

*The “O” Prayers, Pt. 1*  
***O Wisdom!***

**First Presbyterian Church  
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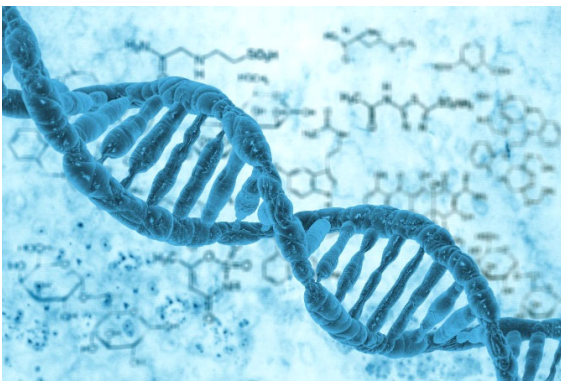
I’ve already heard “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” and “Winter Wonderland” as much as I need to—and it’s still November! Christmas comes around fast. We love much of the familiarity of the decorations, traditions and songs. These may touch us sentimentally and strike a longing for home or loved ones. But there has to be more than “White Christmas” or even the latest edition of the standard Hallmark Christmas plot. How do we make the same old Christmas fresh again? How do we find life-shaping power at Christmas? I think one of the most reliable ways to make things new in the moment is to go back further in the past. Seek the roots. Search for the old ways, the ancient paths of wisdom. See how what has survived the great sifting of time can refuel the present moment.



This Advent we’ll be taking up the “O Prayers.” That’s because each prayer starts with the word “O,” followed by an Old Testament title for the Messiah. Each “O Prayer” is an invitation for the Christ who came to us once, to come and enter our world again. More properly they’re known as the “O Antiphons.” An antiphon is just a short prayer made in response to a reading from Scripture. We don’t know the exact origin of the seven “O Prayers,” but they were referenced as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> century and were in wide use the seven days before Christmas long before the calendar turned AD1000. They’re ancient! Today, we’ll take up the first “O Prayer.”

*O Wisdom which came out of the mouth of the Most High, and reaches from one end to another, mightily and sweetly ordering all things, come and teach us the way of knowledge.*

This is a call to the One who created the underlying order and harmony of all things. In Proverbs 8, we read about the Wisdom of God speaking as if he were a person. Wisdom declares, “When the LORD established the heavens, I was there...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master workman” (Pr. 8: 27, 30). This prayer cries out to the Source of all beauty and order. How shall we image this?



In 1953, scientists discovered the Double Helix structure of the DNA molecule. DNA contains all the information that causes each of us to be uniquely *us*. We’re struck by the beauty of this spiral structure. As well as by the fact that so much information could be stored in such a tiny place. The diameter of a double helix is just 2 to 3 nanometers. A nanometer is a billionth of a meter! That’s pretty small.



Now take a look at what the Spitzer Space Telescope revealed in 2006. Near the center of our galaxy is a Double Helix nebula! The tremendous gravitational forces in that region pull the

gases into that shape. The telescope used infrared imaging to discover what our eyes can't see: the stars within the field of that nebula that make the whole structure look like a DNA molecule. It's just that the Double Helix Nebula is about 80 light years long!



Does this rouse your mind toward the wisdom that orders all things? Does this move your heart toward wonder? We can feel what moved Isaac Watts to write, “I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day. The moon shines full at his command, and all the stars obey.” We take for granted that the universe is intelligible and not random or chaotic. Its laws and structure can be learned. The more we uncover, the more we discover that there are still deeper layers of structure and laws. Everything holds together.

Our friend Malcolm Guite has written a series of prayers on these “O Antiphons.” With his permission they will each be in your advent reading guides. But let's just sample some of his words about our prayer to Wisdom:

I cannot think unless I have been thought,  
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken...

O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,  
O Light within the light by which I see...

Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,  
Come to me now disguised as everything.

Can you see Wisdom in person? “No,” says the cynic, “There is no sign of a

Creator. There is only what there is.” But look more closely. The person of Wisdom is everywhere. Wisdom is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. The order and beauty and resilience and fruitfulness all around us cries out to this Wisdom.

But does this primal, all-pervading Wisdom have a name? Yes, of course, the Christian sings out. Proverbs says that Wisdom was in the beginning with God. John’s Gospel means exactly that when he writes that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. And the Word, the Wisdom that is God, became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory” (John 1: 1-14). So Paul says in our Corinthians passage that Christ *is* the wisdom of God. Uncovering how this is so is every bit as astounding as discovering the double helix structure of DNA and the nebula. Again, how shall we image this?



I want to take you to a place we have been before, to the church of San Clemente in Rome, to the 11<sup>th</sup> century mosaic that adorns the round apse at the front of the sanctuary. In the very center is Jesus on the cross. His arms are stretched out as if in a wide gesture of welcome. Or a complete, open offering of himself to the world. His hands give the benediction of his full embrace.



S. IGNATI Q. IN SV PRA SCRIT But now let's focus the frame closely on the base of the cross to see some more of this mosaic. The foot of the cross is "planted" in a green, leafy plant. Below the plant water flows in four streams, the rivers of Paradise from which the deer can drink. The cross is Eden returning to the world. The cross is the Tree of Life restored!



Next, let's widen our view to see how from that leafy green base of the cross a great vine is growing. It spirals around in circles that spread out over the whole world. If you were closer, you would see that within those circles are people going about ordinary life: feeding chickens, caring for sheep, sewing a garment. Jesus with his arms outstretched on the cross has planted anew the Tree of Life whose branches are circling out across the world. His death is bringing everything to life. He makes all things new. Such is Christ the wisdom of God who by dying brought us life.

