

EMMANUEL

READINGS FOR ADVENT





INTRODUCTION: THE O ANTIPHONS

BY GLENN SUNSHINE

Advent, the beginning of the liturgical year, starts four Sundays before Christmas. Its theme is waiting: We think back to the centuries the people of Israel waited for the coming of the Messiah, and we look ahead to Jesus' return and remember the centuries the church has been waiting for his coming. And it is, of course, also the time we are to spend preparing for the celebration of Jesus' first coming at Christmas.

Many traditions have developed over the centuries to help us prepare for Christmas. One is the use of the O Antiphons, a practice that goes back at least to the eighth century and possibly to the beginning of the sixth century or even earlier.

An antiphon is a short response recited or sung during a church service after a Psalm or Canticle (i.e. a scriptural song not part of the Psalms). The

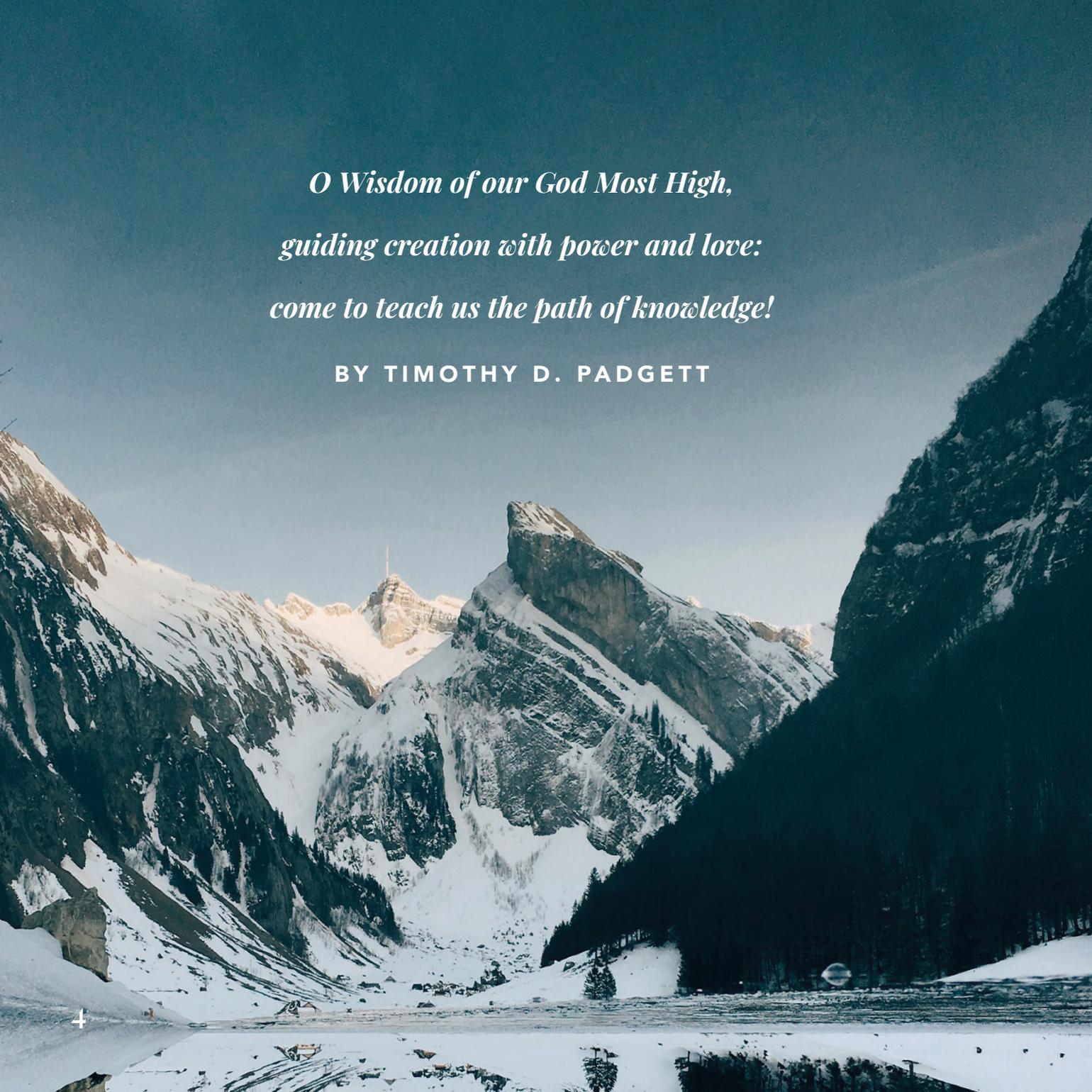
O Antiphons were sung after the Magnificat (the Song of Mary, Luke 1:46-55) during the Vespers service (Evening Prayer) each evening from December 17 to December 23, the seven days preceding Christmas. One antiphon is sung each night. They are called the O Antiphons because each begins with "O," followed by a name for the Messiah drawn from the book of Isaiah, supplemented with other Scriptures.

