



ADULT STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel: An Adult Advent Study on the O Antiphons

The Gift: Focus on the Deep Matters in "O Wisdom"

Goal for the Session

Participants will explore the gift of Advent; be introduced to the O Antiphons, beginning with "O Wisdom" and its call on God the creator; and reflect on ways to focus on the deep matters of life.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the entire four-session study to get a sense of its scope. Pray for yourself and the participants.
- Adapt this session, and the other sessions in this study, for the needs of your group. There are often more activities suggested than you may have time to do.
- If possible prior to the study, contact participants and ask them to bring a journal to class. Plan to provide paper and pens for those who do not bring a journal. Send the participant handout to them as an attachment and ask them to read over session 1 prior to the first class meeting.
- From YouTube, choose a musical setting of the first of the O Antiphons, "O Wisdom," and obtain the equipment to play it. Some possibilities can

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Light the first Advent candle
- Pray together

EXPLORING

- Explore the significance of time
- Examine O Antiphons
- Explore the first antiphon: "O Wisdom"

RESPONDING

- Reflect on wholeness and fullness of life
- Create a visual reminder

CLOSING

- Sing a carol stanza
- Close with a litany

be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0hVJ_xUyiM and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E24f0q_k1qY.

- Set up four purple candles for the candle lighting and bring matches or a lighter. Alternatively, use electronic candles. It is not necessary that the candles be in an Advent wreath.
- On newsprint or a board, print the litany response: Come, Lord Jesus.
- For the Responding activity, obtain drawing paper and markers or crayons, as well as other art materials if you choose (magazines, glue, scissors, colored paper).
- In a hymnal or online, obtain the lyrics to the carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” While you may want to arrange for accompaniment, the carol’s simple and evocative tune makes it particularly appropriate to sing acapella, without any accompaniment. Stanzas of this carol will be used in all four sessions of the study.

Materials Needed

- Materials for journaling
- Four purple candles and matches or lighter (Advent wreath optional)
- Newsprint or board and markers or crayons
- Copies of session 1 Participant Handout
- Bibles
- Drawing paper
- Other art materials (magazines, glue, scissors, colored paper)
- Copies of the carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”
- Copies of session 2 Participant Handout

Teaching Tip

Opening each session with a time for quietly listening to recordings of the antiphons being chanted or sung sets the context for the session, communicating that Advent is a time for reflection and contemplation.

Opening (10 minutes)

As participants arrive, invite them to sit quietly as you play a musical setting of the antiphon “O Wisdom.”

1. Light the First Advent Candle

When most participants have arrived, welcome them to the study. Point out that, in this study, participants will be introduced to the O Antiphons, used in daily prayer on the seven days before Christmas Eve since at least

the eighth century. Invite the group to join in the following litany, which focuses on the first antiphon:

Leader: O Wisdom,

coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,

pervading and permeating all creation,
you order all things with strength and gentleness:

Come now and teach us the way to salvation.

All: Come, Lord Jesus

Light the first Advent candle and sit in silence for a few moments.

2. Pray together

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

God of grace,
ever faithful to your promises,
the earth rejoices in hope of our Savior’s coming
and looks forward with longing
to his return at the end of time.

Prepare our hearts to receive him when he comes,
for he is Lord forever and ever. Amen.¹

Exploring (20 minutes)

3. Explore the Significance of Time

Call the group’s attention to the material in the Participant Handout under the heading “Time: A Means of Focusing on God.” Point out that the author tells us that, early on, Christians set patterns and habits that could shape life and sharpen their ability to pay attention to God. Invite participants to form pairs. Assign each person in each pair either the material addressing daily patterns or the information about weekly patterns. Ask each person to quickly review their assigned material and then to summarize the important points for their partner. In the total group, ask volunteers to respond to the following:

- What was new information for me about the evolution of daily and weekly patterns of Christian practice? What was surprising?
- In what ways do you think daily and weekly Christian practices today reflect continuity with those past patterns? Are there patterns we have lost or that have lost their power? If so, why do you think that has happened? What, if anything, do you think might be important to reclaim or to transform?

