

Hi everyone, my name's Emma, and I'm one of the pastors here at Harbor. And while I'd like to think I'm young at heart, I'm finding out more and more that I'm more of a real grown up than I realize. And it's all my nephew's fault, because on Thanksgiving, when we went to my parent's house, my niece and nephew were so excited to show me the Christmas tree, which they set up before Jeff, Clementine, and I got there. It was my grandmother's tree, she died last Christmas, and it wasn't really anything super special or exceptional, but the kids decorated it themselves, and they were so excited about how they did, so we went downstairs. And my mom came downstairs and we admired the tree, and Clementine got to see her brand new embroidered stocking, and an ornament my mom got her, then my nephew, Leif, said: "Ugh, I wish it was Christmas NOW." And I said, "But the Christmas season is the best part!" And my mom said: "That's how adults feel. The wait is harder for kids." Which is totally and 100% true, right? Anyone with kids knows this. I knew this when I was a kid.

But I forgot because now I'm an adult, and the fun around Christmas is about the season, plus I'm getting older and nostalgic for childhood, and watching old Christmas movies and listening to Christmas music, and spending time with family and friends that I don't normally get to do.

Plus, waiting is kind of just something you do as an adult, so this is more like the fun version. Normal waiting is the worst. And we do it, like, all the time. And here's the purity of kids: they don't accept that, and they get all mopey about it? But grownups do it more grumpy: we get road rage, we get anxious, we snap at people, or we lose hope that it'll happen. We don't like it, but we live with it, as opposed to just being beside ourselves, unable to wait.

We don't talk about it the way my nephew talks about Christmas. I sleep fine before my birthday and before Christmas – I can wait. In fact, sometimes I wish time could last longer than it does. Ugh, what a grown up thing to say...

And the same thing happens at Christmas time. Adults know it's mostly a season, a season where we have lots of parties, we watch Christmas movies, we go to church, we listen to music, all as a lead in. And I think this tradition is less commercial than you'd think.

It's not simply a matter of Christmas creep. (You know, like how there's Halloween decorations and Christmas decorations side by side in the stores in October?) Historically speaking, it is more about the season, the lead up. It's called: Advent. The catholic church, church tradition, celebrated the season as a time of anticipation and expectation. The month before Christmas, we celebrate Advent as a season where we wait for the birth of Jesus, as the old hymn says: "Come thou long expected Jesus?" Maybe Mary was singing that in the 9<sup>th</sup> month, like most uncomfortable pregnant women do.

But the waiting game for baby Jesus lasted for a long time, a long, long time. Way before Mary. This baby was promised to King David in the Old Testament, the first half of the Bible hundreds

of years before Mary and Joseph were born. God promised that one of David's descendants would establish a kingdom that would never end, that would bring about justice and goodness, secure the people's futures forever. And after that, we see the Jewish people waiting for a Messiah, a savior, a king who is better than any earthly king.

But what happened? Seemingly, nothing. The Israelites were left waiting. God promised, but nothing happened.

And many bad things happened in the meantime, while they waited: there were a whole lot of terrible kings that brought in big problems, like idol worship with child sacrifices, and then other countries came in, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Romans, and took over, forced them into exile, drove them out of their home country into foreign countries. The Israelites had no king. God promised, but then bad things happened.

Kind of feels like a broken promise, right?

This was a time of sadness, this expectation didn't feel super happy or content, like we feel this time of year, looking forward to lots of beautifully wrapped, colorful packages under a tree.

This was desperate expectation, a long period of expectation, longing for this promised king who would deliver them, bring them back home again. Living in exile, driven out from your home, that's such a terrible journey, such a hard and sad thing to experience. To be mistreated, to be second class citizens, if that, to be oppressed, forced to live and worship in private. God's people, Israel, were waiting for God to fulfill his promise to king David, but it was hundreds of years.

And that's why a lot of Advent carols are kind of sad. We're in our Advent series: Carols, why we sing the songs we sing. And this week's carol is one of my favorites, O Come O Come Emmanuel – which for people who know me well isn't a huge surprise, because I tend to like these kind of sad and dark songs, even when I was a little kid.

But that broken promise is what that song is all about. The first verse is: "O Come O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the son of God appear." Emmanuel means "God with us," so this is a song asking God to send this king he promised, his King, to deliver Israel.

But you might keep reading or singing the lyrics and notice that they seem to be talking about something different.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny  
From depths of Hell Thy people save  
And give them victory o'er the grave  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

These lyrics tell us something different. There's a different kind of exile here, not just the kind of exile the Israelites experienced.

We're at the end of our year-long trip through the Bible, and we started in Genesis, with the story of the Garden of Eden, and the fall of humankind when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And believe it or not, that Garden, before sin entered the world, that was our home. That was where we were supposed to live forever. But we were exiled when Adam and Eve were exiled and the curse of death entered the world. And we've been living in exile ever since. And so we, just like the Israelites, we sing this same song: O Come O Come Emmanuel!

Come, Come Jesus. That's what we're saying.