The O Antiphons form an acrostic. If you take the first letter of each of the names of the Messiah in the antiphons in order and then read it backwards, it forms the Latin words *ero cras*, which means "tomorrow, I will be [there]." Since the last antiphon is recited just before Christmas Eve, the acrostic is a clever and subtle way of signaling the end of Advent and the arrival of the One predicted by Isaiah and the other prophets and described in the antiphons.

Spending time with these Scriptural texts is a powerful way to prepare you for Christmas and will give you a greater appreciation of just who it is that was born on that night in Bethlehem. Praying the antiphons and singing hymns will help connect you with the people of God in all times and in all ages who have prayed and sung these very same words to the honor and glory of their Savior.



Glenn Sunshine is a Senior Fellow with the Colson Fellows and a contributor on Breakpoint.



*O Wisdom of our God Most High,
guiding creation with power and love:
come to teach us the path of knowledge!*

BY TIMOTHY D. PADGETT

Into the chaos and confusion at the dawn of the cosmos, God came. Into the simple stuff of matter and energy, He spoke His Word, bringing light from darkness, Earth from heaven, land from sea, living beings from insensate matter.

Onto the height of His creation, God wrote. Onto Adam and Eve, He imprinted His Image, breathing an eternal soul into human flesh, making us co-rulers of the created order, relational beings for His honor and His great joy.

Yet, we chose another way, another wisdom. Seeking a knowledge and power of our own, we turned aside from the path of our Creator, thereby undoing the gracious ordering of God's good creation. Left to ourselves, we would have fallen into utter darkness.

Yet, God chose another way. For the sake of His Name, He spoke again into our lives, promising that Someone would come, Someone who would suffer for our sake and emerge victorious for His, Someone who would lead us in His wisdom and His power back to the true path.

Into the chaos and confusion of our world, God came. In the weakness of a baby, God's wisdom, power, and knowledge broke into our darkness. His love bringing light and life to an Earth separated from Him. Taking on human flesh and allowing that flesh to be broken, He restored His cosmos. By His wisdom and love, by His knowledge and power, the same God who made the world at the beginning is now making all things new.

Timothy D. Padgett is the Managing Editor of The Colson Center

REFLECTIONS
THROUGHOUT THE AGES ON THE
COMING OF CHRIST

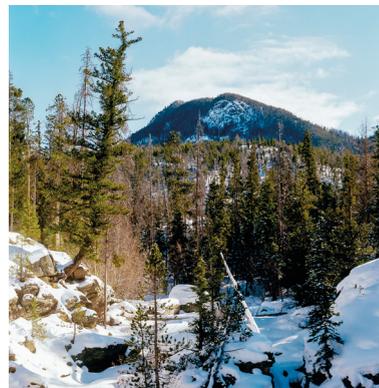
My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for He who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is His name.
And His mercy is for those who fear Him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
He has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of His mercy,
as He spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to His offspring forever.”
Mary, Mother of Jesus (Lk 1:46-55)



*O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush
and gave him the law on Sinai:
Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.*

BY ROBERTO RIVERA

In Deuteronomy 18, Moses told the Israelites that the Lord (Adonai in Hebrew) one day “will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people” and that they should “heed such a prophet.” But, as the second O Antiphon reminds us, the Lord didn’t send a “prophet like Moses”—He sent “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,” who “upholds the universe by the word of his power.”



