

The
O ANTIPHONS
of ADVENT



*Seven Ways to Better Know
the Christ of Christmas*

Written by Chad Bird

1517

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Seven Ways to Better Know the Christ of Christmas



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Hymn #357, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

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Introduction

For at least 1300 years, the O Antiphons have been chanted, sung, and prayed by Christians during the last seven days of Advent (December 17-23). They serve as a helpful guide as we tiptoe our way toward the manger. Most Christians today are more familiar with the hymn which is based upon them, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." The stanzas of this hymn will serve as the concluding prayer to each day's reflection. Each of the Antiphons addresses the Messiah by a different name. All are steeped in Old Testament stories and imagery. Together, the O Antiphons preach the richly textured, Hebrew-accented Gospel. We will look at each of them in this series of reflections.

How to Use this Guide

This guide contains seven entries on each of the Antiphons. It can be used weekly throughout Advent, with an emphasis on one to two entries per week, by church groups, families, and individuals alike. If you choose to split up this content for an Advent study, we suggest the following:

Advent Week 1: Antiphons 1-2 (Wisdom and Adonai)

Advent Week 2: Antiphons 3-4 (Root of Jesse and Key of David)

Advent Week 3: Antiphons 5-6 (Dayspring and King of the Nations)

Advent Week 4: Antiphons 7-8 (Emmanuel)

If you use this guide as a study for the week leading up to Christmas, we suggest reading through one entry each day beginning on December 17 and ending on December 23, following the traditional order of the Antiphons.

For group or family study, we recommend that you read the verse of the day, the reflection, and then talk through the additional Bible verses and discussion questions. Afterward, the group may either speak or sing together the hymn stanza which is based on the Antiphon of the day.

Antiphon One:



*“And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.”*

(Isaiah 11:2)

Before Birds and Bees and Bonsai Trees

Before mountaintops touched the underbellies of clouds, before God ironed flat the flyover states, before birds and bees and Bonsai trees, there stood Wisdom by the Father's side.

The Father turned his head to gaze at Wisdom. Wisdom turned to gaze at the Father. Their eyes met and they both smiled the Spirit's knowing smile. “Let's rock and roll,” they said. And so they did. The Father loved creation into being by a Spirit-drenched Word.

From Gorillas to Galaxies

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). But this “beginning,” what was it? It's not simply the kickstart of a cosmic party. It's not even a “what” but a “who.” Beginning is another name for Wisdom—or, as we say in Hebrew, Chokmah.

First, a word about Wisdom. In the Old Testament, Wisdom is not divine IQ. Nor is wisdom just sacred street smarts. Rather, Wisdom is with God, alongside God, speaking and acting with full divine authority. Wisdom is a divine person. This person is elsewhere called Adonai, the Root of Jesse, the Key of David, Emmanuel.

In other words, Wisdom is the Son of God.

Now, back to the phrase, “in the beginning.” In Proverbs, “Beginning” and “Wisdom” are linked. Wisdom says, “The Lord begot me, the beginning of his way” (8:22 [my translation]). Wisdom is begotten or “brought forth” (8:24) by the Father as the beginning. The Hebrew noun for beginning, *reshit* (pronounced “ray-sheet”), is the same word in Genesis 1:1 (*b'reshit*).

Therefore, the very opening word of the Bible refers to Christ. In the Beginning, that is, in that one who is Wisdom, God the Father created the heavens and the earth. Echoing this in Greek, Jesus tells John that he is “the beginning [*arche*] of God's creation” (Rev. 3:14). John probably had both Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 in mind when he wrote, “In the beginning [*arche*] was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). This Word or Wisdom is the Beginning, not because he is made, of course, but because “all things were made through him” (John 1:3) and “by him” (Col. 1:16).

In the Beginning who is Wisdom, God the Father made everything from gorillas to galaxies, from sticks to stars.

O Wisdom, Come!

On December 17, we sing to Christ as the Father's Chokmah or Wisdom:

“O Wisdom, proceeding from the mouth of the Most High, pervading and permeating all creation, mightily ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence,” (LSB 357).

Wisdom flies down into our world through the open mouth of God to verbalize all things into existence. He is the let-there-be-this and let-there-be-that of Genesis 1. Upon this divine Son rests “the Spirit of Wisdom” (Isa. 11:2). Paul says that in Jesus “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom” (Col. 2:3) and that he “became to us wisdom from God” (1 Cor. 1:30).

This Wisdom pervades and permeates all creation. It's not just a churchy thing, a little cubicked square of life we christen “religion.” Wisdom kicks down boundaries. Wherever wisdom is found in our world—in science, in agriculture, in music, in education, in church—there the Son of the Father is mysteriously and profoundly at work as Creator.

You don't imagine, do you, that Jesus is somehow absent from medical science? That he is bored by geology or geometry or genetics? None of these things would even exist without him. He spoke them all into being. “He upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3). All things hang on Wisdom, who, at every single moment, speaks our every breath and the twinkle of every star into ongoing existence.

