

Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2022  
St. John's, Gloucester  
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Here we are! I invite you, in this moment, to be fully present. Take in a deep breath, let it out. Relax. Let go of the list of things to do, or worries, or irritations, or even anticipations. Just be. Here. Take in the flowers, the candles, the people. Come, dear Jesus.

In staff meetings, I generally start with a prayer, psalm, or poem. This week, I happened on the "Psalm of an Emerging Emmanuel" by Edward Hays ([Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim](#)). The Psalm starts like this:

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,"  
I pray with upraised eyes.  
Drop down, O Dew of Heaven,  
that God might walk and talk on earth,  
might heal and feed our sin-soaked world.

O come, O Come, Emmanuel,  
my prayers like searchlights  
comb the starry winter skies.  
Descend from the black hole of some neighboring galaxy  
to green with your grace  
our barren earth.

Such an Advent waiting prayer  
can be a lifelong profession of patient longing,  
unless I know, with all my heart,  
that Emmanuel not only comes down  
but also comes forth and emerges. (P. 131)

Do you hear the difference? So often we look for and hope for a God coming in might from Beyond, swooping down and putting everything right by their power. God as victorious King, God as military leader commanding a great army, God as Avenger on a Mission. And all of these images are present in the Bible.

But what if, as Edward Hays suggests, what we get is the Emerging Emmanuel? The God who IS ALREADY HERE, the God who, as the writer of Colossians states, created everything by Christ and is in everything—the God who is waiting to emerge at any time, in any place? Then our task is not to passively and patiently wait for the External God to come crashing in; our task is to actively create space and to nurture the Inherent God emerging into flesh. These are two very different ways of being.

The year is somewhere around 4 BC. Caesar Augustus is a mighty Roman Emperor, who has come with large armies and great power and enforced the so-called "Pax Romana," Roman Peace, on the countries and cultures that have been swallowed up by his power, including the Jews and others living in Judea and Galilee. This is a hard peace, accompanied by violence, death and often poverty for the occupied territories.

And some try to rise up in power against the Roman machine, trying to match violence with violence and throw off their oppressors. Many hope that God will be the Avenging Power to come and restore Israel.

But God emerges instead. In that time and place and people. Nearly unnoticed. God chooses Mary and Joseph to be vessels, to be the ones to carry and tend to this new life. It's not an easy task. Did Mary have morning sickness? Did she and Joseph worry about the child or their ability to care for him? Her body swelled up, she had to eat more, it got harder to move and do chores and even sleep at night. And then the Empire said, "Get moving! Time to go to your hometown of Bethlehem"—which meant 90 miles of walking to end up in an overcrowded town with no spare room. I wonder if that's when Mary lost it, rounding on Joseph and yelling, "I thought you said your family members would take us in!! Now what are we going to do??"

And then there is the lodging with the animals, and then labor, which is always a surprise and more painful than we ever imagined. Did Mary moan and cry out and yell? Why not? Allowing new life to emerge, allowing God to emerge, is DIFFICULT! And then 8 or 12 or 20 hours later, he pops out, little baby Jesus, covered in blood, taking his first breaths, crying, having his cord cut, being washed by a midwife or family member, having salt powder rubbed on him, being swaddled by the blankets that Mary brought with her, having his first nurse. Then Mary lies back, exhausted and sore, and Joseph places the baby next to her in the feeding trough, and they tremble with excitement, overwhelm and a bit of fear. Emmanuel has emerged.

But the work is not done. Feedings every few hours, sleep-deprived nights, all the usual new-parent worries—is he still breathing? Is he eating enough? And then the big Emmanuel worries—what does it mean to be God-with-us? The prophecies about him. The flight into Egypt. Every day, every step, feeding, tending, loving, protecting . . . and letting him grow into who he is, the God Among Us. This is God's doing, but they are collaborators, co-creators.

Many of us here have had the privilege and burden of supporting and nurturing little God-miracles from childhood into adulthood. They may or may not have our DNA, but they all carry God's DNA, and they have needed lots of our work and care to emerge into the God-bearers they are. And yet, we're not done. God is everywhere, waiting to emerge. Our world, our communities, our souls need God to keep emerging.

Where is Emmanuel hiding? How are we called to be a midwife and parent to God in us/God with us? Perhaps in an artistic endeavor—creating a painting or picture, writing a poem or play or book, performing music or drama. Maybe tending a garden or trees or turning lawn into a meadow of native plants. Maybe it is an idea in you that is struggling to take form—a new creation or organization or new way of doing something. Maybe it is your own understanding of the world and how you relate to it. Maybe it is a change to your life situation. Maybe, as seems to be happening, it is a new direction, a new mission for this Church. What does it mean to curate, make space for, follow the lead of, nourish and support this godly new life?

I'll tell you what it does not mean. It does not mean charging ahead, acting like you know what you're doing, it doesn't mean forcing this or that to be born, it doesn't mean trying to threaten or coerce it into being. It means—taking time. Waiting. Listening. Paying attention. Slowing down. Throwing out what you think you know.

It means suffering, because not being in charge is hard, and because giving yourself to support new life is hard. It means following the lead of this person/idea/creation of God. It means praying. It means being vulnerable. It means being open to failing and being hurt. It means 8 or 12 or 20 hours or days or years of labor.

And yet. It means God With US! The Emerging Emmanuel who will seek us out, show up, look us in the eye, assure us, THIS IS WHO I AM/ AND THIS IS WHO YOU ARE MEANT TO BE. The one who brings us amazement, joy, heart-exploding love--because this is God, after all. This changing person, this new creation, this idea or organization will fill us and touch us in ways we never imagined.

What, or rather, who is emerging in your life?

Hays ends his Psalm this way:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel,  
come forth from deep within me  
with Christmas luminous beauty.  
For my heart has become the sacred crib,  
the birthing place of God-among-us.

Peace and earth and justice for all  
will only become manifest in our lives  
when enough of your sons and daughters  
awaken to your divine design  
that has made each of us  
an emerging Emmanuel.

Blessed Christmas to all you emerging Emmanuels! Amen.