Invite participants to quickly scan the information about the development of the liturgical year. Ask a volunteer to name the first day put in place to anchor the church year (Easter) and briefly summarize relevant information. In turn, ask volunteers to describe the next day established (Pentecost), followed by facts about the season of Lent, the establishment of the dates of Epiphany and Christmas, and finally the season of Advent. If you note that some adults are less than familiar with the liturgical year, you might illustrate the information volunteers are reporting by drawing a simple circle chart and jotting down days and seasons at the appropriate places on the circle.

4. Examine O Antiphons

Call the group's attention to the general information in the Participant Handout about the O Antiphons. Discuss some of the following:

- We read that the antiphons combine bits and pieces from many biblical verses to form allusions. What does the author suggest this accomplishes for us?
- The author tells us that the antiphons, combined in this way, draw on God's promise of wholeness. Into what specific places of brokenness in this world do you yearn to have God's presence revealed? If you pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" in Advent, what situations or crises come to mind where healing is needed?

5. Explore the First Antiphon: "O Wisdom"

Point out that the author tells us that the first of the Antiphons, "O Wisdom," points to the beginning, to creation. Invite a volunteer to read the antiphon aloud (found in the Participant Handout).

Call attention to the information in the text box about the Apocrypha and point out that, in addition to the reference from the book of Sirach, there are strong connections between what comes from the mouth of God and creation in both the Old Testament (where, in the book of Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman) and the New Testament.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 1, a passage the author observes can help us see the connections between creation, order, words, speaking, and salvation, themes that are linked together in the first O Antiphon. Ask participants to number off by fives to form

five small groups or pairs, depending on the size of your group. Assign one of these themes to each group (creation to the number ones, order to the number twos, and so forth). Ask each small group to review what the Genesis passage reveals about their assigned theme. In the total group, invite each small group to respond to the following:

- Where do you see your theme reflected in the Genesis passage?
- What connections can you pinpoint among the five themes?

Then discuss some of the following, as time allows:

- The Participant Handout details ways that the Old Testament reveals an acute awareness of the risk and destructive power of chaos following the breakdown of boundary conditions. It also discusses our need for those conditions to be in place. What boundary breakdowns can you identify that threaten the flourishing of the created order?
- What limits would you say must be in place for us as human creatures in order to preserve the whole created order? What forces serve to threaten those necessary limits?
- What conditions can you name that can lead to the flourishing of life, not only for us, but for the whole created order? How do you define wholeness or fullness of life?

Responding (10 minutes)

6. Reflect on Wholeness and Fullness of Life

Remind the group of the following questions they considered as they were introduced to the O Antiphons in the activity above:

- Into what specific places of brokenness in this world do you yearn to have God's presence revealed?
- If you pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" in Advent, what situations or crises come to mind where healing is needed?

Invite participants to consider these questions again, this time in the context of the "O Wisdom" antiphon and its consideration of what God intends for the created order. Ask them to respond in writing in their

journals, contemplating specific places of brokenness in the created world. Encourage participants to continue to reflect on these questions in the coming week in their times of devotions or meditation. Suggest that one way to focus their meditation would be to name each place they identified, responding after each with the words “Come, Lord Jesus” and following those words by a time of silent reflection, seeking to discern how God is calling them to respond.

7. Create a Visual Reminder

Distribute drawing paper and crayons, markers, and other available art materials. In the center of the paper, invite them to print the words “O Wisdom” in large letters. Then encourage them to print words or phrases, make line drawings, or use symbols that represent ideas and themes that illuminated the discussion of the O Antiphon in this session. Suggest that they post these visual representations at home to serve as a reminder.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Sing a Carol Stanza

Point out that the writing of the familiar carol “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” came out of a nineteenth century effort to reclaim Christian treasures from sources that predated the Reformation. The carol begins with the O Antiphon that is the culmination of the seven titles of the coming Christ, Emmanuel, but the group will sing together the stanza focusing on the first Antiphon, “O Wisdom.” Sing the stanza together.

Distribute copies of the Session 2 Participant Handout, or plan to send it by email to participants.

9. Close with a Litany

Close the session by repeating the litany used for the opening. Following the group response, sit quietly for a

few moments and then extinguish the burning Advent candle.

