

Advent 3 B 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 17, 2017

The O Antiphons

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Some of you accepted our invitation to put a name for Jesus on a white cross which is now displayed on the blue banner. Some of those names for Jesus are printed in your service folder in the form a crossword puzzle. Redeemer, Shepherd, Life. The word Jesus actually means “savior.” It is a transliteration of the name Joshua, which means savior. Good work to all of you have thought about the names for Jesus.

But if you haven’t done it yet, there’s still time. On the seven days leading up to Christmas there are seven names for Jesus that the Church uses one by one. The Church prays those names with the prefix “O.” O Wisdom, O King of the Nations, O Emmanuel. So the prayers with these names affixed are called the “O Antiphons.” We would do well to call them the “O Verses.” The word “antiphon” is an old word. It refers to a liturgical part– a worship role– that these verses play in the liturgies of morning and evening prayer. (Those would be the structured daily prayers of priests and nuns and monks and occasionally, interested lay people.)

The use of these O-verses, these O-antiphons in the days before Christmas is documented from before 800 A.D. This custom is at least twelve hundred years old.

There was one name on each day leading up to Christmas. Today, the 17th day of December, would be the first one: Wisdom. *Sapientia* in Latin. This is a name for Jesus. It is rooted in the Old Testament book of proverbs, the New Testament gospel of John, and the deuterocanonical book Wisdom of Solomon. It not only means being wise in the way that a master teacher is wise. But it means the power of God in molding the creation to be good and beautiful and balanced. That Jesus played a role in the creation of the universe.

Wisdom– *sapientia*– is an unexpected title for Jesus. A feminine identity for Jesus. Our customary language for Jesus is savior, Son of God, lord. We hear and say and use those words a great deal. But Wisdom, although we seldom use it, is rock solid biblical. As are these other names. *Adonai*, which invokes the majesty of the Exodus. *Emmanuel*, which means the very presence of God in our midst. *Key of David*, which can secure the things that need to be secured, and can set free the things that need to be liberated.

Each of these seven names is used on the seven days leading up to Christmas. They are accompanied by the word *Veni*, the imperative verb form of the Latin word for “come.” Our

word *Advent* is from *venire*. Advent, the coming of the Messiah. Come, Adonai. Come, Wisdom. Come, Root of Jesse.

Seven names for Jesus. Seven requests that he come. And when you take the first letter of each name and arrange them in order. Then when you finally put in the last letter, “E” for Emmanuel on December 23, the letters spell out an answer: *Ero cras*. “I will be there tomorrow.” That’s the beauty of Latin. You can say “I will be there tomorrow” in only seven letters. It takes 22 letters to say it in English. So the hymn would have to have 22 stanzas instead of seven.

The hymn. At some point in the Middle Ages, a couple of hundred years before the Reformation, some of the antiphons were compiled into a hymn. So instead of them being spread out over a week, they could be used together. John Mason Neale created our English-language hymn in the 1850’s. *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. The tune that he published it with— our tune— is from the 15th century, from nuns in France, to the best of our knowledge. That’s why it sounds more plaintive than many of the holiday carols. It is good music to accompany words that yearn... yearn for fulfillment, yearn for the One who is to come.

John Mason Neale and the other hymn-writers who preceded him used only five of the seven O Antiphons. He left out Wisdom, the first antiphon. And King of Nations, the sixth antiphon. So those two missing verses were freshly translated and added to his five in our 2006 hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The hymnal also helpfully illustrates how we have a week of stanzas. Each of the verses is connected back to its original date. The Dayspring, *Oriens*, which means sunrise— comes on the solstice, December 21, which this year is this Thursday. So on the day when the days quit getting shorter and begin to get longer the Church prays:

O come o Dayspring, come and cheer.

O Sun of Justice, now draw near.

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night.

And death’s dark shadow put to flight.

So before singing the hymn, we will imaginatively go through the whole week. Pausing with each name for Jesus to pray and to read some of the scriptural roots. When we get to the last antiphon, Emmanuel, the “acrostic”— that’s what you call a puzzle that uses the first letter of each word— the acrostic will spell out “I will be there tomorrow.” This is the ultimate illustration of the season of Advent. It moves forward, but it also points backwards.

When I was a kid, most years my Mom would buy us an Advent calendar. It was a thing you put on your wall, and opened up a new door or window each day, counting down the days to Advent. I remember in Sunday School making Advent chains. There would be 25 links in the chain, and you would take one off each day until Christmas. The original Advent wreath had more than 20 candles to count down the days until the birth of Jesus. It’s the fundamental nature of Advent to move forward in time, to grow closer and closer to the birth of Jesus.

But the O Antiphons give the answer backwards. You have to read the acrostic, the seven letters,

in reverse order. So it points backwards. “I will be there tomorrow” is read backwards. Because Christ *has* already come. He was born a long time ago. He came into the world. But at Advent and Christmas we are sort of imagining, sort of pretending that that hasn’t happened yet. And we look back to the prophets, back to the Hebrew Bible, for hope and for hints. So Advent, paradoxically, moves steadily forward, looking for fulfillment, while conscientiously looking backward. In that sense, the O Antiphons are the perfect illustration, the perfect distillation, of the season of Advent.

I hope that our presentation of the O Antiphons this morning will first give you alternative names for Jesus, fresh perspectives on who he is. And second, it will help you to see that this holiday carol that you may hear in the background on the radio or while shopping is really among the oldest of the carols, and full of layers of meanings. It’s not exactly “Rockin Around the Christmas Tree.” Third and finally, I hope that the sense of yearning and expectation that all of this expresses will prepare our hearts and minds for the coming celebration of Christmas. Amen.