Wisdom Became Tiny

"Come," we pray to Jesus, "come and teach us the way of prudence." Imprudence is so natural to us that, for the most part, we are blind to our folly. We waste our lives repeating the stupid creed "just a little more and that will be enough" while our souls wander about threadbare and shoeless.

We are like starving men in the food-laden kitchen of God who sit scrunched in the corner nibbling on rat poison.

"O come, Thou Wisdom from on high...to us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go." Teach us prudence. Teach us love. Teach us humility. Teach us awe and wonder and delight in the sweeping grandeur of your world and the profound richness of your word.

Above all, lead us to the manger, O Wisdom, and show us yourself. Wisdom became a tiny human with flesh and blood and skin and bone. Wisdom swaddled in cloths that he made, drinking milk from the breasts he fashioned, rocked back and forth on soil that his hands formed ages ago.

PRAYER

O come, Adonai, Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's
height, In ancient times didst
give the law In cloud and majesty
and awe. Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

REFLECTION:

Read Isaiah 11:4-6 and 33:22. What imagery and titles does the prophet use to describe the Messiah? How is he clothed and what does he do with his mouth? Isaiah 33:22 uses three offices to describe the Messiah and one action. What are they? What do these tell us about Jesus?

Read Exodus 3:1-6. Discuss this Messenger and his appearance. What divine names are given to him and by what authority does he speak? Who is he?

What does Adon or Adonai mean in Hebrew? What do John 1:1-5; John 14:9; and Col. 2:9 say about him? Why is it so important that Jesus is both human and divine?



Antiphon Two:



*"For the Lord is our judge;
the Lord is our lawgiver;
the Lord is our king;
He will save us."*

(Isaiah 33:22)

A Scandalous Confession and the Burning Bush Jesus

In the previous reflection, we were staring into the vast amphitheater of creation, watching the Wisdom of God carve out caverns and kindle fire in the hearts of stars. Now we step into a very different space. We're in the Sinai wilderness. Sheep bleating. Sand swirling. Sun scorching. And there, shuffling along with his flock, is an octogenarian named Moses, just out earning a paycheck from his wife's dad.

He spies a bush pregnant with flame but no ashes blackening the ground. His curiosity piqued, Moses advances to inspect the mystery. And at that moment his life—and, indeed, the life of the world—is irrevocably changed.

"Moses, Moses," a voice says.
Hineni is his Hebrew response: "Here I am."

"Here I am." Now we know who this "I" is. We know about Moses' infant voyage down the Nile in his itty-bitty ark. His coming of age in Pharaoh's house. His deep-sixing of an Egyptian guard. And the last four decades of his life on the lam, during which he met and married Mrs. Moses, raised a pair of youngsters, and got into the shepherding business. Yes, we know Moses.

The more important question is this: Who's in the bush?

The Fire Voice

That's not as simple a question as it might appear. First, we're told "the angel [malak] of the Lord" is in the bush (Exod. 3:2). In Hebrew, malak, though usually translated "angel," is the more generic noun "messenger." Okay, so the messenger of Yahweh is in the bush. Simple. There's your answer.

But not so fast. Next we read, "When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush" (3:4). So, Yahweh sees and God calls? Now this is getting confusing.

Next, the Fire Voice identifies himself, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (3:6). Then he proceeds to say that he is the great "I am" (3:14) whom we call Yahweh.

So, who's in the bush? The messenger, God, or Yahweh? Well, yes.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Malak of the Lord, his messenger or spokesman, visits individuals or groups, beginning with Hagar (Gen. 16:7ff). He speaks as God, has the name of Yahweh in him (Exod. 23:21), acts with divine authority, and is called both Elohim and Yahweh. He is obviously divine but still distinguished from God as his messenger.

Who is this? He's the Son of the Father, his Spokesman, his Word-Man. Jesus is in the bush. Jesus is God. Jesus is Yahweh. Jesus is Adonai.

O Adonai, Come!

On December 18, the church sings the second of the "O Antiphons." Each of these antiphons addresses the Messiah by a different name. All are steeped in Old Testament stories and imagery.

On this day, we sing to Christ as Adonai:

"O Adonai and ruler of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and gave him the Law on Sinai: Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us," (LSB 357).

In Hebrew, Adon (the simple form of Adonai) can be a term of respect or courtesy for an earthly figure like a husband, brother, father, king, or prophet. In these cases, it is often translated "lord" (think of the phrase "lords and ladies"). However, Adon is also used to refer to the Lord of lords himself (Deut. 10:17). The longer form, Adonai, is another name or title for Yahweh himself.

A Scandalous Confession

Let me warn you: in our relativistic religious age, today's Antiphon is highly scandalous. It is a bold, unapologetic confession that the God of the Old Testament, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and who later gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

This confession is unapologetically exclusive. He who claims to worship the God of the Old Testament – but does not acknowledge that Jesus is that God – worships a false god. Yahweh is Jesus. Elohim is Jesus. Adonai is Jesus. He is Wisdom who created the world. He is Adonai who redeemed Israel from Egypt.

In brief, we know no God apart from Jesus the Christ. And in Jesus Christ, we know everything we need to know about God. As the Messiah himself says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” Paul affirms (Col. 2:9).