Teaching Alternative

Explore Scriptures: Invite participants to read and discuss the Old and New Testament Scriptures cited in the Participant Handout: Proverbs 2:19–20 and 8:22–31; John 1:1–5; 1 Corinthians 1:18–24.

Key Scriptures

Genesis 1
Proverbs 2:19–20; 8:22–31
John 1:1–5
1 Corinthians 1:18–24

For More Information

A thorough exploration of the daily, weekly, and yearly cycle of worship developed by the early church and elaborated through the Middle Ages and beyond can be found in these two books:

Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice*, 2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010.

John Harper, *The Forms and Order of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Note

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 165.

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel: An Adult Advent Study on the O Antiphons

The Gift: Focus on the Deep Matters in “O Wisdom”

Introduction

Christmas: no matter how early the stores start playing carols and putting up decorations, it seems to arrive so fast and pass by so quickly. It is a season loaded with expectations, with memories happy and painful, a season of hopes that come true and those that do not. It is a season that can pass by in a blur. We know that Jesus is there, at the heart of the season, but keeping our focus on Jesus is a challenge.

During this time of emotion and expectation, the church offers us a gift, a way to see that which is larger than our personal hopes and expectations, inviting us to see a wider vision of God and ourselves, both today and across all time. Those who have gone before us (long before us) in Jesus Christ offer us the season of Advent and, within that season, a set of words of worship for the seven days that lead up to Christmas Eve, called the “O Antiphons.”

Time: A Means of Focusing on God

Early in the life of the church, Christians began developing ways to turn their hearts and minds to God and God’s presence in their lives. They established times

for prayer and worship, and they developed specific content for those times of prayer. They set patterns and habits that could shape life and sharpen their (and our) ability to pay attention to the God who is with us and present to us even when we are not present to God, the God who is focused on us even when we are focused on everything else. Gradually they found patterns for each day, each week, and each year.

The day. From the beginning, the followers of Jesus developed shared, communal patterns for shaping each day in ways that would help them seek and see God as each day unfolded (for example, Acts 2:42–47). Responding to the New Testament’s call to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16–18) and building on practices of daily prayer common in Jewish practice, Christians came to settle on particular times of day when they would gather together to pray with one another. The basic pattern was to pray morning, midday, and evening.

Over time, some Christians added additional set times for prayer beyond morning, midday, and evening. They developed eight set times over the course

of the day, every three hours (see “The Divine Office” text box for the basic pattern and names, derived from Latin, that are attached to the various times). Of course, not all Christians were able to pray eight times a day, every day, daytime and nighttime. So some committed to pray those eight times on behalf of all Christians—monastic communities and others whom the church supported in praying the full round. The O Antiphons were included in late afternoon to early evening prayer, the time that came to be called “Vespers.”

The Divine Office

The church in Western Europe developed an order of set times to gather for worship and prayer through the day and night. This order is sometimes called “the divine office,” “daily office,” or simply “daily prayer.” This order developed over a long period of time, and the details could vary from place to place. For this Western church, the basic pattern was **Matins** (midnight or shortly after), **Lauds**, **Prime** (around 6:00–7:00 am), **Terce** (9:00 am), **Sext** (noon), **None** (3:00 pm), **Vespers** (6:00 pm), and **Compline** (9:00 pm).

The week. Very early on, the church began to shape the *week*. The central event was the gathering of Christians for worship on Sundays. Sunday was the day of Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead, and worship on that day was (and is for us as well) a weekly reminder of the person and the events central to Christian faith and life.

It has been noted that in the early church the Lord’s Supper (Communion, or the Eucharist) was celebrated only on Sunday. The community was all to gather on Sunday for communion. Those unable to gather were included in the congregation’s celebration by having the bread and wine brought to them from the elements blessed and shared by those gathered. The week was shaped by being gathered together in worship and then sent out into the world to live the faith celebrated on Sunday. The week led out into the world and then back to the gathering together so that faith could be strengthened and renewed. Each week the community was sent out anew as bearers of the good news in word and actions, sharing the gospel of new life in and through the risen Jesus Christ.

The year. Gradually Christians came to share a pattern for the *year*, sometimes called the “liturgical year.” This Christian year was anchored by specific days, some of which were accompanied by seasons. First to be put in place was Easter. There was a good deal of controversy over what the date of Easter should be. That controversy continues today: Easter is celebrated on different dates by the Orthodox churches than by the churches that trace their roots through the Roman Catholic Church. All these Christian groups determine the date of Easter by setting it according to the lunar calendar, which is why it falls on different dates each year.

