Advent Midweek 1

O Come, Wisdom

Isaiah 11:2

Sermon Outline

O Come, Thou Wisdom from on High.

 I. The Wisdom from on high is Jesus Christ.

 II. He is the wisdom we need because he “ord’rest all things mightily.”

 III. His wisdom prepares us to meet him for eternity.

Sermon

Christmas wish lists; everybody has them. Not too many years ago, the most waited-for item in the mailbox every fall was the *Sears Roebuck* Christmas catalog—a veritable toyland in full color. My, how kids looked for it! Maybe you were one of them. In some households, the arrival of the toy catalog meant a minor riot. Brothers and sisters would fight over it. The first one to get his hands on it would take it into the bathroom, lock the door, and devour the pages. At least that’s the way it was in my family.

I remember putting a big check mark beside what I wanted. I’d write my name beside it. I’d fold down the corners of the pages and add each item to my list. I’d take my list to my mother and carefully show her everything I wanted for Christmas, pointing it out on the page. Then I’d beg and plead for what I wanted right up till Christmas Eve. Did you ever do anything like that? I’m embarrassed to admit I did.

As much as I wished and begged for all those Sears catalog toys, for countless longer centuries God’s faithful people once prayed, begged, for the coming of the one promised by God to be their Savior. And for more than a thousand years since he, the Savior, has come, Christians have sung a similar prayer. We know and love it as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

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* 357:2)

That’s the first of seven prayers, seven stanzas, of the hymn.

The hymn is indeed very old, perhaps written in the days of Charlemagne, the 800s, well over a thousand years ago and revised from time to time over the centuries. A literal translation of the Latin is included in some hymnals. But the version we’re singing is the familiar one as translated beginning in 1851 by Rev. John Mason Neale, an Anglican clergyman. He tweaked the song a bit, till in 1857 it became the version many people love today.

How we got the song, though, isn’t really the most impor­tant thing—the prayer offered in each stanza is. It is these important prayers that really ought to be on our Christmas wish list, such as the prayer of stanza 2:

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,

Who ord’rest all things mightily;

To us the path of knowledge show,

And teach us in her ways to go.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to thee, O Israel! (*LSB* 357:2)

I don’t ever recall as a child praying for wisdom. But that’s what we sing for tonight:

O Come, Thou Wisdom from on High.

I.

What you and I really need for Christmas is not something from the toy catalog or the electronics store or “my two front teeth” or even “the doggie in the window.” What we need is “Wisdom from on high.” When we think of wisdom, probably most of us think in terms of making the right decisions or being able to discern between good and bad. And surely that’s part of what wisdom is about.

In his epistle, James encourages those who lack wisdom to pray for it, but to pray in faith. Otherwise, those asking won’t receive it. James goes on to say that every good and perfect gift, such as wisdom, “is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (1:17).

But Scripture also takes this virtue, wisdom, and personifies it. That is, it speaks of wisdom as though it were a person. In Solomon’s *Book of Proverbs*, wisdom is personified as the Lord’s master builder, with him marking out the foundations of the earth, and as the one who gives enduring wealth and righteousness better than gold (Prov 8:12–31).

Ch 11 of Isaiah gives rise to much of what we find in “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” According to Isaiah, the promised Messiah comes from the family of Jesse, father of David, and is anointed by the “Spirit of *wisdom* and understanding” (11:2).

So what do we make of this? When we put these lessons together, we learn that *true wisdom is inseparable from the person Jesus Christ*. Thus, when one knows Jesus Christ by faith, he has found wisdom. Jesus Christ, John tells us, is the very Word of God through whom all things were made (Jn 1:1–3). Jesus Christ personally is the divine Wisdom through whom God made, sustains, and saves his creation. That’s powerful stuff!

This Wisdom from God, Jesus Christ, is the Messiah the people of God in times past always yearned for, whom the prophets foretold. He’s the very descendant of David, the son of Jesse, the promised King. But the royal family tree of Jesse became a stump when Assyria and Babylon conquered Israel and Judah. The sons of the last king were slaughtered and the people exiled. How could a new king sprout from a dead royal stump? God would make it happen, the prophets promised.

And God did, when Jesus was born to Mary in Bethlehem, into the house of David, being the adopted Son of Joseph, a member of the royal family! But how would the world know Jesus was the rightful heir, the promised shoot growing from the stump? “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of *wisdom* and understanding” (Is 11:2).

And that happened too. When? When did the anointing Spirit of the Lord rest upon Jesus? Quite literally, at his Baptism! There at the Jordan River, as John baptized Jesus, the Bible tells us the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son” (Mt 3:17).

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” stanza 2, prays for wisdom. But it turns out that the wisdom God wants to give us isn’t just the ability to make good decisions or discern right from wrong. Rather, it is a person, Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God. So when we pray for wisdom as James encourages us to do, God answers that prayer by sending us Jesus. *He* is the Wisdom we need.

II.

You know the billboards along the highway that say “Jesus is the answer”? It’s true. The answer to our prayer for wisdom is Jesus. But how can he be the answer to my prayer? What if my life is a confused mess? What if my personal relationships are getting me into trouble? What if I can’t figure out what my priorities should be? What if I can’t sort out right from wrong when I really need to? Sometimes things aren’t all that clear. What then? What if I need a job and I’m actually blessed with more than one opportunity? What if I’m tempted to do wrong in order to pay the bills and feed my family? What if I’m tempted to do wrong just because I think it will be fun? How is Jesus the answer?

