Advent Midweek 2

O Come, Adonai

Isaiah 33:22

Sermon Outline

Come, Lord, with an Outstretched Arm to Redeem us.

 I. The Lord we pray to come is Adonai, the Trinity.

 II. And come he does—as Ruler and Lawgiver.

 III. But he also comes with an outstretched arm as our Redeemer.

Sermon

“You always lose something in the translation.” That’s what people say, and there’s some truth to it. At Ysleta Lutheran Mission in El Paso, a native Spanish speaker once gave a long prayer at the annual Have a Heart Dinner. Then the prayer was translated for the English speakers present. Somehow, the English translation wasn’t nearly as long as the Spanish original. Why was that?

The translator explained that he couldn’t remember everything that had been said in Spanish, so he just gave the *Reader’s Digest* version in English. The *Reader’s Digest* version is what we have in the English translation of stanza 3 of the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

In the Middle Ages, stanza 3 would have been sung in Latin at Vespers in the monasteries on Dec 18, six days before Christmas Eve. Each day of the week before Christmas, one stanza of the hymn would be sung, ending on Christmas Eve with what today is stanza 1.

But the translation has been changed for us moderns. Rev. John Mason Neale, who translated the Latin into the present-day version beloved by so many, was working with four line stanzas, plus the refrain, so he couldn’t fit everything in. He had to drop some of the words. Our version today 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.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to thee, O Israel! (*LSB* 357:3)

Rev. Neale’s version is fine as far as it goes. But the original Latin version, based on Is 33:22, literally translated goes on to say, *“Come with an outstretched arm to redeem us*.” I’d say that’s a pretty significant omission, especially from an evangelical and Lutheran point of view. Isn’t that really how we want Jesus to come?

Come, Lord,

with an Outstretched Arm to Redeem Us.

Rev. Neale, with his four-line limit, left that part out, but we won’t. We’ll include the omitted words, if not in the hymn, at least in the sermon. “Come with an outstretched arm to redeem us.”

I.

Our text, Is 33:22: “For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us.” Not just what he does but even the *name* of the one who comes is significant in our text—and in our hymn. The Lord, the Lord, the Lord.

In English, we sing, “O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might.” “Lord of might” is an English translation of the Hebrew Adonai. Adonai is the Hebrew name for God used here and also in the Latin version of our hymn. It’s the third most common name of God in the Old Testament, occurring, by some counts, 439 times.

Interestingly, like another name for God, Elohim, Adonai is plural. So we could, I suppose, sing, “O come, Thou *Lords* of Might.” But we don’t, any more than we translate Gen 1:1, “In the beginning, *Gods* (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth.” Why not?

Well, if anything is clear in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, it’s that there’s *one* God, not many. “You shall have *no* *other gods before me*,” Yahweh thunders from Mount Sinai in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:3). In Deut 6:4, “the Shema,” the first verse Jewish children learn from the Bible, we’re taught, “Hear, O Israel: *The Lord our God, the Lord is one*.” Then in Is 43:11, God speaks, saying, “I am the Lord, and *besides me there is no savior*.”

*Emphatically* the Bible wants us to know there is but one God. So what do we do with names of God that are plural like Elohim and Adonai in stanza 3 of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”? Well, we could do as the Jews do and just say that this is the plural of majesty.

Maybe you’ve heard Queen Elizabeth say something like, “We have decided” to do this or that. Now everyone knows there’s only one queen, but when she speaks she refers to herself as “we.” In fact, she’s so majestic, no one speaks to the queen directly with just the pronoun “you,” but indirectly as “Your majesty.”

We can certainly agree God’s name is majestic. But there’s more to it. Elohim and Adonai are plural because they reflect the revelation of *God as the Holy Trinity*, one God who always exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So when we pray in “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” for Adonai to come with an outstretched arm to deliver us, we pray that the one triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—would come to save us. And he does! In the person of Jesus Christ, Adonai comes in all the ways we pray for him to come in stanza 3.

II.

“The Lord is our king,” Isaiah says. “*O come, Thou Lord of might,” we sing. That is, h*e comes as *Ruler*. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the same God who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush joins himself to a human body in the womb of the Virgin Mary and is born in Bethlehem as King of Israel and true heir to the throne of David. And since the true Israel includes all the redeemed who make up the Church, Jew and Gentile alike, this prayer is already answered. The King born in Bethlehem to Mary rules at this very moment through his Word and Sacraments in the hearts of all who welcome him by faith.

Adonai, the Lord, comes too as *Lawgiver*: “O*n Sinai’s height, In ancient times didst give the Law, In cloud and majesty and awe.”* When he appears to Moses on Mount Sinai, Adonai reveals his Law externally. He carves it on stone slabs and hands them to Moses, who in turn brings them down the mountain for Israel to learn and obey.

But when Moses arrives back in the camp, Israel is already thumbing its collective nose at the Lord, so Moses in anger smashes the tablets, grinds them to powder, mixes the dust with water, and makes the people drink it, maybe hoping to put the fear of God into them one way or another.