As Easter fell into place, other important dates could be located on the calendar. Pentecost, marking the arrival of the Holy Spirit among the followers of Christ and launching the church in new patterns of life and mission, was on the fiftieth day of the Easter season. Lent developed as a period of preparation for Easter over the forty days leading up to it. And there was careful reflection on the date of Jesus’ birth, based on the story told in early chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Initially the celebration of Epiphany (on January 6) served as the day to remember Christ’s birth, along with the visit of the magi and Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan. But some claimed December 25 as the day to celebrate Jesus’ birth, and eventually Christmas Day and Epiphany both were celebrated. Advent grew in connection with Christmas. Like Lent, Advent developed as a season of anticipation and preparation. Both arose as times for Christians to take a clear look at the sin marring their lives, and at the life and mission they shared with other Christians and with the world beyond the church.

Within the season of Advent, there came to be special parts of the liturgy, said or sung at Vespers, starting on December 17 and running to the day before Christmas Eve, the seven “O Antiphons.”

Focusing Advent: The O Antiphons

The O Antiphons are brief elements of liturgy, like short poems. All seven begin with the letter “O,” followed by a name drawn from the Bible that identifies something about who God is—a characteristic of God or an image for God, particularly an image that highlights God’s involvement in history. The Antiphons combine bits and pieces from multiple biblical verses. In that way, they do two things for us. First, they offer new ways of

Advent and the Calendar

Advent is a season that stretches across the four Sundays before Christmas. This means that Advent starts on a different date from year to year, and it lasts a different number of days from year to year. When Christmas Day falls on a Sunday, Advent lasts a full twenty-eight days, the longest Advent can be, and begins on November 27, the earliest it can start. When Christmas Day falls on a Monday, Advent lasts twenty-two days and begins on December 3. This means that our printed Advent calendars with the little boxes that open, one for each day, starting on December 1, count down the days of the season of Advent correctly only in years when Christmas is on a Wednesday.

understanding what those verses tell us about God and the world. Second, they give us words to understand what it means for us that God is coming into the world, a world that in so many ways is broken, hurting, and hurtful.

The antiphons take material from across the Bible. They pick up and combine biblical images, making allusions. Sometimes the allusions are very direct, quoting verses of Scripture—for example, the antiphon for December 19 (“O Root of Jesse, rising as a sign for all the peoples . . .”) quotes part of Isaiah 11:10, “On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples.” Sometimes the allusions are less direct, bringing together bits and pieces from multiple verses—for example, the antiphon for December 22 (“O Ruler of the nations”) refers to the cornerstone and to forming out of clay, references to Genesis 2:7, Isaiah 28:16, and Ephesians 2:20. This way of writing—drawing out bits and pieces and combining them in new and illuminating ways—is very old. It is found in Scripture itself, for example in Mary’s song, the “Magnificat,” sung after learning from the angel Gabriel that she would give birth to the Messiah (Luke 1:46–55). The O Antiphons were originally tied to the Magnificat, something we will turn to in the third session.

We don’t know who authored the antiphons. What we do know is that the O Antiphons were being used in worship by communities of Christians starting a very long time ago. They began to show up in worship books thirteen hundred years ago, in the eighth century. They have been used continuously since then. When they are said in worship, one on each of the days leading up to Christmas Eve, they build toward the Christmas celebration, especially on December 23 with the last of the seven antiphons, “O Emmanuel,” which is tied to the words of Matthew 1:22–23, which speak of the birth of Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14: “‘and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God is with us’” (v. 23).

The O Antiphons are handed to us through the long stretch of history. They draw on God’s promises of wholeness. Fiercely they call on God to come, to break into a history of brokenness and pain, of loss, of oppression and death, of disorder and disorder, to be present here and now, bringing renewed life. The first of the antiphons, “O Wisdom,” points to the beginning, to creation, calling on God’s strength and gentleness to bring an order in which all can flourish.

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A Familiar Tune?

