore and kneel before God who made them.

Here we are, too, generations later...still singing the psalms of God's people and lifting our own hymns, bidding "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" to Jesus, God-With-Us. We welcome this special season of waiting and preparing as a particular time of prayer and reflection on God's coming into our lives, in the Person of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

With depth and insight, the late Henri J. M. Nouwen penned many devotional books inviting readers into deeper intimacy with Jesus. We've mined much wisdom from Nouwen and paired it with the power of daily Scripture selections to invite you, dear reader, into these weeks of grace and joy. Finally, seasoned author and spiritual director Steve Givens takes up each day's Scripture alongside the contributions from Nouwen, weaving together a truly one-of-a-kind devotional.

Indeed, come and worship! And invite the Holy Spirit to guide your daily prayer and meditations each day.

O come, O come, Emmanuel!

Pat Gohn, *editor*

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The Coming of Jesus

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

The one who stayed with us in the past and will return to us in the future becomes present to us in that precious moment in which memory and hope touch each other. At that moment we can realize that we can only expect someone because he has already touched us. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, 60)

When we remember something, we are doing much more than dredging up the long-forgotten past. We are “re-mem-bering,” putting the pieces back together and recalling those moments when, as Henri J. M. Nouwen writes, “memory and hope touch.” More specific to this season of Advent, recalling the coming of Jesus into the world as the Incarnate Word of God becomes all the more real when we remember the movement of God in our own lives.

As joyful and as sacred as this season can be, it can also be a time of incredible stress and grief for some. So as you enter each day of this season in a spirit of prayer, begin by remembering how faithful God has been to you in your past. For the God who has come and blessed us so often will surely do so again. Christian hope is not wishful thinking. It is the evidence of things seen.

Amid the busyness of this season, still my mind, and help me recall your ongoing presence in my life, O Lord. Meet me at that still point where memory and hope meet. Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Enter In

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Here we are already made aware that following Jesus means changing places, entering into a new milieu and living in new company. The full meaning of this gradually unfolds in the Gospels. We come to see that Jesus not only invites his followers to live with him in the same house, but that he himself is the house. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Peacework*, 33)

I still vividly remember, as a child, lying on the living room floor in front of the Christmas tree and peering into the manger scene beneath it. I would get my face so close to it that I would feel like I was “right there,” an onlooker to this moment of Incarnation and grace. Being a child, I didn't have the vocabulary for that or fully grasp the theology. Nevertheless, I felt myself there in that place, and I knew it signified something deeply special.

That's what Advent asks of us. We are invited to drop to our knees in gratitude for this gift of Jesus, to lower our heads and enter into the house that is the Incarnation of God. Once there, we place ourselves more fully into that moment and breathe in the truth of God's love. For the Incarnation is not a clean and easy story. It smells of barn animals and makes demands on us. For if this story is true, our only response must be this: It has changed us forever.

Welcome me into your home, O Incarnate Word of God. See me waiting by the door, waiting to be changed. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

He Has Sent Me

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners...

Isaiah 61:1

The mystery of God's love is that our burning hearts and our receptive ears and eyes will be able to discover that the One we met in the intimacy of our homes continues to reveal himself among the poor, the sick, the hungry, the prisoners, the refugees, and all people who live in fear. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts*, 88)

How easy (and convenient) it is to read these prophetic words from Isaiah and think they apply to Jesus alone. For certainly Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, sent to do all these things. But we fall short in our understanding of both the words of the prophet and the call of Jesus if we believe the work and ministry of Jesus begins and ends on the roads and in the fields between Nazareth and Jerusalem.

The mystery and reality of the coming of Jesus is that he continues to come, continues to reveal himself through us. This is the call we hear especially during Advent. "Yes, I will come," Jesus is saying to us. "I will work and heal and teach and bring justice, but only if you open up your lives and allow me to do it through you."

"Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours," Teresa of Avila famously wrote. Are we prepared to believe that and make it our life's work?

Jesus, help me to fully recognize and embrace your living spirit surging through my body, alive in my life and work. Through me, reveal yourself to a world in need. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Come, Come Home

But thus says the LORD:

Even the captives of the mighty will be taken,
and the prey of the tyrant will be rescued,
for I will contend with those who contend with you,
and I will save your children.

Isaiah 49:25

You want to draw all people to yourself and offer them a home where every human desire is met, every human longing comes to rest and every human need is satisfied. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Heart Speaks to Heart*, 22)

There have been times in my life when, for no apparent reason, I have felt great dis-ease. While there was nothing obviously wrong, there was something that wasn't quite right. I felt trapped by this feeling, not at home in my own body and life. I couldn't shake it because I didn't know what it was or what was missing. When I finally remembered to turn to prayer, I found God waiting for me, of course. "Where have you been?" God seemed to be asking.

We who profess a faith in this Emmanuel, this God-With-Us, still lose our way from time to time. We find ourselves driven in other seemingly interesting directions, forgetting that our only true home is in God. There, "driven" is replaced by "drawn," and everything we need can be found. There, every sense of being held ransom is replaced by being held in the arms of God, everything in darkness obliterated by the blinding light of God's love. Advent is our annual reminder of that. Come home.

O come, O come Emmanuel, bring me back home. Amen.

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Let Go

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God...

He will come and save you.”

Isaiah 35:4

Don't be afraid of the One who wants to enter...and invite you to let go of what you are clinging to so anxiously. Don't be afraid to show the clammy coin which will buy so little anyway. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 16)

When we hold tight to old fears, wounds and broken relationships, we may begin to think of them as some sort of personal treasure. We believe if we hold on to them tightly enough, we will somehow exert power over them and control them. “I'll show you how powerful and independent I am!” we say and then proceed to wallow in that fear, relish the wounds and bear grudges over the brokenness. So who's really in control?

Advent is a journey that gives us a chance to see in a new way. Ultimately, we are invited into the intimacy of a cave in Bethlehem, where we find ourselves humbled at the sight of an innocent baby. There, our spirit of independence and fear is replaced by a poverty of spirit that encourages us to let go of what binds us. There, we open ourselves to the possibility of new life, and the darkness of our past is replaced by a new light streaming from beneath a stable door.

Open my clenched hands, O Lord, and receive what I have been holding.
Amen.

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Welcome to Advent—this special season of preparation for the coming of Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

With depth and insight, the late Henri J. M. Nouwen always invited readers into a deeper intimacy with Jesus.

With Nouwen's thoughts, paired with daily verses of Scripture, and reflections and prayers by seasoned author and spiritual director Steve Givens, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* is an inspirational volume for adults seeking quiet moments amid the busyness of the weeks leading up to Christmas.

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1564 Fencorp Dr., Fenton, MO 63026
800-325-941 • www.creativecommunications.com HNA