He didn’t send someone who would see a burning bush—He sent the One who caused the bush to burn.

He didn’t send a human vessel through whom He would teach his people the Law—He sent the divine lawgiver Himself.

The second O antiphon brings us face to face with the central mystery of our faith: the Incarnation. Names like “Root of Jesse,”

“Wisdom,” “Key of David,” and even “King of the Nations” could

have been attached to a purely human messiah. In fact, that was the expectation.

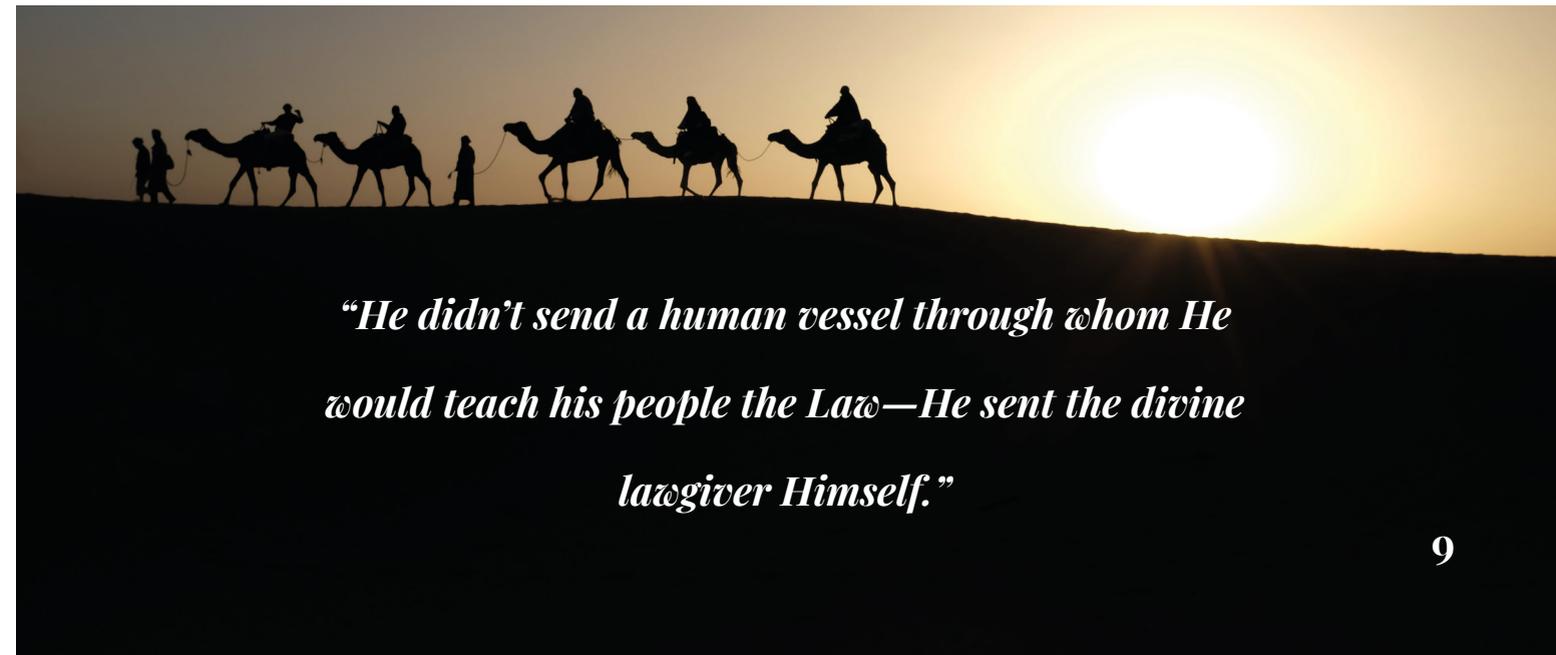
But Adonai is different. For Second Temple Jews, there was only one Adonai, and He was One. They expected Him to end the exile that began with the destruction of the first temple six centuries before, but not in person.

