

This Advent I'm preaching on one of our oldest and most beloved Advent hymns: "O come, O come, Emmanuel." It's based on prayers that are at least 1,200 years old. The verses of the hymn, and the original prayers they're derived from, are based upon Old Testament names and titles for God, and for the Messiah.

This week I'm focusing on verses 2 & 3. Because verse 1 of the hymn is also verse 8, you might have noticed that verses 2 and 3 are actually the beginning of the cycle of 7 verses. They are the ancient prayers for December 17 and 18.

Verse 2, the verse for December 17, is a verse about Wisdom.

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,  
Who orderest all things mightily;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.<sup>1</sup>*

I preached on the Old Testament image of Wisdom 6 months ago on Trinity Sunday. Wisdom in the OT is a gift from God to his people. Wisdom is there to instruct us in making right choices. It's about being able to see what is good and bad, right and wrong, and being able to choose wisely. The hymn certainly asks for the coming of that kind of wisdom:

*To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.*

But Wisdom also has a deeper meaning. The Jews regarded God as one. But by Jesus' time, there were certain aspects of God's nature, God's modes of working in the world that were so distinct they were almost personified. They were almost seen as separate agents distinct from God. They were almost viewed as separate entities in and of themselves. They include God's Spirit, God's Word, the Law, God's Presence or Glory, and God's Wisdom.

Wisdom, the book of Proverbs tells us, was with God in the beginning. Through Wisdom, all things were made. To quote the book of Proverbs, "Wisdom says, 'Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth... before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth.'<sup>2</sup>

To ask for the coming of this kind of Wisdom is to ask for more than the ability to make wise choices. It is also asking for God's presence, God's Wisdom, the same Wisdom that helped create and undergird the very existence of the universe.

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,  
Who orderest all things mightily.*

The second verse is a call for God to help us make good choices. But more deeply, it is a cry for the God who created the heavens and the earth to come to us.

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<sup>1</sup> #56, *The Hymnal 1982*

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 8:23, 25

We often have a sense that things have gone awry in the world. The state of the world is at times mystifying. It seems that things are off kilter, that the train has somehow jumped the tracks. This is not a new idea. This is an ancient human problem.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Marc Antony says,  
*O judgement! thou art fled to brutish beasts,  
And men have lost their reason.*<sup>3</sup>

Marc Antony is speaking of the way his society is breaking down in the assassination of Julius Caesar. But I know at times I too worry about the state of affairs in our world. Things do seem crazy at times. Have we lost our reason? Can we get someone truly wise to come and set things right?

In a different Shakespearean play, Hamlet laments,  
*Time is out of joint—O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!*<sup>4</sup>

But in reality, Hamlet cannot set it right. The madness that surrounds him ends up consuming him. That play ends with the Danish royal family lying dead and a Norwegian king assuming the throne of Denmark.

We human beings might be able to make minor fixes and minor improvements from time to time. But we have a deep longing, a deep need for God's divine wisdom in our lives and in our world. We need direction from God, the architect of the complexities of quantum physics, the architect of the complexities of the human heart. We need God's wisdom which is wiser than any human wisdom.

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,  
Who orderest all things mightily;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.*

But if we're really honest with ourselves, we seek more than just God's wisdom. We want God to act as well.

Our collect of the day for this Sunday is begging God to come and help us. We prayed earlier,

"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us."

Stir up your power. Stir up your strength. God, do something. Help!

Next week's Psalm will say the same thing:

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<sup>3</sup> Act 3, Scene 2

<sup>4</sup> Act 1, Scene 5

*Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; \*  
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.  
In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, \*  
stir up your strength and come to help us."<sup>5</sup>*

That's why I love the juxtaposition of verse 2 and verse 3 of the hymn. We want and need God's Wisdom. But we also need God's power and strength. Verse 3 says,

*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.<sup>6</sup>*

The imagery here is Exodus imagery, the release of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and their gathering at the foot of Mt. Sinai to receive God's law. The original prayer has even stronger imagery, including also the burning bush, and the image of God's outstretched arm, an Exodus image of God intervening to save his people.

The original prayer on which this verse is based reads,  
"O Adonai (O Lord) 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."

This takes us a step further than the previous verse. In the previous verse we longed for the coming of God who in wisdom created and ordered the universe.

But now we sing to the God who intervenes in history, the God who is active in the world, the God who breaks in, sometimes in very powerful ways. The God of the burning bush. A Lord of might, who appears in cloud, majesty, and awe. A God who is stronger than Pharaoh. A God who is stronger than any earthly ruler. A God who can truly save his people.

During this time of the year, our dominant image of Jesus is of helpless infant lying in a manger. But that helpless infant is also the Jesus who will later reach out his arms on the hard wood of the cross to save us. And he is the Jesus who one day will return in great power and might to judge the living and the dead.

Thus in the third verse we pray for God's powerful intervention in the world, so that his will may be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

*O come, O come, thou Lord of might*

Several years back I preached an Advent sermon series on C.S. Lewis's classic, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 80:1-2

<sup>6</sup> #56, *The Hymnal 1982*

In that book, Aslan the Lion, the Christ figure, speaks of the "deep magic" from "the dawn of time."<sup>7</sup> That deep magic reflects the way the universe was set up, the way the world of Narnia was structured at creation.

But more importantly, Aslan also speaks of the "deeper magic" from before the beginning of time. This deeper magic reveals God's deeper plan, that through the death of a willing victim, Death itself would be defeated.

We need both the deep magic and the deeper magic. We need the God who created in the universe in Wisdom. And we need the God with the power to make things right, the power to truly save us.

Hamlet lamented,  
*Time is out of joint—O cursèd spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!*

But Hamlet had neither the wisdom nor the power to make things right.

However, during Advent we prepare for the birth of one who was truly born to set things right. We look for the coming of the savior who was with God in the beginning and created the world in wisdom. We look for the coming of the savior who has the power to set things right. By his birth, by his death, by his resurrection, Jesus has opened the kingdom of heaven to all who trust in him.

His is the wisdom. His is the power.

O come thou wisdom from on high.  
O come, O come thou Lord of might.

Enlighten us. Lead us. Save us.  
Stir up your power, and come.

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter 15