

THE O ANTIPHONS

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A) – December 18, 2022

Sometime in the 9th century of this, the Common Era, a monk wrote a series of verses that would be chanted, one each day, in the eight days leading up to Christmas—the final days of Advent. He called them the “O Antiphons” because each one began with “*O veni, veni*”—“O come, come.” They were written in Latin and the clever monk composed them so that the first letter of the subject of each antiphon, from Wisdom to Emmanuel, would spell a word which, if read backwards, would be *ero cras* in Latin—or in English, “I will be present tomorrow.”

The O Antiphons were discovered and translated into English in the 15th century, but not composed into the hymn we sing until the 19th century. In other words, the O Antiphons have been around for a very long time, inspiring Christians for well over a millennium. And each time it is chanted or sung, while the needs of the people change, the plea for God’s presence does not.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of man appears.
We are indeed captive this year, aren’t we? Captive to the virus that still sickens and kills, and at the least won’t let us shake hands in friendship with each other. Captive to racism and anti-Semitism and gun violence and war. Imagine singing this as a citizen of Ukraine, or a mother mourning a child killed by a bullet. Imagine being in those shoes—the very idea is terrible. But there are lesser captivities: the frenzy of Christmas shopping, holiday parties, card and letter writing—all of which steal time from the quiet ponderings of our hearts that is meant to mark Advent. Even that long-ago monk knew that the world too often stole from the spirit.

O come, O come thou Wisdom from on high that orders all things mightily. To us the path of wisdom show and teach us in her ways to go.

There’s a saying going around: “You can’t fix stupid.” I mumble that frequently while listening to the daily news, especially when it concerns politics. No matter which party you favor, decisions made in our names are too often less than wise and more about power and greed. Imagine, if you will, that all of the people in our government prayed for, and followed, God’s wisdom, taking seriously “thy will be done.” Just imagine it!

O come, O come thou Lord of might, who to thy tribes on Sinai’s height, in ancient times didst give the law, in cloud and majesty and awe.

The operating instructions for freedom and peace are in our hands and have been since Moses watched God carve them in stone. We have always known *how* to be the people God has created us to be. The “how” is not what’s holding us captive. We have all we need to make a difference.

O come, O come thou Branch of Jesse’s tree. Free them from tyranny that trust thy mighty power to save and give them victory o’er the grave.

I find it interesting that the pronouns change in this antiphon. Two verses earlier we asked, “*to US the path of wisdom show*” but now we pray “*free THEM.*” When did we stop taking responsibility? When did it become “us” and “them”? I think of “West Side Story” and the bitter rivalry between the Sharks and the Jets. Only when someone beloved by both sides is killed do they come together to mourn. If only they’d addressed their hatred sooner. If only they’d talked, tried to understand each other sooner. If only. What are *we* waiting for?

O come, O come thou key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home. Make safe the way that leads on high and close the path to misery.

Jesus came that we may have life, and have it more abundantly. Will we ever have “heaven on earth”? I doubt it, although we should, we *must* continue to work toward bringing the Kingdom of God closer. The Incarnation, or as Orthodox Christians call it, the *enfleshment* of God, brought heaven to earth so that we might have a model to make earth more like heaven. Step by small step.

O come, O come O Dayspring from on high and cheer us by thy drawing nigh. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight.

The days are short and this Wednesday will be the longest night of the year. Years ago, on a visit to Wales, a very wise Welsh woman said that in their culture, they recognize the winter solstice as the beginning of the *growing* season, and the summer solstice as the beginning of the *dying season*, when growing things have reach the peak of their fulsomeness. So on Wednesday, if darkness seems overwhelming and Christmas spirit hard to come by, think about all those roots and bulbs underground, having died are now slowly splitting cells and preparing to grow until it is warm enough to come above ground. It is the beginning of the growing season.

O come, O come desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind; bid thou our sad divisions cease and be thyself our king of peace.

Help us to remember that although we pray for “peace on earth” as if it is God’s doing alone, it is actually in our hands, with God’s help. Imagine what the human race could accomplish if so much of our energy were not being spent on arguing Who’s right and who’s wrong or Who’s more powerful than whom, and instead put our minds and hearts toward figuring out: What would Jesus do?

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of man appears.

This is the fourth *Sunday* of Advent, but Advent doesn’t officially end until Christmas Eve. The Twelve Days of Christmas go from Christmas Day (or sundown Christmas Eve) to Epiphany. We still have seven days to ponder, as did Mary, the coming among us of the Son of God. Don’t let yourself be imprisoned by the ruthless frenzy of the so-called “Christmas season” that isn’t about Christmas at all.

Next to my bed hangs a beautiful framed calligraphy by Michael Podesta. It was given to me by a dear friend when I was ordained priest because she knew, like most clergy, that I would have trouble with keeping my personal boundaries intact and taking care of my own physical and spiritual health. I reread it often in this season, to try, despite the noise of the world, to reflect on the first coming and the expected second coming of Christ. I offer it to you:

"If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things, and again with things . . . If we consider ourselves so unimportant that we must fill every moment of our lives with action, when will we have time to make the long slow journey across the desert as did the Magi? Or sit and watch the stars as did the shepherds? Or brood over the coming of the child as did Mary? For each one of us there is a desert to travel, a star to discover, and a being within ourselves to bring to life."

May we rejoice, and rejoice again, that Emmanuel *shall* come to us, O Israel, O people of God. *Amen.*

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25.