Yet that’s what happened. Even when the New Testament calls Jesus

“Lord,” it is using the Greek word *kyrios*, which is how the Septuagint translated Adonai. This wasn’t a coincidence. It was a confession that the God who revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush had once again seen the affliction of his people and come down to rescue them.

That being the case, heeding Him isn’t enough. Only worship will do.

Roberto Rivera is a Senior Fellow at the Colson Center.



*“He didn’t send a human vessel through whom He
would teach his people the Law—He sent the divine
lawgiver Himself.”*



REFLECTIONS
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Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be.

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (b. 296, d. 373)

*O Root of Jesse's stem,
sign of God's love for all his people:
come to save us without delay!*

BY G. SHANE MORRIS

After centuries of conquest, captivity, and crownlessness, it seemed as if God had abandoned Judah, the remnant of His covenant people, to be trodden on by the Gentiles. Once, He had promised David, the son of Jesse—the shepherd boy and giant-killer—that He would establish his kingdom and throne forever. But generations of idolatry provoked God, and Daniel's four monstrous empires devoured the giant-killer's kingdom. Like the barren couple from whom God had produced Israel, Judah's throne stood truncated and fruitless, hewn in divine judgment by the axes of the heathens. So, too, the promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation that would bless the whole human family seemed to have shriveled.



“The prophet saw a King like David, a King from humble origins, who would ascend Judah's throne with the Spirit resting on Him like a dove”

But Isaiah, writing before the old tree was felled foretold this desolation, and gave another promise: that from Jesse's charred stump, a Shoot would spring forth that would grow into a mighty tree and bear fruit for the healing of the nations. The prophet saw a King like David, a King from humble origins, who would ascend Judah's throne with the Spirit resting on Him like a dove, whose hands would be filled with might, who would bid the wolf

lie down with the lamb and would fill the earth with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. The nations would stream to this royal Branch, inquiring of Him and resting in His shade. And the stump of Jesse, once so desolate, would rule creation, empires that shattered his forefather's throne kneeling gladly before Him. And of the increase of His government and of peace, no end would come.

G. Shane Morris is a Senior Writer at the Colson Center and Host of the Upstream Podcast.

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Great God, what do I see and hear!
The end of things created!
The judge of mankind doth appear
On clouds of glory seated!
The trumpet sounds; the graves restore,
The dead which they contained before;
Prepare, my soul, to meet Him!

*Hymn, author unknown,
tune by Martin Luther (1483-1546)*



*O Key of David,
Opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom
Come and free the prisoners of darkness!*

BY SARAH STONESTREET

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato tells of prisoners who, in chains, are forced to see only distorted shadows of reality on the wall of a dark cave. They are ignorant of their true condition and reality until, one day, a prisoner breaks loose and walks out into the light of the sun to behold reality.

Like the prisoners in Plato's tale, humanity is imprisoned in darkness, subjected to distorted views of reality. Unlike the prisoners, we are unable to free ourselves from Satan's deception.

