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Fourth Sunday of Advent full of excitement and anticipation

Marty Haugen | Dec. 21, 2012 Spiritual Reflections
Marty Haugen's Advent reflections

How difficult in this year, when the fourth Sunday of Advent falls only one day before Christmas Eve, to maintain any sense of waiting for the Feast of the Incarnation. It is appropriate that the readings for this Sunday are so pregnant with hope and anticipation; they mirror and magnify the excitement that comes with true waiting, knowing we are on the cusp of experiencing God's unlimited love made manifest to us once again. The birth images in these readings are unmistakable and create a sense of imminent labor.

Micah names Bethlehem as the place that will "bring forth" the one who will deliver Israel, the one who will protect and feed his flock, the one of peace. In the letter to the Hebrews, Christ foreshadows his own passion ("Sacrifices you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me") even as he announces his coming as something that has already occurred. And in Luke, the pregnant Mary rushes eagerly to meet the pregnant Elizabeth, and John the Baptist "leaps for joy" in her womb. Perhaps it is perfectly fit that the Christmas Vigil should be the next day.

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Micah 5:1-4a
Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

Full text of the readings [1]

As tempting as it is to flood this day with Christmas carols, a bit of restraint can make the following feast even richer in its fulfillment.

The origins of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" are debated widely, with dates of the creation of its text varying from the ninth century to the 12th. The music has also been attributed to early chant of the eighth century, to a 15th-century processional song. What is undeniable is the spare, haunting and powerful strength of these "O" antiphons. The beautiful "O" sound at the beginning of each verse creates a passionate yearning for the coming of the Christ in all his mystical variations -- "Wisdom," "Rod (Root) of Jesse," "Dayspring," "Key of David." To dare to sing this unaccompanied (with good choral or cantor leadership) or with a simple woodwind on this Sunday will make the bells and brass of Christmas even richer.

[Marty Haugen is a composer of liturgical music for Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations, with more than 400 compositions published by GIA, Augsburg Fortress and other publishers.]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/122312.cfm