

Sunday November 27th, 2022

Advent I

Sermon Series: Songs of the Season
“Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”

Have you ever noticed something interesting about Christmas music. Unlike musical numbers of other genres, it seems that it doesn't matter how many times a Christmas carol or song gets recorded, people think that is good thing, going so far as to buy Christmas recordings and ending up with dozens of versions of Frosty the Snowman. I have also noted that most musical stars, at some point, have to produce a Christmas album. And sometimes not just musical talents.

I was somewhat gob smacked, when I read that Toronto Raptors broadcaster Jack Armstrong announced plans to release a Christmas music album. If you have ever watched a Raptor's game on TSN, you know who Jack Armstrong is. The record project, named “Hellooo and Happy Holidays,” was set to be released Nov. 18 through Comedy Records. Proceeds from the album are slated to go toward the Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Foundation and the Special Olympics.

Armstrong, of Brooklyn, N.Y., has been on Raptors broadcasts since 1998 and serves as an analyst and colour commentator for TSN in addition to being the on-air in-game broadcaster for Toronto. The 59-year-old has built a reputation for his voice — and New York accent — and catchphrases like, “Helloooo!” and “Get that garbage outta here.” Personally, I am not sure how much radio play this album will get, but I may be surprised.

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Why is music so popular, and so beloved at Christmas time. Why do we long to hear the old favourites; some of which are hundreds of years old. Well, I thought it might be fun, to explore at least a few of our favourites. To get a taste of its history, but more importantly to learn what the composer was trying to say. It is also true that many people actually develop their ideas about God, and faith, through the theology promoted in hymns and carols. So, it is critical to examine carefully what is being presented.

That being said, and because it is the first Sunday of Advent, I thought the beloved carol “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” is a great carol to kick off your Advent season, since it centers around Israel's longing for the Messiah and humanity's deliverance.

Here are the lyrics:

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

*Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,*

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*born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal spirit
rule in all our hearts alone;
by thine all sufficient merit,
raise us to thy glorious throne.*

This hymn was written by Charles Wesley. Charles Wesley was a prolific hymn writer; it's said that he wrote over 6500 hymns in his lifetime. Wesley was a Methodist Pastor, but he was also an itinerant preacher – making his way on horseback from town-to-town to preach to small local congregations; often house churches. He was a key figure in the Great Awakening. A time when interest in the Christian faith was drawing many people to faith. Beginning in western Europe and England the Great Awakening really took hold in America and also spilling into Canada.

Charles Wesley wrote some of the most famous hymns of our faith – many of which we still sing today. Some examples are: And Can It Be, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Love Divine All Loves Excelling, and this one. All things considered if you study the language of Wesley's hymns, this one before us today is perhaps the deepest, the most poetic hymn he wrote.

Wesley knew first hand what it meant for people not to be free. When he was about thirty years old, he traveled to America on a mission, where he saw slavery in its rawest form. He recorded in his journal that he had seen parents give their child a slave to torment. Wesley was so shaken by the evil of slavery that he nearly had a nervous breakdown. It wasn't long before he returned to England.

Some would criticize Wesley for not remaining in America to join the fight against slavery, but Wesley's weapons were his sermons and his hymns. For the next several decades, his sermons and hymns lent their power to the efforts to make people free — free from slavery — free from fear — free from sin.

In 1744, Charles Wesley considered the verse from Haggai 2:7 which reads, “and I will shake all the nations, so that all the treasure of all nations shall come, I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts.” Considering this promise to Israel, and looking at the situation of the numerous orphans in the areas around him. Wesley began to put pen to paper. Socially, Great Britain was in a real mess in Wesley's day; something Charles Dickens also noticed.

Wesley looked at the massive class divide in Great Britain. Through this train of thought, he came to write "Come, thou long expected Jesus" based upon Haggai 2:7 and published a prayer at the time which had the words: "Born Your people to deliver, born a child and yet a King, born to reign in us forever, now Your gracious kingdom bring. By Your own eternal Spirit, rule in all our hearts alone; by Your all-sufficient merit, raise us to Your glorious throne. Amen."

Wesley, then adapted this prayer into a hymn in 1744, and published it in his "*Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*" hymnal. Wesley wrote "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" with the intent for people to remember that Advent and Christmas commemorate the Nativity of Jesus and to prepare for the Second Coming. These hymns were critically important to educate and encourage people, at a time when literacy was at a very low level for the general populace.

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"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" was the first of a number of Wesley's hymns that became known as the "Festival hymns". These "Festival Hymns" were published outside of Methodism by German, John Frederick Lampe in 1746. The hymn came into popular knowledge across Christian denominations in England via popular Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon made a Christmas sermon in London in 1855 when he was 21 and included sections of "Come thou long expected Jesus" in it.