To go looking for God apart from Jesus Christ is to find nothing but an idol.

Outstretched Arms of Mercy

What we need is for Adonai to look for us. “Come with an outstretched arm and redeem us.” With his arm, the Lord redeemed Israel from the death grip of Pharaoh (Exod. 6:6). He stretched out that strong arm to cast down plague after plague, to slay

the firstborn of their enemy, to halve the Red Sea, to transform rocks into rivers, and to guide his people to the land flowing with milk and honey.

Stretch out that same hand, O Adonai, to redeem us. And he will. He will stretch out his infant arm to touch his mother’s face. He will stretch out his hand to heal a leper. He will stretch out his hand—both hands—to have them nailed to the bloody wood, on which we are redeemed.

O Adonai, our Lord Jesus, Messenger of the Father, Bearer of the Spirit, Ruler of the house of Israel and Head of the Church, wrap us in your strong, redeeming arms of mercy.

PRAYER

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

REFLECTION:

Read Isaiah 11:2-3; Proverbs 8:22-31; and 1 Corinthians 1:30. What do each of these sections say about Wisdom? How do they relate to Christ as the Wisdom of the Father?

Where do we see wisdom in science, in agriculture, in music, in education, in church, or other places in the world? How is the Lord present in all these, “mightily ordering all things”?

How does Jesus not only teach us prudence, love, humility, but embody these in himself? What are some examples from the Gospels where Jesus did this?



Antiphon Three:



“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit... In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.”

(Isaiah 11:1, 10)

Family Scandals and Deja Vu

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes” (Mark Twain). A modern leader is compared to an ancient one; this war is likened to that war. There’s a rhythm beating in the background of history. Patterns and designs dance before our eyes, forming a mosaic of meaning in the world’s unfolding history.

Sometimes, we experience a kind of communal déjà vu in which we exclaim, “Wait a minute! Haven’t we been in this exact same situation before?”

Reading the Bible can elicit a similar experience. In the last reflection, we spoke of old Moses, out shepherding his sheep, minding his own business, when suddenly, without warning, God kicked down the front door of his ho-hum life and said, “Listen up, old man. Have I got a mission for you.”

In this reflection, we’ll hear the rhyme of that old, old story, but it’ll be spun in a different direction. We will meet another shepherd, out with his sheep, whose life is forever altered when God shows up. We will meet another man to whom God says, “Hey, do I have just the job for you.” And this man, like Moses, will eventually wind up as head of the Israelites.

But history will not repeat itself; this young man, David, will be no carbon copy of Moses. This anointed David will be a foretaste of the Anointed Son of David to come.

We’ll talk about that, but first we need to get dirty. Let’s do a little digging around the base of David’s family tree.

Drunken Incest and a Boy Named Moab

I suppose if you sniff around enough in anyone’s family history, you’re going to find something that stinks. David was no different. His father was Jesse, his grandfather Obed, and his great-grandparents were Boaz and Ruth. You can read about their not-too-steamy romance in the book of Ruth.

Now Ruth was not an Israelite; she hailed from Moab. “Okay, so what,” you ask? Well, the “so what” is where the stink kicks in. Moab was named after its founder, a man with an infamous genesis. He was conceived in a cave, after two daughters and their father, Lot, hightailed it out of Sodom right before God torpedoed the place. One night, in this cave, the oldest daughter slipped into bed with her drunk father, did the deed, and conceived a baby. She named him “Moab,” which means—and I’m not making this up—“from Dad.”

The long and short of this is that if you dig down deep into the roots of David’s family tree, things stink. You’ll catch a whiff of Sodom’s fire and brimstone and the reek of a cave that became like a mini-Sodom where drunken incest was memorialized in a baby named “from Dad.”

I bring up this sordid history because it matters. When it came time to choose a replacement for Saul, the Lord had his pick of Israelites. He could have chosen someone from a squeaky-clean family—or, at least a family without actual Bible stories documenting their incestuous past. But, no, that wouldn’t do. God wanted a man with a pedigree that preached of broken humanity. God wanted Moab’s descendant. David alone was the man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14).

When Samuel traveled to Bethlehem on a covert mission to anoint the next king of Israel, Jesse paraded his oldest seven sons before the prophet.

“No, no, no,” God said to each of the men.

“Got any more?” Samuel asked.

Then, almost as an afterthought, Jesse said, “Oh, yes, there is one more, now that you mention it. My eighth and youngest boy, David. He’s out with the sheep.”

“Fetch him,” Samuel said.

And the rest, as they say, is history—history that rhymes. Like Moses the shepherd, David the shepherd’s life is forever altered from that day onward. He is anointed to deliver Israel. He slays Goliath. The Lord chose him to be the leader of his people, conqueror of kings, subjugator of nations. David defined kinship in Israel.

How Could Jesse's Son Be David's Root?

Skip forward a few centuries. Jesse's and David's bones have long since turned to dust. But the prophet Isaiah is about to breathe new life into their memory. Standing tall in his Jerusalem pulpit, Isaiah scans the far-distant horizon and says, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit" (Isa. 11:1). And a few verses later, "In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious" (11:10).

