

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil... (Ephesians 5:15–16)

We can look around our world and see decorations being put up, presents being bought, and Christmas music already blaring through speakers. Christmas is drawing near. But, as the calendar moves from the end of the Church year into the season of Advent, one theme within the Church remains the same: *Jesus* is coming. He is coming again in power and glory to judge the living and the dead, so that all flesh might see the salvation of God. For now, Jesus implores us to *stay awake* (Mark 13:37) and to be prepared.

But, Jesus isn't back yet. What should we do while we await the new and perfect creation? Advent is the season when the answer to this question comes into sharp focus. Advent is not a mini-Christmas, nor is it a pre-Christmas. It is a season on its own, observed for the express purpose of being prepared for Jesus' second coming. Not coincidentally, I think, it's during this season that some of the best Church music leaps off the pages of the hymnals onto our singing tongues.

Consider, for a moment, what we actually sing during Advent. The hymns in the Advent section of the hymnal speak much less of Christ's first coming than you might expect. Instead, they help to sharpen our focus – and readiness – when it comes to the return of our Lord. Take the fourth century hymn attributed to Saint Ambrose. Certainly, the words speak of Christ's first coming in Bethlehem. But, notice how the very first line of the first verse helps us to focus our attention forward in prayer:

“Savior of the nations, come; virgin’s Son, make here your home. Marvel now, O heav’n and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth” (LSB 332, v. 1).

Or consider one of my favorite Advent hymns, “Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People.” In this hymn, the author, Johann Olearius, uses the words of Isaiah 40 to help us to prepare for the coming of the Lord, just as his namesake, John the Baptizer, once did in the time of Jesus.

“Hark, the herald’s voice is crying in the desert far and near, calling sinners to repentance, since the Kingdom now is here. O that warning cry obey! Now prepare for God a way; let the valleys rise to meet Him and the hills bow down to greet Him” (LSB 347, v. 3).

Popular culture holds “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” to be a Christmas song, but it is most certainly an Advent hymn. Right away in verse 1, this ancient Latin text brings God's people together in their most fervent prayer, *Come, Lord Jesus!* (Revelation 22:20).

“O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!” (LSB 357, v. 1) One hymn all Christians should know – a hymn that we sang in November and December last year – is “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending.” This hymn describes for us what Jesus' true and final advent will be like. With the words of John's Revelation in the background, author Charles Wesley describes the joyful singing of God's people.

“Yea, amen, let all adore Thee, high on Thine eternal throne; Savior, take the pow’r and glory, claim the kingdom as Thine own. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Thou shalt reign and Thou alone! (LSB 336, v. 4)

Singing and Advent go together! This shouldn't surprise us at all, since the Apostle Paul implies as much in Ephesians 5, where he writes about our readiness for Jesus' return. *Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ* (Ephesians 5:17–21). Stay awake. Be prepared. And sing!

-Pastor Squire