It might seem that we need specific wisdom for each of these very different situations. But not really. All we need is the wisdom that is Jesus Christ, God’s good and perfect gift. When we are joined to Jesus Christ through faith, when we are buried with him through Holy Baptism into his death, burial, and resurrection, when through Baptism we are covered with the righteousness of Christ and filled with his Spirit, we have all the Wisdom we need.

How can that be? The hymn tells us. It says Jesus Christ, God’s Wisdom from on high, “ord’rest all things mightily.” Faith in Jesus Christ sees the divine order of things the song speaks of and knows what to think and do. Our world and life are not just a confused mess when we realize that everything is ordered by God’s Wisdom. Somehow, everything fits into the wise plan of God, who works all things out for the good of everyone who loves him (Rom 8:28).

The hymn would have us pray, “To us the path of knowledge show.” How does Jesus Christ, God’s Wisdom from on high, show us the path of knowledge? He shows us the path of knowledge through the written Word of God. *Proverbs* is a great place to start finding that path! That’s why one congregation I know of keeps a Bible open to the *Book of Proverbs* on the altar. Proverbs is part of what we call “the wisdom literature.”

But even more than in *Proverbs,* we see God’s Wisdom clearly in the Gospels. In them Jesus Christ shows us the path of knowledge, God’s order of all things, through his words, his life, his saving work on the cross, and the empty tomb. In Jesus Christ, God reveals his priorities, how to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, true from false. And God’s priority, his order of what’s right and good and true, is that he is reconciled to you, at peace with you. That’s what Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection achieved. Your sin, my sin, which disordered everything and threw God’s perfect creation and our relationship with him into chaos, has been forgiven, removed, so that we are once again with him. All is once again right with the world—*shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace, perfect well-being with God. Jesus won it and lets us see it. Jesus Christ is God’s Wisdom with flesh on it, Wisdom we could have seen and touched had we been at the manger in Bethlehem, Wisdom we can taste in the Lord’s Supper.

Pray for God’s Wisdom from on high! When you ask in faith, God promises to send you his Wisdom. In faith, let that Wisdom embrace you. Allow it to saturate your mind and heart with everything Scripture tells you. As you do, the Wisdom you seek will be yours. And it will be Jesus.

III.

But God’s Wisdom from on high is more than having one’s heart and mind filled with the knowledge of Jesus and God’s Word and allowing that knowledge to direct us. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is, after all, an Advent song. Most people tend to forget that Advent isn’t just about the coming of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom from God, as a baby in Bethlehem. It’s only been in recent centuries that we’ve focused on that.

Historically, Advent was about preparing for the coming of God’s Son in power, glory, and judgment on the Last Day. Advent used to be a darker season for contemplation of the wrath of God, a season for repentance from sin and for fasting. Christmas and Epiphany have always been the bright, happy seasons, not Advent. Just note the subject matter of the Scripture lessons on many of the Sundays in Advent, and you’ll see what I mean. So praying for the coming of God’s Wisdom from on high isn’t just about welcoming a baby, but it’s about welcoming the Judge of the world who comes to destroy evil and make his creation new again.

A baby, yes, but even more, judgment. That’s what we’re preparing for during Advent. Yes, we want God’s Wisdom from on high to guide and direct us in daily life through his written Word and the teaching and example of Jesus. But we especially want God’s Wisdom from on high to prepare our hearts to meet Jesus through repentance and faith, that we might joyfully spend eternity with him.

Praying for God’s Wisdom to come from on high is to pray that we will be watchful and ready like the wise virgins in a story Jesus tells. You remember that story in Mt 25, don’t you? Ten virgins are waiting with lamps to meet the bridegroom. Soon he’ll be passing by in a joyful wedding procession that they hope to join. Five of the virgins are *foolish*, and five are *wise*, we’re told. The *foolish* virgins bring their lamps but no oil. The ones with wisdom, the wise virgins, bring both.

The bridegroom’s procession is delayed. The virgins get sleepy and doze off. Finally, the cry comes at midnight, “Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him” (25:6). There’s a crisis. Of the ten virgins, only the five wise ones have oil to light their path and join the procession. “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out” (25:8), the foolish virgins beg the wise. But the *wise* virgins refuse, saying if they do, they won’t have enough for themselves.

So the foolish virgins go shopping for lamp oil at midnight. Meanwhile the bridegroom and the procession pass by, the wise virgins join in, and together with the bridegroom they all enter the wedding hall for the feast. Everyone, that is, but those five who lacked wisdom. Showing up late, they find themselves locked out. “Lord, lord, open to us” (25:11), they plead, but the door remains shut. “Truly, I say to you, I do not know you” (25:12), the bridegroom says from the other side.

What does this mean for us? What *wisdom* are we to gain from it? Jesus tells us: “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (25:13). What day and hour is Jesus talking about? The day and hour he returns, the day he comes to condemn the unprepared foolish but to welcome the faithful wise into his eternal kingdom. You, my friends, are those wise to enter heaven, for you have Jesus Christ, God’s Wisdom from on high, who by his death on the cross has reordered all things for your eternity with him. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20).

Gracious Father in heaven, teach us to know that true Wisdom is your Son, Jesus Christ, who comes to us from on high. By your Word and Spirit, enable us to welcome him by faith on the day he comes in power and glory, that we might be received into your eternal kingdom. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.