If I were Moses, I think I’d have thought twice about that strategy, especially at age 80. After smashing the Ten Commandments, which God had personally engraved with his own finger, Moses doesn’t have them anymore.

He has to climb all the way back up the mountain and get another set, engraving this one himself. Either way, the Law of God on tablets of stone doesn’t seem to have much effect on God’s people. They pretty much ignore it and go their own stubborn way. What’s needed is not the Law of God written *externally* on stone, but the Law written on human hearts.

And that’s what Adonai does for us when he comes to each of us graciously and personally. When you and I are baptized into Jesus Christ, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, who gives us new life from God and the gift of faith. Alive to God through the Means of Grace—Word and Sacraments—the Holy Spirit begins writing the Law of God on our hearts. So then it’s no longer just commands and threats engraved on stone tablets or printed on paper, but rather it’s the new delight embedded in the flesh of our own renewed hearts.

Things are different, now that Adonai has come and we have been baptized into him. Now God’s Law is written on our mind and conscience. Now Adonai rules from *within* us, bringing forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Thus, a prophecy of Isaiah is partially fulfilled: “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Is 11:9). I say partially, because complete fulfillment awaits the return of Christ on the Last Day.

III.

But that doesn’t exhaust the meaning of our prayer in stanza 3 of the song. We also pray that Adonai will come with “outstretched arm and redeem us.” That’s the part that Rev. Mason’s translation leaves out, the Gospel part, the outstretched arm of the *Redeemer*. The Lord of Might terrified Moses in the burning bush and then terrified the children of Israel with threats and lightning and thunder and smoke on Mount Sinai. But this Lord of Might is also the God who just as powerfully redeems his people.

I bet you can think of some examples of the outstretched arm redeeming God’s people. In Exodus, God’s people have their backs to the sea. Pharaoh’s army and chariots are rapidly approaching to capture and return them to slavery in Egypt. They cry out to God, and the Lord instructs Moses, “Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground.” Moses does as he’s told. He stretches out his hand over the sea, “and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind . . . and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground” (Ex 14:15–16, 21–22). *That’s* the strong outstretched arm of the Lord redeeming his people.

Later, the newly freed Israelites are attacked by Amalek. Joshua and the army go out to fight, and when Moses raises his arm, the army of Israel prevails. But when his arm weakens and begins to fall, the Amalekites prevail. So Aaron and Hur bring Moses a stone to sit on and hold his arms outstretched until sundown. The Bible goes on to tell us that “Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword” (Ex 17:13). *That’s* the strong outstretched arm of the Lord redeeming his people.

But we’re not done. That was all in Old Testament times. Where do we find the strong outstretched arm of the Lord coming to redeem his people in the Gospels? I bet you know. It’s an outstretched arm that to the world looks weak and helpless. Actually, it’s two outstretched arms, beaten and bruised arms, bloody and dirty arms, arms nailed to the cross. It’s the arms of Jesus, Adonai, who has come to redeem us through the shedding of his own blood on the cross. Humiliated as a slave and common criminal, the Lord Yahweh in the person of Jesus allows himself to be crucified, that you and I might be delivered from the slavery of sin.

*That’s* the strong outstretched arm of the Lord redeeming his people, people of all ages before and after the cross, people like you and me.

One of my seminary professors, Dr. Robert Preus, once told our class about an encounter he had with a person who described himself as “born again”—you know, one of those dear people who think unless you can remember the day and hour you invited Jesus into your heart, you aren’t really a Christian. This person asked Dr. Preus, “When were you saved?” Dr. Preus thought for a moment and answered, “I was saved when in eternity past God elected me in Christ. I was saved when Jesus died for my sins on the cross. I was saved when as a baby I was baptized into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. I was saved each time I heard this again and believed. I was saved when I received the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of my sins. I will be saved when I am with Christ in heaven. And I will be saved when Jesus comes in power and glory at the end of the age to raise me and all the dead.”

I hope the person who asked Dr. Preus got the point. Being saved doesn’t depend on the moment you ask Jesus into your heart. Being saved is everything God has done for you in Christ from his electing love in eternity past to when Jesus comes in power and glory at the Last Day to raise the dead and restore his creation.

This last manifestation of Adonai’s outstretched redeeming arm we also look forward to as we sing stanza 3 of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” You and I are not in heaven yet, though we can taste it in Holy Communion when we partake of the Paschal Feast surrounded by saints and angels in heaven. And we have not yet seen Jesus come visibly in power and glory, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God, to redeem us from this fallen world and translate us into the perfect world that awaits us.

But that day will come, because it is God’s will and plan and because he answers all prayers that are asked in accordance with his will (1 Jn 5:14). Confident this is God’s will because he specifically tells us so in his written Word, we pray boldly these words, not this time in Rev. Neale’s version, but a more literal translation of the Latin:

O Adonai 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.

O Adonai, mighty Lord and Ruler of the Church, come as you have promised with outstretched arm. By the cross of Jesus and his resurrection, redeem us from all the sin, death, and darkness of this world, that we might enter the holiness, life, and light of your kingdom. In his name we pray. Amen.