Now here's the kicker! This is actually a Christmas picture! There are words across the great semi-circle of this huge mosaic. They're taken from Luke's

Christmas story. In translation they sound a lot like the words the angel said to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest. Peace on earth. Good will toward men.” Except there’s been another phrase inserted into the angel words. The mosaic actually says, “Glory to God in the highest, *to him who sits on the throne*, peace on earth, good will toward men.” The cross has been connected to Christmas. The praise to the newborn king becomes praise to Christ who triumphed and sits on his throne. But his throne is not made of jewels and precious metals. His throne is the cross! Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, rules from the rough wood of the cross.

This is the Wisdom who made the universe. This is the Wisdom who redeemed the world. This is the wisdom of God which is foolishness to the world. God won by losing. God reveals his glory by taking the place of shame. God restores us by making our sin his own. God brings life precisely by dying. Oh, Christ the wisdom and the power of God!

So how shall we make this our own? How does this deep wisdom come into our lives this very Christmas? I’d like to take you to a picture of a chess match.



In 1831, German painter Friedrich Retzsch created “The Chess Players.” The work is based on the legend of Faust, the young man who made a deal to trade his soul to the devil in exchange for the knowledge of how all things work. Faust has come to symbolize all the ways we trade what we know to be good and right in our quest to have for ourselves the secrets to life. Faust laid hold of me in college when I began to read English literature and thought foolishly, “This is deeper than Scripture!” As if! Or when I considered declining seminary to go study philosophy to find out the “true” depths of human thought. I’d wrestle with Faust for years until God led me back to the treasures of

Trinitarian theology and the deep mines of Christian wisdom, compared to which all the wisdom of man seems but trinkets.

So in this picture, Satan is the scowling, supremely confident figure on the left, richly arrayed in his fine robes. The index finger against his cheek is a gesture of the master schooling a novice. Faust is the young man with fair skin in ordinary robes. He is dejected. His head in his hand indicates that he knows he is losing. The opponent has lost only a couple pieces. Faust has lost most of his men. In fact, those who know chess have thought this painting should be titled “Check Mate.” It appears young Faust has no place to move his king that will not end in utter defeat. An angel looks on sadly. Soon the boy will be lost.

There’s a story that goes with this scene. I had not been aware of it until I was reading a book by the Scottish prince of preachers, James S. Stewart of Edinburgh. He relayed the story in 1952. It was later picked up by Billy Graham and then many other preachers through the years. These days, this painting is in a private collection. But it used to hang in a great museum where it could be seen by thousands. A grand master of chess made his way through that gallery. His attention was arrested by the desperate scene of this match. The chess master stopped and stared at the painting. He studied the placement of the pieces. Faust’s position was dire, but the chess master could not stop looking at the painting. Other patrons came and went, and still the master stared at the board in the quiet of the museum. After several hours, he suddenly cried out, “Wait! It’s a lie! The king has one more move! The king has one more move!”

The wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. Everything can appear on the edge of ruin. The LORD sent plagues to make Pharaoh release God’s people. The Hebrews ran into the wilderness seeking freedom, but all too soon Pharaoh decided to hunt them down. God’s people fled as fast as they could until they hit the Red Sea. Killing soldiers behind them. Swirling waters of death before them. Checkmate. The people cried out. Caught between the flood and the sword they expected to die. But the King had one more move. Moses lifted up his staff and the LORD parted the waters of the Red Sea. They passed safely through to a new life.

Centuries later, the LORD’s people dwelt in captivity. The king of Babylon. erected a great statue of himself and decreed that all must bow down and worship the golden image. But the young Hebrews Shadrach,

Meshach and Abednego would not bow down. “We will not serve your gods.” Enraged, the Babylonian king heated the fiery furnace to seven times its usual heat. The king of Babylon ordered the Hebrews to be thrown into the raging fire. But the King of the universe had one more move. A fourth figure appeared in the fire, one like a son of the gods, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were not burned. Not a hair was singed. Not even the smell of smoke was about them.

God sent his Word into the world. His wisdom, his Son, grew to be a man who walked among the fiery suffering and blazing anger of a rebellious world. He came to save us. Yet, we rejected him. The rebel heart of man declared the wisdom of God to be foolishness. Guilty of crimes against humanity we said. We nailed him to the killing tree of the cross. But you know the story. The King had one more move. On the third day the Father decreed in a voice that tossed away the great stone and knocked the Roman guards upside down, “Not guilty! Let the dead Christ rise. Let the one rejected become the Ruler of all.” One more move from the King, the wisdom of God to take the worst that we could do, killing the Son of God, and turn it into the best news the world would ever hear: your sins have been atoned for. Death has been conquered. The devil has lost. The king had one more move and the match has turned forever in his favor.

That means no matter where you are, one more move awaits *you* this Advent. No matter how hopeless your life has become, no matter how many pieces you have lost, check mate has not occurred. No matter how foolish or wounded, arrogant or ignorant you have been, the game is *not* up. The accuser may whisper it is too late. But that is a lie! You have this moment one more move. To join yourself to the king. To cry out, “O Wisdom that orders all things, O Wisdom of the cross, come and save me! I give control of the board to you. Lord Jesus, you brought victory out of defeat, light out of darkness and life out of death. I make the move toward you. Now make your move of grace through me.”