You may have encountered the O Antiphons already. The much-loved hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is based on the O Antiphons. There was a Latin hymn that set the O Antiphons to music by the thirteenth century. The English version we sing today was first written in the middle of the nineteenth century, and over the years it has been revised, reworked, and improved. Some hymnals print only some of the seven stanzas of the hymn; others print all seven. The first verse, “O come, O come, Emmanuel . . .” is based on the seventh O Antiphon.

The First O Antiphon: “O Wisdom”

Coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,
Pervading and permeating all creation,
You order all things with strength and gentleness:
Come now and teach us the way to salvation.
Come, Lord Jesus

The first O Antiphon draws in four themes: creation, spoken words, order, and salvation. This first antiphon begins with the beginning, naming the good gift of creation and life, calling on God to lead people to the fullness of life we know is God’s intention and aim.

The first lines of “O Wisdom” are drawn from the book of Sirach, which is part of the Apocrypha. In Sirach, chapter 24, wisdom is portrayed as a woman speaking to the people: “I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist” (Sir. 24:3). Wisdom goes on to tell of her presence in heaven and on earth.

Apocrypha

The books of the Apocrypha are accepted as part of Scripture by some Christian traditions but not by others. The Apocrypha is made up of writings that are included in the Septuagint (the most widely used ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) but are not part of the Hebrew text. They consist of several separate books, together with additional material for some of the books that are part of the Hebrew text. Sirach, which is quoted in “O Wisdom,” is sometimes given other titles, especially Ecclesiasticus, or The Book of Ben Sira.

The connection between what comes from the mouth of God and creation is strong in both the Old and the New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Wisdom is identified closely with God’s creation (Prov. 3:19–20; 8:22–31). In the New Testament, creation is linked to wisdom and to words, and both are linked to Jesus Christ (John 1:1–5; 1 Cor. 1:18–24, esp. v. 24).

The first chapter of Genesis can help us see the connections between creation, order, words, speaking, and salvation that are linked together in the first O Antiphon. Genesis 1 describes the primal ordering of

creation, picturing a series of days—six days of activity followed by a seventh day of rest. The first four days of activity are taken up with the work of setting basic conditions in place. On the first and fourth days, God speaks the words that create light, illuminating what was not visible in the darkness. Sun and moon are created to mark day and night. God sets in place daytime and night in a rhythm that is a basic condition of life. The lights provide order for the long stretch of time, “for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen. 1:14). On the second and third days, God speaks the words that separate water from dry ground, gathering each in their own particular place. The gathering of water and dry ground into distinct places in and through which they can relate fruitfully is a basic condition for the flourishing of life, as we are reminded by flood and drought. When water and dry ground find their different places, they interact in ways that support life’s flourishing: “Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation” (Gen. 1:11–12a).

A friend once commented that the Old Testament has an acute awareness of the risk and destructive power of chaos that follows from the breakdown of boundary conditions and our need for those conditions to be in place. Floods undo the healthy separating of water and dry ground, with often devastating effect. Creatures do not flourish in such conditions. Part of God’s good and powerful creating work is establishing basic boundary conditions in which creatures can flourish, because to be a creature is to have limits. And what God seeks for creatures is their flourishing, setting conditions in which limited beings can flourish.

“O Wisdom” celebrates God’s work of setting in place conditions that enable flourishing. Genesis 1 tells of that flourishing in its account of the fifth and sixth days of creation, when teeming life breaks forth: “the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:25).

“O Wisdom” calls on this God, who provides basic order and pattern, doing so “with strength and gentleness,” to come to us and “teach us the way to salvation.”

Salvation is a thread that runs across the Bible. It is a constant theme in the Psalms and Isaiah, as it is in the New Testament. “O Wisdom” calls on God, who provides the basic conditions and ordering that enable life to flourish, to be present as the one teaching how, in the midst of this life, to find the way to the salvation that opens the way to wholeness, to the flourishing God intends for all creation.

Conclusion

Advent is a gift, offering us help in focusing on the deep matters of life in the midst of that which would distract us from it. Within the gift of Advent are the O Antiphons, beginning with “O Wisdom” and its call on God the creator, the one who creates conditions for life to flourish, to teach us how to make our way to the fullness of life God intends for us.

For Further Reading

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