He did this to illustrate his point that very few are "born king", and that Jesus was the only one who had been born king without being a prince. As a result of its growing popularity, including in the Church of England and American hymnals, it was first published in the Methodist, Wesleyan Hymn Book in 1875 after having previously been excluded. The original reason for exclusion was that there had been no officially suitable music intended for it before then.

In recent times, "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" has not been as well known as a Christmas Carol, as others written around the same time. "Joy to the World" being one such example but "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" is still used to focus on the hope of the Second Coming of Jesus.

The lyrics of "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" focus on God choosing to give a Messiah to the world in the form of Jesus. It also focusses on the Old Testament Israelites longing for the Messiah to come, and take the burden of sins from them to take them upon himself. The last line of the first verse may have come from Wesley being inspired by 17th century philosopher; Blaise Pascal's claim that "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every person that cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator."

There is much we could explore here, from this hymn. There is the importance of celebrating and remembering that Advent is not just a preparatory time for Christmas, but a time to seriously contemplate the inevitable return of Christ. Advent is a time of remembering; that our God in Christ, is a God of coming. Coming to us, his people. We also need to be prepared for this occurrence, just as some of the parables (i.e. the Ten Virgins) we looked at recently, encouraged us to do.

Yet the one thought that really grabbed my attention in exploring this beloved carol, was the probable connection to Blaise Pascal's comment about the God shaped vacuum in every person's heart. Israel's strength and consolation, is a profound metaphor for the universal hunger and need for God. The truth is, we all need God, whether or not we recognize that need, or acknowledge that need.

The scriptures are ripe with stories of people whose hearts were a vacuum, longing for something, really anything, to fill the void. Take Zaccheus. He had a vacuum in his heart. He tried to fill it with money and influence, but there was no satisfaction there. So, he climbs a tree to glimpse the one who could fill that hole. The woman at the well comes alone and at mid-day with a vacuum in her heart to the well in John 4.

She had had five husbands, and now had another man in her life. These relationships were not filling the vacuum. She meets Jesus, and a spring of living water erupts in her heart and there is no longer a void in her life. The Apostle Paul, who was "zealous for the faith of his fathers" was persecuting Christians in part because his heart was empty and he longed for significance and purpose. Then came his Damascus Road experience.

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In these and every instance, then and even now in our time, people have turned to many things to try and fill the hole in their core of being; only to find it was never enough. There is never enough: power, money, drugs, sexual activity or any number of things; to fill the hole.

Wesley knew this hunger in us. He saw it in the faces of people every day, whose lives were devoid of meaning and hope. He also knew, as we do, that there are any number of people in this world who seek to exploit that emptiness in us, but offering us alternative escapes. The wonder of Advent and Christmas is, that after centuries of sending prophets to tell us how to live and what God was like; God did something extraordinary.

Radio Preacher Steve Brown describes a housewife who was washing dishes in the kitchen sink one day after her children had left for School. He looked at one particular plate. She stared at it for a long time and asked over and over again, "How many times have I washed this plate? How many times have I dried it? How many times will I wash and dry it again?" She set the plate down, took off her apron, packed a few of her belongings, and left.

That night she called home to tell her husband that she was all right, but that she just couldn't come home again. From time to time, over the next several weeks, she would call just to see how her husband and children were doing. But she would never tell them where she was, nor accede to the pleas from her family to return.

The husband hired a detective to search for her, and after picking up a few leads, the detective tracked her down. She was in another state, living in a small apartment over a luncheonette where she had a job as a waitress. Her husband set out immediately to bring her home. When he found the place, she was staying, he knocked on the door of her upstairs apartment. She opened the door, saw him, and did not say a word.

She went into the bedroom, packed her belongings, and silently followed him out to the car. Then in silence, he drove her back home.

Several hours later when the two of them were alone in their bedroom he finally spoke, and he asked her, "Why didn't you come home before? Over the phone I begged you to return. Why didn't you come?" The wife answered, "I heard your words, but it wasn't until you came for me that I realized how much you cared and how important I was to you." (Let me tell you a story-Tony Campolo)

The reality is that I can preach a thousand sermons to you. I can encourage you to read your bibles, and attend bible studies. But what we all need, today and every day, is Jesus who comes to us, no matter where we are, no matter how beaten up by life we are. All so he can say directly to our emptiness, "I care about you". Advent and Christmas remind us that our God has come to us, and he continues to come to us, and will come again, because he loves us.

That emptiness you are grappling with. That itch that just won't be scratched. That unsatisfactory way that worldly things try to fill a void, but come up wanting. These are all signs of our need for the "Long Expected Jesus", so set us free. All so we can join in and sing the words of Revelation 5 which inspired Wesley to write his hymn.

"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have

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made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5:9-10). Amen.