O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel

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In autumn, leaves turn brilliant colors, then fade and fall. Shadows lengthen as days grow shorter and colder. Warm summer memories start to fade. We are reminded once again that the things of this world last but a moment then pass away.

It is Advent — and Advent draws us into a season of change, of longing and expectations. We light candles on our Advent wreaths to remind us that Jesus is the true light of the world. He is the light that shines in darkness. These lit candles symbolize our ongoing commitment to come out of darkness and enter into God’s marvelous light.

During the Advent Season the Church invites us to reflect on Christ’s coming: His first coming at the stable in Bethlehem more than two thousand years ago, and His second coming at a day and time we do not know. The first is an event that we now participate. The second is a consummation that we still anticipate.

This dual focus symbolizes our spiritual journey; an affirmation that Christ has come and that He is present today. It is also a preparation for His return at the end of time. We do not know the day or the hour of His return, therefore we must be prepared. So, we repent whatever hinders our readiness for that day.

Our Advent observance has Old Testament roots. God, through the prophets, taught Israel to expect a Messiah to set them free from sin and injustice. This longing or yearning for the Messiah arose across many centuries. They cried to the Lord as sin and injustice prevailed in their lives and in their land.

This yearning for deliverance expressed by Israelite slaves in Egypt is the same cry uttered by those who are victims of injustice in the world today. The Israelites hoped in God to deliver them from their bitter oppression. And God heard their cry and delivered them.

It is this hope, however faint at times; and it is this God, however distant He sometimes seems … it is this hope and it is this God that bring to the world the anticipation of a King who will rule with truth, justice, and righteousness over His people and His creation.

When the hungry are fed, the poor are cared for, and justice is established – the light will then break forth like the dawn. (see Isaiah 58.) Charity, equality, and mercy are marks of God’s kingdom. When Christ returns, it will be to complete the work, that we, His followers, have begun in His name. At the end of time, He will then make whole that which we have accomplished in part.

During Advent, we make Israel’s cry our own. Yes, Christ has already come. Yet, we know that sin and injustice still have their terrible effects in our lives and in our communities. We still are in very much need of the Messiah to daily set us free.
During Advent, the Church invites us to acknowledge our need for God’s saving work and to long for the glorious freedom as God’s children. We know that God has begun this saving work in us. Now, we long for Him to bring it to completion.

While there is a profound joy in the celebration of Christ’s first coming, there is also a somber warning to prepare for His second coming. But even then, the prayer of Advent is still “O Come, O come Emmanuel ransom captive Israel.”