On December 19, the church sings the third of the "O Antiphons." It is based on this foretelling of Isaiah. On this day, we sing to Christ:

"O Root of Jesse, standing as an ensign before the peoples, before whom all kings are mute, to whom the nations will do homage: Come quickly to deliver us" (LSB 357).

Notice something very odd about Isaiah's prophecy. It's not that the Messiah will be from David's line. We knew that already. Indeed, David himself knew that; God had told him way back in 2 Samuel 7. A "shoot from the stump of Jesse" will spring forth. A new heir will arise to take the throne and rule forever and ever. He will be the "branch from his roots [that] shall bear fruit" (Isa. 11:1).

What's odd—indeed, what is marvelously mysterious—is that the Messiah is the root of Jesse. How is that possible? How could David's Son be Jesse's Root? That would be like me saying that I am the source of my grandfather, that I predate him, that I am the root of the man who was born 53 years before I was.

How could the Son of David be the Root of David's father?
In one way only: by being Jesse's own Creator.

This divine root of Jesse and human shoot of David, this Theanthropos ("GodMan"), as the church fathers called him, "stands as an ensign for the peoples." In Hebrew, an ensign is a *nes*, a military standard, around which troops gather.

We see that already in his youth, people from all walks of life and all nations gathered around this ensign, from Jewish shepherds to Gentile magi. The people of Israel follow him and a Gentile woman from Tyre pleads for his mercy. Jewish leaders jeer around his cross while Roman soldiers gamble beneath it.

"The peoples," Jew and Gentile, flock to him. They can't stay away from the Son of David. Love him or hate him, he magnetically draws them near. None can steer clear of God. And he will drive none of them away.

He inherited the lineage of Moab, this Son of David. His family tree boasts all the infamy that humanity can muster: incest, murder, prostitution, lies, you name it. Matthew will begin his Gospel with the Son of David's pedigree that preached of broken humanity's need for a Savior.

But the Root of Jesse did not come to inspect our moral resumes before welcoming us into the kingdom. He just came to welcome us. "Come one, come all! Moabites, Israelites, Greeks, Romans, Americans, Africans, Australians. Do homage before him. Kneel at his manger, kneel at his cross, kneel at his altar." He is the man after God's own heart—a heart that thrills to welcome sinners home.



REFLECTION:

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13. Who is (secretly) anointed to be king and who is his father? Upon what basis is the boy chosen? In what town do they live? Talk about how many of these details find their way into the Christmas story.

Read Genesis 19:30-38. What is the origin of the nation of Moab? How are the Moabites connected to the line of David? Discuss how God's method of choosing is often so different from our own. What does this tell us about him?

How does Isaiah use the story of David and Jesse in Isaiah 11:1-10? Reflect on the implications of the Messiah being both the shoot and root of Jesse.

PRAYER

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Antiphon Four:



“And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”

(Isaiah 22:22)

A Tale of Two Politicians and an Unorthodox Sheriff

Let me tell you a tale of two politicians. One thought he was a big man. The other found out he served a big God. Their story, told by Isaiah, is crucial for understanding why Jesus is called the “Key of David.”

About 2,700 years ago, in the city of Jerusalem, Hezekiah sat on the throne. Two men who served during his reign are our interest. One of them was named Shebna and the other Eliakim. Permit me, if you will, to modernize their story from Isaiah 22:15-25.

Shebna was a kind of vice-president, the “master of the palace.” And, oh, he would have relished the title “Master.” His press releases read like a litany of self-congratulatory praise. He rolled into work every morning in the “glorious chariot” of his shiny new limo and strutted in like he owned the place. He paused only to let a few hangers-on lick his boots with sycophantic gushing before he was off to save the world (sigh) again. Shebna was pompous, bloated with self-importance. Case in point: he had already ensured that at his death, he would be laid to rest in this gaudy monstrosity of a tomb so no one would ever forget what an awesome person he had been during his lifetime.

Shebna, in short, was a mortal with a huge god complex.

He sickened Isaiah. And, more importantly, Isaiah’s God. So the preacher verbally blackened this politician’s eye, popped his bubble, and predicted his shameful demotion. In one of the most memorable images in Scripture, God says he is going to take Shebna, roll this man up into a ball, and throw him far, far away from Judah (Isa. 22:18).

He who thought he was a god would end up as nothing more than a bouncing ball of mortal buffoonery.

The Lord had another man, Eliakim, who would assume his post. God would rip off Shebna’s robe and sash—the uniform of his office—and wrap these around Eliakim (22:21). The fool would be naked, the wise man clothed. Whereas Shebna had been pompous, Eliakim would be paternal, “a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of David” (22:21). God would establish for him a “throne of honor” (22:24) instead of Shebna’s house of shame (22:18).

Then we hear this—and this is what our whole discussion has been leading us to—God says, “And I will place on [Eliakim’s] shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (22:22). In Hebrew, a key is a *mafteach*, from the verb *patach*, “to open.” A *mafteach* is thus “an opening device.” Perhaps this *mafteach* or key was some official insignia that Eliakim had. Whatever it was, he possessed “the authority to legislate and make binding decisions” (J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 188). What he shut, stayed shut. What he opened, stayed open. His word established reality.

