

O come, O come Emmanuel. This is the refrain that has shaped our common worship these four weeks of Advent. Heavy with imagery from both the Old and New Testaments, it's a hymn that references both Jesus' first and second comings, that beckons to the One who was, and is, and is to come. It recognizes that God is present and active through all our human experience – from the beginning of time until the end. And this understanding of God as Emmanuel, God with us, serves as a frame for the entire Gospel of Matthew that we will be using throughout this liturgical year.

There is a great movie about the later part of CS Lewis's life called *Shadowlands*. He was an academic and a theologian. His story as portrayed in the movie is one of love and loss, life and death, emotion and intellect, doubt and faith.

At one point, he is discussing his book *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* with a group of his friends. He draws a metaphor between the birth experience and passing through one's suffering as a means to a life of faith:

“The child must push through [the coats in the wardrobe]. They're pressing close, almost suffocating and suddenly there's white light. Crisp, cold air. Trees. Snow. Total contrast you see. It's a gateway to a magical world.”

The other day, I heard the story of a woman who found herself huddled in the corner of a dark closet with a phone in one hand, and a crumpled paper in the other with the number of a Christian counselor written on it. Beside her lay her young son. Her life

was a mess, and she simply wasn't able to hold it together any more. With shaking hands, she made the call.

A man with a groggy voice answered ~ clearly he was in bed and she had woken him up. (It was 2am after all.) She described her voice quivering as she spoke into the phone. 'Hi. My mom gave me your number. Can we talk?' She heard the rustling of sheets as he obviously sat up in bed; she heard the click of a lamp; he cleared his throat. 'OK, I'm ready.' And so they began to talk. And talk. And talk. She told him of her son sleeping next to her. She explained that she felt alienated by her family. She explained how years ago she fell in to the wrong crowd and got addicted to drugs.

She talked. He listened. She told him of the choices that led to the to this phone call. She told him of how they were hiding in the corner of the bedroom closet to avoid getting hit by her partner yet again.

She talked some more. He listened some more. Hours passed. The sun finally began to rise. The man's full attention was present with her. He was gentle and kind. She began to feel calmer. She wanted to thank him for being there for her, for listening, for not judging. He was a great counselor ~ exactly what she needed that night. She asked if he had Bible verses she ought to read, because she figured she owed him that much. He'd been so helpful. He dodged the question. The conversation came back 'round and she asked how long he'd been a Christian counselor ... and it was then, after hours of being with her on the other end of the line, he said, 'first promise me you won't hang up. OK? The thing is, you dialed the wrong number.'

As her story unfolds, she explains that her experience that night was what she had heard called ‘the peace which passes all understanding.’ For the first time she could recall in far too long, she encountered goodness and love, and “discovered that some of it was unconditional, and that some of it was for her” ~ a drug addict who knew just how messy life could get.

It took a while, but she got her life together. She left her abusive relationship, got clean, got a job, successfully raised a smart and capable young man. She claims she was able to do so because on that night a pinprick of light entered her world. And as she’d been living in darkness for so long, that pinprick was blindingly bright.

The woman who made that phone call never did learn the man’s name. Having misdialed, she never had a chance to speak to him again. But she learned that “in the deepest, blackest night of despair and anxiety, it only takes a pinhole of light ... and all of grace can come in.”¹

God was with her that night. Just as God is with us. Emmanuel.

Which brings us to our question for this week: why? Why would God come be with us and become one of us? The simple answer is this: because we are God’s beloved, and because suffering exists.

We are so loved that God came to us, to dwell among us, to show us how to live into the Shalom of God, the peace of God that passes all understanding, the restored wholeness that God freely offers us. There is no reason that we should fear pain or deny the reality that it causes soul-deep hurt, rather Jesus shows

¹ Auburn Sandstrom in “The Phone Call,” recorded on November 21, 2015 and aired on July 5, 2016 on The Moth Podcast. <https://themoth.org/stories/a-phone-call>

us a way through the struggle and the storm ~ through the dark wardrobe with the ‘stuff of life’ pressing in on us from all sides, to a magical world on the other side. That is why God is with us in our stumbling and shortcomings, in our hunger and our hurts, in the midst of the messiness of our lives and the days we seem to barely hold it together.

God was, God is, and God will continue to be with us. Always.

In the movie, CS Lewis offers this reflection to a group of students:

“[We may ask ourselves,] isn’t God supposed to be good? Isn’t God supposed to love us? And does God want us to suffer? What if the answer to that question is yes? ’Cause I’m not sure that God particularly wants us to be happy. I think he wants us to be able to love and be loved. He wants us to grow up. I suggest to you that it is because God loves us that he makes us the gift of suffering.”

The thing is, we, as the people of God and the followers of Jesus, sometimes forget that all our lives, our loves, and our longings are caught up in a God who became flesh and blood and bone and body to be with us. Ours is not a deity that is far off, removed from our cares and occupations; instead, ours is a God who walks many miles in our shoes.

O come, O come Emmanuel is not only our prayer this Advent-tide, it is the promise of our faith that Christ is Emmanuel, “God with us” ~ a promise made through flesh and blood that no matter where we find ourselves in this life, even in death and beyond death, that we are never, ever alone!