

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 18, 2008 at 3:16pm

'Who mourns in lonely exile here ...'

by Jamie Manson



This line from the antiphon

'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' runs in my mind and heart throughout Advent. Its haunting melody at once evokes loneliness and longing. It expresses exile, an isolation that runs so deep it seems that no human presence can bring any comfort. That such a profoundly personal experience is attributed to the group of people we know as Israel never ceases to fascinate and move me -- especially since I have been restless with loneliness and longing for most of my life.

My own personal mourning in lonely exile is in many ways a repercussion of a life-long battle with depression. I remember being caught in the throes of one particularly severe bout while I was in graduate school. I was sitting alone in my apartment, my head in my hands, feeling completely lost and alone, unable to think of one person to whom I could reach out.

Only words could keep me company that night. I remembered a quote from one of the letters of Vincent van Gogh. In an attempt to describe his own struggle with loneliness, Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo: 'One may have a blazing hearth in one's soul, yet no one ever comes to sit by it. Passersby see only a wisp of smoke rising from the chimney and continue on their way.'

I sat there, immobilized by grief, and thought about the blazing hearth in my own soul -- the passion both of my innermost yearning and of my suffering in mental and emotional anguish. How desperately I wanted to think of someone who might be willing to follow the wisps of smoke through the chimney, and find the fire within me and sit by it. I longed for a hearth, a home where I could dwell and flourish. I was in exile, deprived of any human presence that could get through to me, heal my broken heart and release

me from this prison.

There was no one in my life who could be with me at that level. As my depression lifted and I got older, I realized there probably never will be one person who could do all of these things for me -- not unless I wanted a lifetime membership to codependents anonymous! But nevertheless, I learned a lot about feeling utterly alone and abandoned that night. Mourning in lonely exile turned out to be quite formative.

There is so much noise now, so many ceaseless opportunities for distraction, that I wonder how many people have had the chance to be aware of their longing and conscious of their isolation. The current hallmarks of progress -- cell phones and text messages, e-mails and Web sites, smart phones and Skype -- have made us more connected, but less communicative; more contactable, but less present; more reachable and yet somehow so much more isolated. These communications devices have done much to temper and mute longing and loneliness, especially for my generation. Yet, paradoxically, all of this progress has created conditions for unprecedented experiences of loneliness. By embracing my own exile, I learned about the human need for God. In my yearning, I began to understand Emmanuel.

God is with us. Yes, God was present to me during this suffering, whether I was aware of it or not. But I believe that God was with me, and with all people who have an experience like mine, in a much deeper sense. God was with me, and Van Gogh and the wandering Israel, in all of our longing, because God yearns for union just as we do. This, after all, is what Advent celebrates and anticipates: the glory of the Incarnation. The awesome realization that God so desires to be with us that God is willing to take on human flesh to seek a deeper union with us. No higher level of academic learning or childlike sense of wonder can ever capture a mystery so great and so extraordinary. Our yearning for divine presence is united with God's longing for human presence. Though our longing for both divine and human presence seems so intense at times, it is only a glimpse of the longing that God has to be with us.

As our drive to find community continues to break down and the church persists in fracturing our hearts, it may seem more challenging than ever to find a place to dwell with God. Yet, I believe that if we can attune our vision, we might find that God is right here, trying to break through to us, longing to be found. God is that blazing hearth in our midst, who shines out to us in the faces of loved ones and strangers, who reaches out in the mightiest waves of the ocean and the gentlest breezes in the desert, who calls to us in the cries of the broken and the shouts of the joyful, who yearns for us in the stroke of paint on the canvas or the crescendo of the song. We must continually beckon, O Come Emmanuel, and seek out a hearth, the intimacy that will free us from exile. But the truly glorious mystery is that God beckons us with a desire that far surpasses ours.

God is with us, shining in the darkness of our deserts, gleaming as a bright morning star in our own nights of loneliness, and radiating above our broken mangers as the promise of union both present and future. And this is truly a reason to rejoice, rejoice.

(Jamie Manson, who received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church in New York.)

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