The prophet Isaiah promised that God would rescue Israel by placing His robe and sash on the shoulders of a foretold one and by giving Him the key of the house of David (Isaiah 22:15-25). Addressing the church of Philadelphia, the Apostle John identified Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

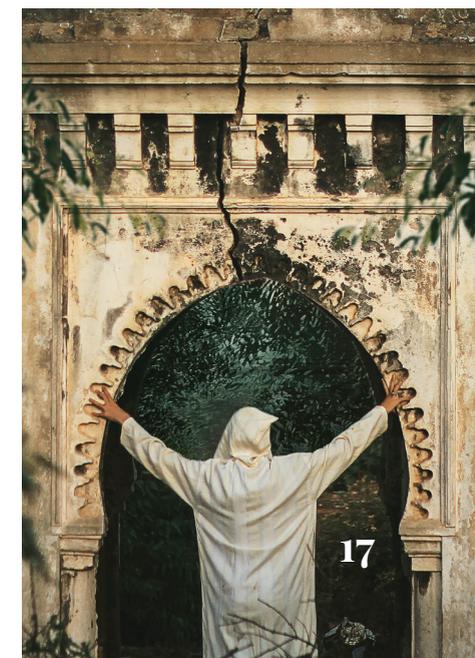


Because Jesus Christ holds the key of David, He has authority to protect the church at Philadelphia, to strengthen it in its weakness, to overthrow the powers of darkness, and to finally establish it in His kingdom (Revelation 3:7-13).

The coming of Christ means that Satan is now the one constrained, and those he had imprisoned are set free. No longer are they subject to distorted realities, counterfeit authorities, and fear. They are released, and through the power of the Spirit, they now join God's liberating work. They are even granted authority to open the gates of God's eternal kingdom, and to help release others who lie imprisoned in darkness (Matthew 16:19).

“Those he had imprisoned are set free. No longer are they subject to distorted realities, counterfeit authorities, and fear.”

Sarah Stonestreet is a wife, a mother, the co-host of the Strong Women podcast, and a co-leader of the Colorado Springs affiliate of the Colson Fellows Program.





REFLECTIONS
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Salvation to all that will is nigh;
That All, which always is all everywhere,
Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
Lo, faithful virgin, yields Himself to lie
In prison, in thy womb; and though He there
Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet He will wear,
Taken from thence, flesh, which death's force may try.
Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son and Brother;
Whom thou conceivst, conceived; yea thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother;
Thou hast light in dark, and shuts in little room,
Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb."

John Donne (1572-1631) from Annunciation

*O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun
of justice: come and shine on those who dwell in
darkness and in the shadow of death.*

BY ANNE MORSE

How often in Scripture do we witness the contrast between light and darkness? What is its meaning? In Genesis, in His first command, God created light, declared that it was good, and separated the light from the darkness.

Isaiah, anticipating Christ's birth, writes, "The people walking in darkness shall see a great light." The great star that unexpectedly lit up the night skies above Bethlehem startled the shepherd boys and led the Wise Men to their destination. Not a map, but a star: Light.