Eliakim was God’s chosen servant. The key man. The opener and closer.

Quite unexpectedly, this largely unknown politician was also a prefigurement of the Messiah.

O Key of David, Come!

On December 20, the church sings the fourth of the “O Antiphons.” On this day, we sing to Christ:

“O Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel, You open and no one can close, You close and no one can open: Come and rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death” (LSB, 357).

When Jesus tells John to write a letter to the church in Philadelphia (modern-day Alaşehir, Turkey), our Lord identifies himself this way, “The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (Revelation 3:7).

Perhaps you’ve read those words before. If you didn’t already know, now you do: Jesus is saying that he is the new and better Eliakim.

It's a strange comparison, to be honest, but still less strange than when Jesus likened himself to that pigheaded, xenophobic missionary named Jonah slathered in three days' worth of fish slime (Matt. 12:40) or to a bronze snake coiled around a pole (John 3:14). In this case, Christ is telling us: "Now, kids, go back and read Isaiah 22 with me in mind. What Eliakim was, I am more."

A New Sheriff's in Town

When the Messiah comes, there's a new sheriff in town. But he's the most unorthodox sheriff the world has ever seen. He doesn't investigate crime scenes, collar criminals, and throw them behind bars. No, he comes whistling into county jail, whips out his key, and proceeds to throw open jail cells left and right. "You are free to go," he laughs with a great big belly laugh, then moves on to the next cell, high-fiving folks as they blink and shuffle into the blinding light of liberation.

You and I just sit there for a minute on the other side of those bars, looking back and forth at each other, like, "Who's this crazy dude?" Meet Anti-Sheriff Jesus, come to rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death. Now, we know we belong in jail. No trumped-up charges put us there. We were caught, convicted, and sentenced with 100% justice. Blood on our hands. Smoking guns. Our fingerprints are all over the crime scene of the commandments. Caught dead to rights. We are sinners; this is as true as true can be.

But all that doesn't matter one iota because the Eliakim named Jesus is here. And for all those sins, he paid the price by being lifted onto the throne of crucifixion. We can't even call them "our" sins anymore; Jesus has assumed ownership of them. They're his sins. He's like a father to us, caring for his children. God's chosen servant. The key man. The opener and closer. He's come to set us free.

Sure, there will always be some stupid Shebna's around, who'll sulk in their wide-open cells, spooning with the darkness, kissing their chains, caressing unbelief, whimpering about the gospel being a fairy tale, clutching the bars even as Jesus tries repeatedly to lug them into freedom. And to them, on the last day, Jesus will walk up and say, with a heavy heart, "Since you refused to let my will be done, thy will be done," and their doors of darkness will be locked for good.

Don't be that fool. Don't just sit there, thinking this is all too good to be true, that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Friends, with Jesus, even breakfast and dinner are free.

You are forgiven. You are free. The new Eliakim has come.

He who is the Key of David has opened the kingdom of heaven to us—to me, to you, to the whole blessed world. Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Jesus is with us, Light of Light, Freedom of Freedom, whose laughter and love will make the darkness retreat in shame and flood our lives with joy to the world.

PRAYER

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

REFLECTION:

Read Isaiah 22:15-25. Why was Shebna deposed from his office? How is he described? What will be given to Eliakim? What symbol of authority does he have in vs. 22?

Read Revelation 3:7-13. How does verse 7 compare to Isaiah 22:22? What will Christ open or close?

Reflect on how Jesus is a very different kind of "sheriff."

How does Christ use his key? Talk about how Jesus has come to "rescue the prisoners who are in darkness and the shadow of death."



Antiphon Five:



*“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light; those
who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.*

(Isaiah 9:2)

Winning the Fight Against God

An old Jewish tradition says that the first time Adam witnessed the sun set, he grieved all through the night. He was unaware of the dawn. In his mind, the disappearance of the sun and the advent of darkness could mean only one thing: the sun was dead and darkness now reigned unchallenged.

Legend though it is, this tradition captures an almost universal human experience.

There comes a time in almost everyone’s life when we feel like the rays of light and hope and joy have been extinguished. Darkness alone remains. We sit and grieve in a kind of nocturnal exile. In our hearts, there is a quivering fear that, though we are alive, the sun is dead, dawn has been aborted, and a long and brutal winter of darkness stares at us through frozen eyes of contempt.

Moms and dads who weep beside small coffins know this darkness all too well. Couples whose marriages have been chainsawed into bloody halves know this darkness as well. We could spend all day going through examples of hurting people in hurting situations who hurt themselves, hurt others, and are themselves hurt by the sharp and merciless edges of a world that often feels like a sadistic machine designed to make our existence “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

In grim irony, this time of year, full of first noels and colorful lights and tinsel trees, is often the hardest time of the year for many. They go around pasting on a smile to cover a weeping heart.

O Dayspring, Come!

