

In the last few days before Christmas, there's only one place you don't hear Christmas carols: You can hear them on the radio, in the streets, in stores, elevators, and parties, but the one place you don't hear them is church. We always wait till Christmas Eve. That's when most everybody else stops, but we keep going, singing and lighting our tree well into January. Well, all the prayers and readings at Mass wait for Christ to be born, so we don't sing that Christ our Savior is born. Churchgoers become schizophrenic between the prayers here and the carols at home, but we hope that Advent will bring its own reward.

The most popular song of Advent uses a title we hear both in today's first reading and the Gospel. "O Come O Come Emmanuel" reminds us that Matthew quoted Isaiah to proclaim the birth of Jesus.

To understand who this Emmanuel is, imagine that you are Ahaz, the king of Judah in the year 735 before Christ our Savior is born. Two other nations, Syria and Israel, are fighting Assyria, but suddenly they invade you and force you to fight their enemy. Assyria destroys the two nations that attacked you, and now starts breathing down your neck. <sup>You're being surrounded!</sup> Into your court struts this Isaiah, who says, "Pay no attention to them. Yes, Assyria conquered both the nations that conquered you, but its plans to attack you will fail." You ask, "How do you know?" Isaiah says, "You have descended from King David. God says your throne will not be lost." So what do you do?

Ahaz said to Isaiah, "Thank you very much. I'll think about it. Good-bye." He had made up his mind to surrender, and wanted to get rid of Isaiah. That's where today's first reading begins. Isaiah desperately bargains with the king, "Ask God for a sign, any sign you want, deep as the netherworld, high as the sky!" Ahaz piously responds, "God is busy. Let's not bother him." Isaiah says, "OK, don't ask for a sign, but God will give you one anyway. A young woman will bear a child and his name will be Emmanuel." Now, very likely, the woman in question was Ahaz's wife, and the child, next in line for the throne, would bear a name that would shout to Ahaz, "God is with us; God is with us."

So when Matthew quotes this story at the birth of Jesus, he's not just recalling a virgin or a young woman giving birth, he claims that this baby is trying to save us from our mistakes. It's trying to restore our trust in God, to make us courageous, against the odds. Every year we chirp "O Come O Come Emmanuel," we're praying for discomfort. And since we don't sing Christmas carols before Christmas we spend four weeks begging this terrible baby to come.

Christmas comes like Emmanuel. It challenges us to trust, to let go of our hatred, our prejudice, and our fear. To risk sitting at table with family members we don't speak to, to risk contributing extra to the poor. Emmanuel is a terrible baby, who comes when we think God is busy. Christmas, like Emmanuel, enters our lives whether or not we ask it to come.