

One song that signals “It Is Now Advent” is, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” *Emmanuel* means “God with us.” And that is the believer’s deepest desire: for God to be with us, for God to come and live with us. We pray to be delivered from the isolation and the emptiness of life apart from Him and His gifts. Our entire goal as Christians is to be restored to perfect communion and fellowship with God.

Advent reminds us that our God is one who does come to be with us. He comes now, and He has come throughout history, in powerful ways and in surprising ways. The powerful ways are easy to identify, but the surprising ways require a little more attention.

Here’s one surprise for us: Jesus is eternal. That means He has always existed as a person of the Triune God. In other words, Jesus did not start existing at Christmas. Sometimes, we might be led to think that the Son of God wasn’t doing much before His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, that He didn’t really come on the scene until the New Testament. The whole idea of Jesus in the Old Testament seems a bit foreign. But in fact, the Son of God has been intimately involved with His people from the very beginning of time. The Scriptures say that all things were created through the One who is the Word. And God the Son appeared to His chosen people many times in the Old Testament before taking on flesh. At the bidding of His heavenly Father, the Son of God descended to this earth at various times to be with His people Israel, to speak His Word to them, to guide them, and to deliver them from their enemies. All of this was a precursor to the time when Christ would descend to this earth in the ultimate way, taking on our very body and soul and becoming the eternal Savior of mankind.

In today’s Old Testament Reading, we encounter the Israelites after they were freed, as they traveled in the wilderness. We learn of how God was present with His people in the form of a cloud that filled and covered the tabernacle. The tabernacle was like a mobile temple, a large tent for the worship the Lord had prescribed. Within it was the Most Holy Place, where the ark of God was located. The ark contained the two stone tablets of the testimony, which God had given to Moses, and on it was the Mercy Seat, where the Lord was present to meet with His people through the blood of the sacrifices. Even as God was present in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, so too was He present among His people as a cloud in this tabernacle, a cloud that had the appearance of fire by night. When the cloud rose

above the tabernacle, the Israelites would journey. When it remained on the tabernacle, they would stay where they were.

Now, we heard in the reading from John's Gospel that no one has ever seen God, but that Christ, the only begotten Son of God has revealed Him. This cloud, then, was a revelation of God in His Son. It was the real presence of the Creator entering into creation for the sake of His people, to lead them to the riches of the Promised Land. It was a living prophecy of how the heavenly and the earthly would come together in a permanent and enduring way in the conception of Jesus and in His birth at Bethlehem.

The apostle John teaches us this in those very important words "The Word [that is, the Son of God] became flesh and dwelt among us." That word, *dwelt*, is actually another form of the word for "tabernacle" or "tent." So we could translate John's statement this way: "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." Jesus "set up His tent" in our midst. For the same Lord who dwelt in a tent made of animal skins has taken on our human nature—flesh and blood, body and soul. The glory of the Lord dwells in human skin in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The tabernacle that Jesus descended to fill was our human body and soul. And He did so not just for a little while but for all eternity. In the wilderness, the cloud would sometimes rise out of the tabernacle. But in Christ, the divine and human natures are eternally joined, so that God the Son is and always will be true man, our brother. The human tabernacle which He now inhabits is His dwelling place forever. This helps to explain why Jesus said, "Destroy this *temple* (referring to His body), and in three days I will raise it up." God and man come together forever in Christ, so that all humanity might be raised up to the glory of God. Jesus is Himself the glory of God, full of grace and truth for us.

That's why Christmas is such a joyous time for us. It celebrates this very reality. It celebrates that Christ crossed the canyon that our sin created. He bridged the gap between heaven and earth and brought us back to God. Through the human nature of Christ, we have been reconciled to our heavenly Father. God and man have been reunited in Jesus, and now we have access to heaven by His holy name. The human and the divine are one in Christ, and so through faith in Him, we have been made one with God. We have been restored to His holy fellowship. This is the glory of Christmas.

We see this fellowship foreshadowed in the cloud that descended on the tabernacle in the wilderness. Clouds are often connected with Christ in the New Testament as well. For instance,

when Jesus revealed His glory to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, a cloud came and enveloped them. When Jesus ascended into heaven, it was a cloud that hid Him from the disciples' sight. And what are clouds made of but water? It is through water that Christ is present for us in Baptism to make our bodies His temple, the tabernacle of His Spirit. It is also written that Jesus will come in the clouds with great power and glory to bring the redemption of His people to its fulfillment.

Revelation 21 describes the fulfillment of our Advent hope to come on the Last Day: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." No more isolation or exile. We will experience the fulfillment of the Lord's name, Immanuel. God with us. The Word made flesh tabernacling with us forever.

We are not there quite yet, however, so let us follow our Lord Jesus across the wilderness of this fallen world. He goes with us. Jesus is our holy place, our tabernacle, where His gifts go—his gifts of Word and Sacrament—He goes. We even go with him through the grave, and into the resurrection and the promised land of the world to come.