

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

O come, O come, O Lord of Might, who to your tribes on Sinai's height in ancient times you gave the law, in cloud and majesty and awe.

The word "Adonai" is Hebrew for "Lord." Devout Jews address God using this word instead of speaking God's name YHWH, the name that God revealed to Moses, the name that means "I Am who I Am." If you look through the Old Testament, whenever you see the word LORD written in small capital letters, that is this word, God's name.

O come, O Adonai, Lord of might. Adonai who spoke to Moses from a burning bush and called him to be the one to confront the power of Pharaoh. Adonai who led God's people from slavery to freedom. Lord of Might, whose outstretched arm and mighty hand opened the Red Sea and pointed God's people to safety on the other side. Adonai, who appeared as a pillar of smoke and fire to lead God's people through the wilderness to the promised land. Lord of Might, who gave God's people the law to teach them how to live in obedience to God and in community with each other.

This is an ancient story, the story of the Exodus. It is the story of God's friendship with Moses. It is the story of a people learning to walk in God's ways, over 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. It is the story of God's covenant and promise to God's people. It is the story of how God's people came to know who they were and whose they were.

This ancient story and these ancient memories point us to Jesus. He was a son of Israel. He was a son of the covenant. He lived his life in obedience to the laws of Moses and in obedience to Adonai, the Lord of Might, the great I AM. Jesus identified himself with God the I AM. All through the gospel of John we hear him say it: I am the good

shepherd, I am the true vine, I am the bread of life. Jesus' radical claim was that he was the Messiah. But he was not the Messiah in the way that people expected.

O Come O branch of Jesse, free your own from Satan's tyranny. It makes sense to pair these two verses together. One is an image of God's strength and the other is an image of God's tenacity – a green shoot growing from a dead stump.

First of all, who is this Jesse? Jesse was the father of King David. In the book of 1 Samuel (chapter 16) God sends the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king from among the sons of Jesse. Seven older sons parade in front of the prophet, but the one that God chooses isn't even there at first. He's out in the fields tending the sheep. David is the youngest and the last, the one who doesn't even merit consideration from his father Jesse. And yet David the shepherd boy is the one that God chooses. David became Israel's greatest king, a man who loved God and who was loved by God.

500 years later, the fortunes of the people of Israel had changed considerably. At the time of Isaiah the prophet, the territory that David had ruled had been divided. The land of Israel had been invaded and conquered by the armies of Babylon. Many people had been killed. Others were forced into exile in a distant country. And still others simply gave up on God altogether -- gave up on worship, and gave up on the community they had once known. For years, the people of Israel lived far away from their promised land. From their exile in Babylon, they longed for home. They mourned the loss of loved ones. They told stories about the glory days of King David and King Solomon, even though it had been centuries since David and Solomon had lived and ruled. As they waited in exile, the people of Israel got nostalgic for the way life used to be.

In many ways, we know what exile feels like. Maybe you have known a place inside you so dark with depression that the light just can't seem to get in. Maybe you have known a place inside you so lonely that it seems there is nowhere to go. Maybe there's a place inside you that despairs of ever celebrating Christmas the way you remember it. Maybe you miss someone who is gone so terribly that you can't even say their name without choking up. That is what exile feels like. Exile of the soul is every bit as wrenching as being torn away from home and marched off to a foreign land.

Isaiah prophesied that a green shoot would spring from the stump of Jesse – that there was still life in what appeared to be dead. Isaiah prophesied that a descendant of the great King David would come, that the spirit of Adonai, the Lord of Might, would rest on him, that righteousness and faithfulness would encircle him, that peace would break out even between enemies, that he would be a signal to all the nations. Once again, we hear these words pointing to Jesus Christ, who indeed carried the spirit of Adonai upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and reverence.

Advent carries us back to the longing and anticipation that Isaiah proclaims. The longing for God to act and the anticipation that God will act. In the gospel this morning we hear John the baptizer calling us to prepare the way of the Lord in our own time and place. Preparing the way means repentance, just as it did for the people of Jerusalem. Preparing the way requires a searching and candid look back at our lives to this point – not nostalgia for a time gone by, but honesty and straight talk about who we are and what we have been doing. Preparing the way also means acknowledging that this time of year isn't always a happy time. Just because Christmas is coming does not mean that cancer has been cured,

or that estranged family members will come home, or that we haven't lost spouses or parents or friends or siblings or children.

Advent carries us to the scene by the Jordan river, where John is standing waist deep in the water. Advent takes us to the line of people on the bank waiting to be baptized, waiting for the chance to confess and repent. Advent is John reminding the people who came to see him that he is not the Messiah, but only the advance man. Advent is right now, as we long for that same Messiah to come again, yet knowing that he has never left us, that he is right here in our midst because he promised to come among us whenever we gather. Here in word and sacrament. Here in prayer and singing.

Advent turns us from nostalgia for the past to looking ahead with hope and expectation. Advent calls us to step out of the frenzy of the "holiday season" and to listen for what God is calling us to do. Advent reminds us that our worship inside of these walls is directly connected to how we live and what we do outside of them. Advent calls us to become the voices crying out to a world that desperately needs to hear good news. God is here. God is with us. We sing it and pray it and live it because it is true.

O come, O come Emmanuel.