And he did come, as a little baby, that night in Bethlehem. God came and brought life through His Son. Jesus lived a perfect and unblemished life, and he laid down his life, he took on our sin, our brokenness so we could return from exile, so that death no longer holds us down. God fulfilled his promise through this different kind of King, one nobody expected, but was better. God became a person, and that person died and rose again; he defeated death, which nobody had done before, and offers us new life. The gospel, that word you are familiar with or at least heard before, means "good news!" Christmas is the beginning of this good news.

But how many of you, whether you believe in Jesus or not, sometimes look around and say to yourself: "It looks like I'm still living in exile."

I know I do. A lot.

I like to play video games a lot, and there's this game that's been getting a lot of attention called: "That Dragon, Cancer," and it's about a young family who find out their son has cancer,

and isn't expected to live much further than his first birthday. And the game follows their journey as they pray for a miracle – this was a couple who believed in Jesus, who believed in his healing power, that he could heal their sweet son.

And they began developing this game, documenting their experience. They hoped that in this game, their little boy would defeat that dragon, cancer. They prayed for a happy ending. But they didn't get it. And reading about that, listening to interviews with this man, hearing his story, it broke my heart. All I could think was: “No. This isn't supposed to happen. This is wrong. O Come O Come Emmanuel.”

Because even though Jesus came, we still struggle and deal with the same problems we did before, problems that arose when we were driven out of our perfect home, the Garden of Eden- problems like sickness, brokenness, death.

How many of you say: “I struggle with the idea that my body is getting older, that it's not infallible or indestructible. O Come O Come Emmanuel...”

Or: “Death has come for my friend. My mother. My father. My grandparents, so many of my loved ones. It has stolen these people from my life, these people I loved. These people I need. These people I miss so much. O Come O Come Emmanuel.”

Or: “I watch the news, and I go online, and I see pictures of people suffering, starving; I see cities being blown to bits, and stats of children dying, dozens, every day. O Come O Come Emmanuel...”

Or: “I see vibrant, young children who become sick and die, and that's not supposed to happen. O Come O Come Emmanuel...”

And I would say: “Amen” to all of that. To “amen” something is to agree, it means to agree, so “amen.” This world has so much brokenness in it even though Jesus came and rose again. And it's heartbreaking. It's sad. It's upsetting, disconcerting, and unfair. Like Israel, we need rescue. We need a savior.

Most of us don't live in literal exile. Maybe our ancestors did – most Americans are here because they or their parents or their grandparents, or their great grandparents, or great great great grandparents left their home country to come here as immigrants.

But there is a kind of exile we all live in nonetheless. But because of death, because of this thing that looms over all of us the same way it loomed over Adam and Eve, reminds us we're still in exile. And that's why we sing this song. O Come O Come Emmanuel and rescue captive Israel. Rescue us. We're captives in lonely exile here.

But there's a second part of the song in each of those verses: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel! Shall Come to thee o Israel!” There's that promise. Even though sometimes it might feel like

God's breaking promises to us, he NEVER breaks his promises to us. People will let you down, but God will never let us down. Rejoice, rejoice- CELEBRATE! God *has come* and *will come* for us in our brokenness.

But we're living in what's often called: "The Already and the Not Yet." That's a paradox, but it's still true – two seeming contradictory ideas that can still be true at the same time. It means Jesus has already come and delivered us. We live as new creations now. But there's also the "not yet." We still see the broken world. We still see death and we still lose loved ones.

So what do we do, as we live in the already and not yet?

Our Scripture reading comes from 1 Thessalonians 4: 13

*And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died. 15 We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet him ahead of those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. 17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. 18 So encourage each other with these words.*

What do we do, then, while we're still living in exile, while we continue to live in the already and the not yet?

We mourn. We mourn, but we mourn in hope and expectation.

Paul is the one who wrote this letter to an early church in the ancient world, back when Christianity was still very new, and so they had questions about this. Some people in the early church were wondering what was going to happen now that they believed that Jesus rose from the dead and conquered the grave. People still died- so now what? The exile was supposed to be over, but it didn't seem over at all.

He writes in verse 13: Because of Jesus, we do not grieve like those who have no hope. Notice that he doesn't say: "Don't grieve! There's nothing to be sad about!"

No. We grieve. We grieve, we mourn, but not like those who have no hope.

Without Jesus, without that promise of a new life, there isn't much hope, is there? When someone dies, and we think this is it, this is all you get, that we are finite creatures who are here for a short time and then die, sometimes sooner, sometimes later, then that's pretty hopeless when someone's gone. We come up with some ways to say it's okay – their legacy lives on, through children, through nice things they've done, through memories, but even with all that, the person is gone, and there's no hope that you'll see them again.

That's how people mourn who have no hope in a resurrection.

But with Jesus, it's different. With Jesus, we grieve, but we have hope. You know, I think C.S. Lewis put it best when he said that if there wasn't anything else out there, we wouldn't long for something more, in the same way a creature that lives deep in the ocean doesn't long for light. We long for eternity because we were made for it. We were made for eternity, and we long for it, even though we can't see it. So even though we live in this broken world filled with death and goodbyes, we long for something more.