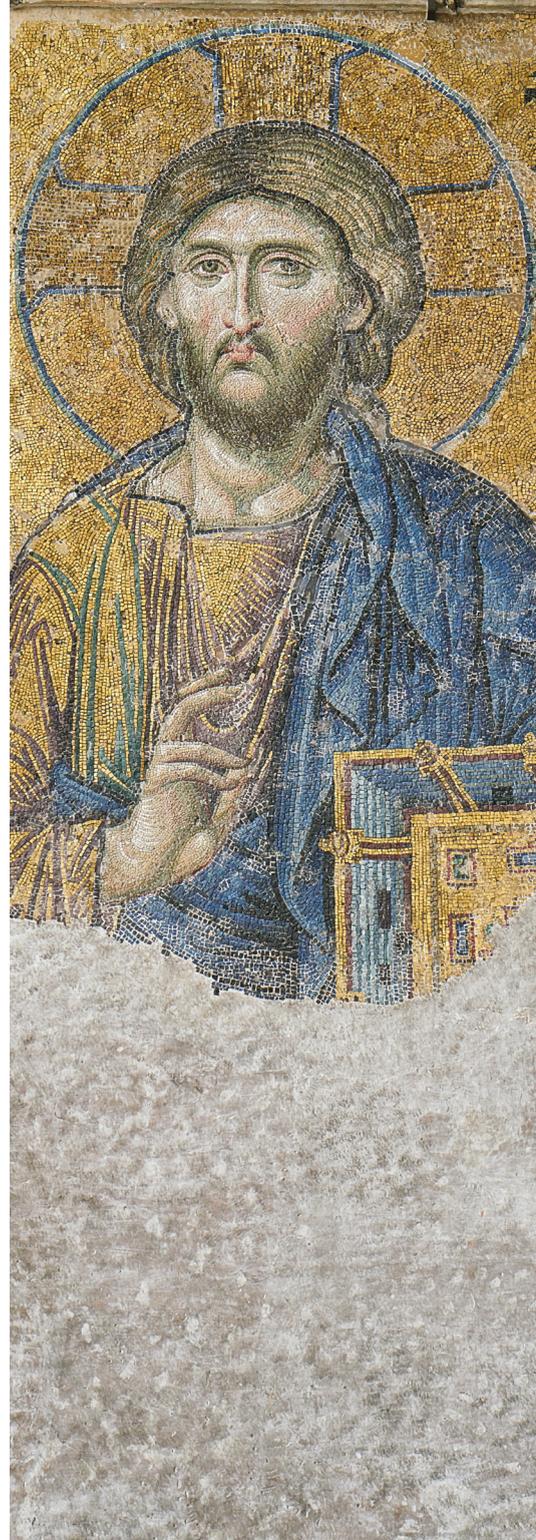
Three decades later, Jesus tells us not to hide our light under a bushel. He means, don't hide the truth of who He is, and what He represents in our lives. Instead, He notes, we are to be "the light of the world"—a light that shines "before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly father." After His crucifixion, Mary Magdalene saw Jesus at dawn, as the night's darkness fell away. Symbolically, it fell away forever.



*“Christ—eternal, radiant, joyful light—has forever
put death’s dark shadows to flight, destroying the
power of death itself.”*

Light shines its way into our most beloved Christmas hymns. In the third verse of "Silent Night," we sing "Son of God, Love's Pure Light, Radiant beams from thy holy face." In "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," we ask Christ to "Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight." Christ-eternal, radiant, joyful light—has forever put death's dark shadows to flight, destroying the power of death itself. Two thousand years after the light-filled night of our Savior's birth, His followers continue to spread the light of His truth to those who dwell in darkness.

Anne Morse is a freelance writer, a regular contributor to BreakPoint, and the co-author of several books with Chuck Colson.



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. . . And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.

***Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945),
from *God Is in the Manger****

*O King of all nations and keystone of the Church:
come and save man, whom you formed
from the dust!*