For all these reasons, perhaps this “O Antiphon” is the most fitting for such a time as this. On December 21, the church sings to Christ:

“O Dayspring, splendor of light everlasting: Come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (LSB 357).

The “dayspring” is, as the word suggests, when the day begins to spring. Dayspring occurs when the first glowing hints of light appear on the eastern horizon to signal that night is coming to an end. In Hebrew, the word is shachar. For instance, when the Messenger of Yahweh (i.e., the Son of God) wrestled with Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok River, he did so until shachar, “until the breaking of the day” (Gen. 32:24).

Night was a time for fighting with God. Night was a time for struggle. And when the dayspring happened, when the night was coming to an end, God blessed Jacob. He gave him the name Israel, which means “God-Fighter.” The dayspring was the occasion on which the Lord admitted that he had lost and that his child had won.

The God of love, whose blessing came at dayspring, was glad to be bested by his beloved.

Bested by His Beloved

I can think of no better way to picture what Jesus our Dayspring does for us, individually and corporately. He came to Jacob in the middle of the night. He comes to us who are sitting in darkness and the shadow of death (Isa. 9:2). We may be sitting on our couch at home or in a funeral home. We may be sitting in our car on a long drive home, in a prison cell cut off from our family, or in rehab wondering how we managed to screw up our lives so drastically.

Wherever we are, Jesus shows us, ready for a fight. We may be “all in,” boiling with anger and hurt, ready to slap and jab and claw and bite, to get our pound of divine flesh. Or we may be “all out,” too weakened, too battered to throw a single punch.

Either way, Jesus is there to fight.
And, when all is said and done,
to lose so that we might win.

Christ was born into the darkness of the world to swallow that darkness whole. To suck in the void of death and despair and hatred and shame and pain. To make it his. To make it all his. He came to experience the mad jealousy of Herod, the razored words of the religious elite, the frigid kiss of his betrayer, the spit of the crowds, the hammer of the nails, the boredom of the executioners just “doing their duty.”

And whatever personal hell you are experiencing—self-created or otherwise—he came to take that into himself as well. To fight you for it. To fight you and me and Pontius Pilate and the Pharisees and every other sinner.

And, gasping for breath, to say Tetelestai. It’s over. Finished. I lost. You won.
When that moment happens, when death dies in Jesus, when sins are sinned away in his passing, when hell is burnt to ashes in his final breath, then—Do you see it? Look!—there, on the horizon; there, the long-awaited dayspring appears.

Light is alive and darkness is dead!
God has lost and we have won!
And no one is happier than Jesus.

He has been bested by his beloved. He gives us all new names: we are Israel. We are the God-Fighters. We have struggled with God, rolled on the mat of death and despair and darkness, and he has let us take home the gold.

From the east to the west, from heaven to hell, through all the galaxies of stars, resounds the laughter of Jesus as he steps forth alive from his grave to run a victory lap with us on his shoulders. Joy, oh, joy to us! Our God is alive. And we are alive in him.

The night will not win. The night has not won. Our Dayspring from on high, the splendor of light everlasting, has come to us. Morning breaks eternal in the face of our God, Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

REFLECTION:

Read Genesis 32:24-32. Talk about the various ways that our lives, struggles, pains, and “limps” are paralleled in this story of Jacob. How do we win? What do we win?

What are some examples – from your own life or those of others – when it seemed that the darkness would never go away, when light would never come? Where is our Lord during those lightless hours and what is he doing in our lives?

Read Isaiah 9:2 and Matthew 4:12-17. How does Christ bring light into our world? How is this work of enlightenment evident even on the night he was born (Luke 2:8-9)?



Antiphon Six:



“He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

(Isaiah 2:4)

Cornerstone of the Living Temple

In American politics, whatever the party affiliation of a newly elected president, he will indubitably call for unity. He will tell us that, during his presidency, he will be “a force for unity....will work to heal divisions....will bring people together.”

Baseball, hotdogs, apple pie, and presidential calls for unity.

The sentiment is welcome, of course. I’m all for unity, as I’m all for world peace, ending poverty, and sending cancer back down whatever hellhole it crawled out of. Disunity is not good for our country, states, communities, or families.

That being said, we must not naively assume that unity is the answer to our problems, either. Being unified just means people happen to believe most of the same things, most of the time, about stuff that matters to them. A gang can be unified around the creed of greed and power, with rituals of violence to bind them together. The men of Sodom—“both young and old, all the people to the last man” (Gen. 19:4)—were unified in their desire to gang rape Lot’s two visitors, but I assume we can all agree that was an ugly, beastly unity.

So, where does that leave us? Disunity is not good, but a false unity might be equally or grossly bad. The goal, then, is neither disunity nor unity merely for unity’s sake. What we need is something else.

Cornerstone and Clay

On December 22, we sing an Antiphon that speaks of that “something else.” It’s a unity not just for unity’s sake, but a oneness that is found in our cornerstone King.

“O King of the nations, the ruler they long for, the cornerstone uniting all people: Come and save us all, whom you formed out of clay” (LSB 357).