We mourn, and we grieve, but not like those without hope.

And it's because we live in another kind of expectation, a different, new kind of advent. At Christmas, we celebrate Baby Jesus coming, Jesus' birth, and that was the first coming of Christ.

But there's a second coming of Christ, and that's what we're all looking forward to. That's the next advent, the next "Christmas" so to speak.

And when Jesus comes again, Paul says that signals the resurrection of the dead, all those believers who have died will have new life just the way Jesus had new life. Here in 1 Thessalonians, Paul says in verse 14 (read). It's new bodies that are like our bodies, but better, new, perfect, so that can return to the Garden and we can be together again. Because we believe in Jesus, we believe we will be reunited with those who we've lost, who we had to say goodbye to; Paul tells us here that (read verse 15b-17). We have something to look forward to, something like a larger, cosmic Christmas morning, a reunion in the sky. And this is meant to be an encouragement to the Thessalonians thousands of years ago, and to us moderns, right now.

But this doesn't mean we don't mourn at all. This doesn't mean we aren't devastated by the losses we experience. This world is broken still. Terrible things happen. Things that just don't make any sense at all. Suffering, sickness, and death are devastating and we need to mourn. There's something wrong with us if we don't mourn.

Jesus' sympathy for his friends at the death of Lazarus point to that – he was saddened, even angry, when he saw his friend Lazarus' tomb in the gospels, in Luke, and he was also saddened by how much suffering was brought upon his friends who were mourning their friends' death.

And he knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead in, like, five minutes! But he didn't walk in and say: "Stop crying everyone, this is no big deal! There's nothing to be sad about because we're all going to be drinking and hanging out in a minute, so just hold your horses with the mourning stuff." No. He was deeply moved, he wept! Even though Lazarus was going to be brought back to life within the hour.

And so yes, we do mourn. We do grieve.

But we grieve in hope and expectation. We are living in an Advent that will last until Jesus comes back. While we live in the already and the not yet, we sing and pray: "O Come O Come Emmanuel! Give us Victory over the grave!" We pray: "Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight!"

Some of you might be listening to this and you're thinking: "I want this hope. I want to live in that already and not yet. I want to know Jesus" and if that's the case, I want to invite you to find out more, because there is new life, there is more to this life, when you know Jesus. That song, O Come O Come Emmanuel – Emmanuel means "God with us." Jesus is God's Son – He is God, He is alive, he's with us now. He still works in this world, and you can know him. This isn't an impersonal religion, it's a personal relationship, a chance to know Jesus and be fully known by him, and it's new life, starting now and lasting forever. And we can help you find out more – I'm happy to talk to you, or John (who leads worship) or Kelly, or you can write it on your connection card. And we can tell you more about Jesus and how he can and will change your life.

Some of you might be listening to this and you're in the middle of that valley of death. You're praying and singing O Come O Come Emmanuel, and you're feeling deeply sad, or mournful, or full of grief. And I'd like to say to you: "You're in the right place." The bible tells us that we are mourn with those who mourn, and we'd like to come alongside you as you grieve. The holidays are a really tough time for some people, especially if there are people missing that used to be there with you are you celebrated together.

It's okay to grieve and mourn. And we want to come alongside and grieve and mourn with you.

But we also want to remember that there's also the "already" part of this story. Even though death and brokenness are all around us, even during the Christmas season, there is a promise, a promise from God, that this is not it. This is not the end. So if you're mourning, sad, or afraid, even if you don't know if this is true, I want to speak to you (and to myself, really. I need to remember this daily): Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. He's beside us, when life is so heavy that we can't walk, he takes our arm and puts it over his shoulder and he holds us up.

He carries our burdens with us, and he gives us his hand and a new home. We trust our loved ones to him. We trust ourselves to him. God cares for us and he cares for them more than we ever could. And Jesus knows how sad death is – he has felt that sadness, and he died because of that sadness and brokenness.

It's a paradox, but we can see goodness and hope even during the bleakest and saddest moments. It may not be comfort-able, but it does give us comfort, a deeper sense of joy. And we wait in that joy. We're like my nephew: "I can't WAIT for Christmas! I can't WAIT for Jesus!" But we wait. We endure this season with Hope and Expectation. We live, and we mourn, but not like those who have no hope, because we do have hope. God fulfilled his promise: He brought us out of exile. He promised new life, and he gave us the best gift we could possibly get: new life through his precious son. It's like the best Christmas Present under the tree, with the sparkly wrapping paper and huge red bow that we just can't wait to open, but we have to wait.

You remember feeling that as a kid, just being so beside yourself, like you can't wait another minute, that it feels like torture seeing that present there day after day. But there's hope, even if you can't open it yet: You WILL have that Barbie dream house, or that Lego Star Wars Set, or the new drum set (okay, that's my husband's Christmas wish this year!)

As we close, I want you all to spend some of this time meditating on this idea of the "already and not yet." We're in exile. We ask: O Come O Come Emmanuel. Rescue Us. Open wide our heavenly home. And we mourn and grieve, but we mourn with hope and expectation that there is a home for us, found in God alone. Let's pray.