

First Week of Advent

O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver,
the Expected of the nations and their Savior:
Come and save us, O Lord, our God.

I enjoy the television series *Star Trek* in all its variations: the first series with William Shatner, the later series with Patrick Stewart, and the two spin-offs, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*. The series offers an appealing vision of the future, and I find the assumptions about science and technology made throughout the series fascinating. Some technological advances made in the first two series, such as the digital tablet, have become reality. I look forward to a time when we can transport ourselves across great distances of time and space.

Despite the future orientation of the series, some episodes travel *back* in time and show the potential of a history that could have changed the world. In one such journey into the past, a small mission team from the Starship Enterprise interacted with Samuel Clemens and a young Jack London. In this episode, the “away” team faced the pressure of not changing history’s time line. Nothing changed—so much for the wonderful nonreality of television! However, the idea of traveling back in time to meet people and witness particular events intrigues me. So bear with me as we take time to travel backward in time.

Imagine you are a Christian layperson living in Italy in the year 500 CE. You work in fields or manage household affairs. Perhaps you farm, work in a carpentry shop, or bake goods for sale. Your simple and functional clothing does not differ much from that worn in Jesus’ time or even in ancient Greece five hundred years before Jesus. Men wore short tunics and shirts. Women wore full-length tunics. Your extended family surrounds

you. You enjoy family life. You have children who play and work beside you. You work hard. You hear rumors of wars, but those rumors come from far away and you feel secure. Various warrior tribes, such as the Huns, the Visigoths, or the Vandals are attacking nations. The Empire verges on collapse. With no media reporting, no one knows about the impending collapse. In your spare time, you raise questions about the world; but most of the time you work and talk about community matters and mix in some gossip.

You go to worship. Humanity has not yet put into practice the architectural principles that brought about the great medieval cathedrals. Christmas approaches and with others in the congregation, you join in prayer. You hear a priest proclaim in the Latin language of the church:

*O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster,
expectatio Gentium, et Salvator earum:
veni ad salvandum nos, Domine, Deus noster.*

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As you worship, maybe this prayer nudges you to think about God's vision of salvation for the world. Perhaps you begin to look beyond the drudgery of daily life and anticipate a future of hope fulfilled. You begin to anticipate the coming of salvation through the Expected One. And we are not so far removed from such hope and desire for salvation.

We perceive and experience many changes between the year 500 and our own time. We sometimes describe our daily work as a grind, but that work generally is not as grueling as was the work of the sixth century. We probably do not live near our

extended families today, and the dimensions and boundaries of family life vary greatly from the year 500. Today we learn quickly about events beyond our community, and such news often generates fear. We receive news 24/7, but the tyranny of the news cycle allows for little follow-up reporting on yesterday's big story. Whether we lived in the year 500 or the current year, we share some common points of humanity. Throughout this history, we—along with our ancestors—live with a sense that hope and love will overcome the power of evil.

We go to worship today. Styles of worship are unlike those of the sixth century and diverge from church to church or from various services within a congregation's experience. We may prefer a contemporary style of worship or a contemplative one, a traditional service in a sanctuary or a service set in a coffee house. Our choices for worship continue to point to the desire of our hearts and to the hope and love that God extends.

We continue to anticipate Christmas and the celebration of Jesus' birth, this sacred celebration of Emmanuel—God with us. What do you anticipate this Christmas? What vision do you pray to see fulfilled? As you read this week's meditations and prayers and as you continue the Advent journey toward Christmas, may you experience wonder and awe.