First, let’s pause just a moment to marvel at how pregnant with Scripture this antiphon is. In five phrases of only twenty-six words total, the author alludes to Genesis (“whom you formed out of clay”), Haggai (“the ruler they long for”), the Psalms (“the cornerstone”), Isaiah (“King of the nations”), as well as to numerous New Testament books.

Only a mind and soul saturated with Scripture could pen such words.

Second, do you see the contrast between who we are and who Christ is? We are “clay,” but the Messiah is “the cornerstone.” This takes us back to Genesis 2:7, where adam (“man” or “human”) is so named because he is from the adamah (“earth or arable ground”). As Isaiah says, “We are the clay, and you are our potter” (64:8). Clay, in and of itself, is not strong, not stable. Clay does not unite. One good rainstorm and it’s washed away.

But a cornerstone? It is secure. It is stable. A cornerstone holds the entire building together. It is the point of unification and oneness. Everything rests on it.

The original Latin of this antiphon tells us precisely which biblical verse the author had in mind. Christ the cornerstone makes utraque unum (“both one”). This same phrase is used in the Latin translation of Ephesians 2:13-14, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one [utraque unum].”

Paul is speaking to Jews and Gentiles, once disunified but now unified, made unum in the one man, Jesus Christ. Immediately after this, Paul says to the church in Ephesus that all of us are now part of God’s household, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (2:20-22).

We who are formed out of clay are being reformed into a living, breathing vast temple of God. Jewish clay and Gentile clay. Male clay and female clay. All of us are unified in Jesus Christ as we become part of this living temple-church. And this living temple-church is unified by Christ Jesus, “himself being the cornerstone.”

A Deeper Unity

Now, finally, we see what kind of unity we need. It’s a unity based not on politics, ethnicity, race, ideology, philosophy, or morality. No, our unity—the true unity that the Father desires for all of us—is a unity only and fully in Jesus Christ.

I am a fifty-one-year-old, white, American male who is a disciple of the Son of God. And in Jesus, I am in communion with a twenty-year-old Pakistani woman who believes in Christ, a seventy-year-old Nigerian man who confesses Jesus, and a three-day-old Ecuadorian child who is still dripping from baptismal water poured in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I am more unified with them than my white, American male neighbor who is an unbeliever. He and I share a certain unity, to be sure, but it is ephemeral. With my brothers and sisters in Christ, I share an everlasting, unshakable unity, for we are all members of the one body of Christ.

No matter which political system we live under—from republic to dictatorship—we all bow to a higher authority: the King of the nations. Our allegiance is to him.

More importantly, his commitment is to us. There may have been kings who willingly gave their lives for their nation, but none that willingly and joyfully shed their blood for their enemies. But our king did. He was born with a target on his back—a target that one day would become a cross. He bore it on his body that, when he was “lifted up from the earth” to die a glorious death upon that cross, he might “draw all people to [himself]” (John 12:32).

He is the unifier. Our oneness with the Father. Our communion with the Spirit.

He is the desire of the nations, the only one who can satisfy our deepest human longings. He is the king of the nations, before whom every knee will eventually bow. He is the cornerstone who unites the living temple-church of his body.

O King of the nations, come and save us all!

PRAYER

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

REFLECTION:

Review again the specific words of this antiphon: “O King of the nations, the ruler they long for, the cornerstone uniting all people: Come and save us all, whom you formed out of clay.” Keeping in mind Israel’s place under the old covenant, why does this antiphon stress that Jesus is for “the nations” and “all people” and that he saves “us all”?

How is the universal nature of the new covenant under the Messiah different from the old covenant?

Read Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42; and Ephesians 2:20. What image for the Messiah do all these share in common? How does Jesus bring us this unity?

Reflect on some of the ways that people are unified or divided. What brings them together and what drives them apart? How is the unity we have in Jesus deeper and better than any surface unity we have in this world?



Antiphon Seven:



*“Therefore the Lord himself will
give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall
conceive and bear a son, and shall call his
name Immanuel.*

(Isaiah 7:14)

Christmas in the Garden of Eden

It was beginning to look a lot like Christmas in the Garden of Eden. The Lord of heaven had kneeled on the earth, scooped up a handful of soil, and exhaled the Spirit's life into the first human being. Later, he tucked lonely Adam into a nice long nap, performed the first surgery, and built a woman from the man's side to be his ideal mate.

Man and woman, woman and man, both “worded” into being by the God who said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This wasn't the Lord talking to his angelic council or the so-called “royal we.” No, this was the Father speaking to his Son and Spirit—a trinitarian trilogue—saying, “Let's do this.” And so they did.

As we watch the Creator fashion Adam and Eve in his image, after his likeness, what exactly are we seeing take place? We are watching the Father make humanity in the image of his Son. Christ “is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4), “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), “the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3).

Notice: there's an “is” and an “in.”
Christ is the image of God.
Humanity is made in that image.

God's creation of us, therefore, is also a revelation of him. Adam and Eve mirror the Word of the Father, in whom and by whom they were made. Is it any surprise, then, that as we read the rest of the Scriptures, God is pictured in strikingly human ways: with a face, hands, feet, mouth, ears, and heart? We label these anthropomorphisms, that is, the attribution of human-like characteristics to God. It would be more fitting to call humanity's God-like actions theomorphisms. We imitate him, not he us.