BY DR. BILL BROWN

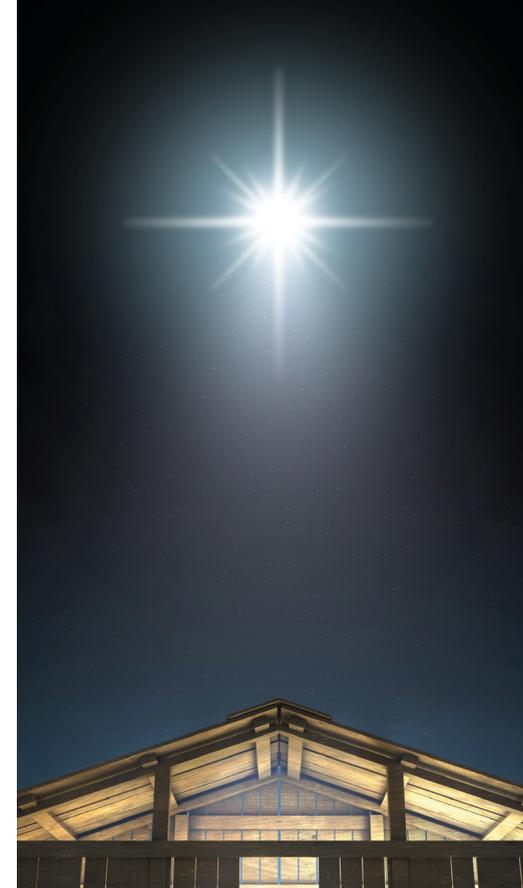


Once heard a music expert on National Public Radio extol the brilliance of Handel's Messiah. "The soaring music takes one's breath away" he said. "And the lyrics are majestic: 'King of Kings, Lord of Lords.' So appropriate for the musical score. 'Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father. The Prince of Peace.' Magnificent!" he exclaimed. He seemed to have no idea the "lyrics" were the words of Scripture. And that the words are not merely magnificent, the words are true.

O King of all nations . . . The King of kings hasn't abandoned his people. He hears their cry for deliverance. The eternal Sovereign steps from His throne and removes His crown to become fully human, a baby in a feed box, born to share our flesh and blood so He might die to save us from the penalties of our sin.

. . . keystone of the Church: come and save man, whom you formed from the dust! The Creator stoops again to create humanity; not from the life-giving dust of the Garden but from the muck of rebellion and death. Born a second time, we "new creations" join as living stones to become the Church, secured by Him who is the capstone.

The NPR music expert was wowed by the genius of Handel's Messiah, but the deeper truths are even more stunning. The soaring music and words tell the true story of God and man, heaven and earth. Their histories converge face to face for a time; from Advent to Ascension.



Now, enthroned again, the Lord does not shout, "Behave!" He cries out, "Behold!" He is making everything new (Revelation 21:5). Including us.

Bill Brown is the Senior Fellow for Worldview and Culture at The Colson Center for Christian Worldview.

REFLECTIONS
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"Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."

**C. S. Lewis (1898-1963),
from *The Last Battle, Chronicles of Narnia***

*"A stable once had something inside it
that was bigger than our whole world."*





*O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law:
come to save us, Lord our God!*

BY BROOKE B. MCINTIRE

In the long years of the history of the Church, we have heard words like these so many times that we can fail to see how remarkable they are. They remind us how God is astonishingly counter-cultural in the way He approaches us.

The name Emmanuel means “God with us.” God *with us*. *With* is such a radical little term. The pagan religions were more likely to emphasize prepositions like *against*, *apart*, *over*, *opposite* to describe the relationship between the deities and “us.” The Greeks, too, emphasized transcendence *over* the physical, the immortals *over* the mortals. The idea of a deity willingly coming down to be *with us* was unthinkable.

Yet, the counter-cultural God of Israel chose *with*.

The God of the Old Testament, known by the Jews as their King and Lawgiver, chose the most unexpected, counter-cultural preposition to describe how He would relate to His people: *With*.

Isn't odd that, when God finally made His grand entrance into time and space, it ended up being, well, not so grand? He picked a subjugated community, a teen pregnancy, and a cave with a feed trough because His desperate, low-income parents had nowhere else to go. But perhaps this counter-cultural arrival shows us that when He says *with*, He means it. He doesn't just mean with us in our palaces, our triumphs, our strengths, and our joys.

Look at how He chose His first “*with us*.” It was uncomfortable, impoverished, and undignified. When He says *with us*, He means with us even in the deepest poverty of heart or body. He is with us in our weaknesses, our mundane routines, our embarrassments, our grief, grime, frustrations, loneliness, disappointments, and pain. He is with us to listen, to comfort, to weep, to get His hands dirty, to wait, to enjoy, to heal, to guide, and to restore. Not from afar, but from right here *with us*.

This really is counter-cultural, and it really is Good News.

Brooke B. McIntire is the Content Manager for What Would You Say?



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