The main point is this: the creation of humanity is a prophecy of the incarnation. He who would become human, as he is forming Adam and Eve, looks over at us, smiles, and gives us a wink. “The day will come,” he suggests, “when I will become one of you.”

Dress Rehearsals of the Incarnation

The rest of the Old Testament prepares us for this incarnation, first glimpsed in Eden. In story after story, God stuck close to humanity in very human-like ways. He strolled in Eden (Genesis 3). He broke bread with Abraham (Genesis 18). He rolled in a wrestling match with Jacob (Genesis 32). He appeared so ordinarily human to Gideon, as well as to Manoah and his wife, that they initially thought he was just a regular Joe Israelite (Judges 6 and 13).

All of these were Christophanies (i.e., appearances of Christ) before he was conceived and born among us. As Christians in the Scottish Highlands used to say to David Murray, “Christ enjoyed trying on the clothes of his incarnation” (Jesus on Every Page, 82).

Isaiah tells us, however, that one day these “dress rehearsals” would cease and reality would come. A pregnant virgin would carry a son in her womb whose name will be Emmanuel (Isa. 7:11).

We Have a Human God

On December 23, as we sing the seventh and final of the O Antiphons, we address our prayer to this son of Mary:

“O Emmanuel, our king and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Savior: Come and save us, O Lord our God” (LSB 357).

Emmanuel is two words in Hebrew, Immanu (“with us”) and El (“God”). This child is the “with-us-God” or, as we say in better English, “God with us.”

Ages before this God-with-us boy was born, he was already with his people, but not in a flesh-and-blood sort of way. He told

the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, “I am with you” (Gen. 26:24; 28:15). Before he sent Moses into Egypt, he said from the burning bush, “I will be with you” (Exod. 3:12). He repeated this promise to Joshua (Deut. 31:23), Gideon (Judg. 6:16), Solomon (1 Kings 11:38), Jeremiah (1:8), and all Israel (Isa. 43:2).

It’s one thing for God to be with us as God, but it’s on a whole different level for God to be with us as a human being who spent forty weeks in utero, learned how to crawl then walk, suffered through pimples and puberty, and eventually faced the firing squad of Roman crucifiers. We have that God.

And that human God, Jesus of Nazareth, is also our king and Lord. Just consider what that means. Having a friend is good. He can be there for us, in good times and bad times. We can lean on her and seek her advice. But our regular friends, well, they have their limitations. They have their own problems, of course, and their own lives, so they can’t be there for us 24/7. Nor can they, if necessary, move heaven and earth to do something for us.

Our flesh-and-blood God can. He is king. He is Lord. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. And all that authority he exercises for us, his friends, his brothers, his sisters, at whose side he always sticks close.

Just imagine if you had the phone number of the most powerful person in the world, could call or text him anytime, ask him to help you, no matter what, and he would do it in a heartbeat. What we have in Jesus makes that seem like child’s play. He is the creator of heaven and earth. He is King of all nations. He is Lord of all.

Most importantly, he is your Emmanuel, the God with you and the God for you.

Before the words “come and save us” leave our lips, before we draw the breath to speak them, even before we know we need to say them, he preemptively answers our prayer (Isa. 65:24). He is simply overjoyed to do anything and everything to save us, show us mercy, and demonstrate that he is the God of love.

Friends, we have a God who knows intimately what it is to feel a heart breaking, hot tears running down his cheeks, and blood flowing from gaping wounds. He knows what it’s like to be both loved and hated, as well as betrayed. There is no human emotion foreign to his experience. There is no human need that he has not felt pressing into his soul.

Jesus is our fully divine and fully human God. The image-maker made into the image. The creator become creature.

If you’ve ever wondered just how far the Lord of heaven and earth would go to make sure you were his own, peer down into the manger and look up onto the cross. There’s your answer.

O Wisdom,
O Adonai,
O Root of Jesse,
O Key of David,
O Dayspring,
O King of the nations,
O Emmanuel, come and save us, O Lord our God.

PRAYER

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

REFLECTION:

Read Genesis 1:26-27, 2 Corinthians 4:4 Colossians 1:15, and Hebrews 1:3. Reflect on how these verses describe who humanity is and who Christ is. How is the creation of humanity a prophecy of the incarnation?

Read Isaiah 7:14. How does Matthew use this verse to describe Mary and Jesus (Matthew 1:18-26)? God had told many people in the Old Testament that he was “with them,” so how is Jesus as Emmanuel different? In what new way is God with us in Jesus?

Talk through the implications of God becoming one of us. What comfort does that give? What hope does it give? How does the coming of Jesus end “our lonely exile here”?

Take a few moments to reflect back on these seven O Antiphons. Which of them are especially meaningful to you? How have they helped you to ready your heart for the celebration of the birth of Jesus?





If you have enjoyed this series of Advent reflections, be on the lookout in 2022 for the first Advent Series produced by 1517. It will feature readings, sermons, music selections, and much more.

