A Time of Fulfillment
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Preface

Advent and Christmas invite us to reflect in new ways upon the mystery of this season. During these weeks many people feel a deep yearning to celebrate the feast so that it touches and transforms them. At the same time, they are incapable of understanding the mysteries of this season and of implementing them in their lives. People long for quiet but are unable to find peace. They want to be moved by Advent and Christmas songs, but the texts and melodies remain superficial. They would like to hear the liturgical texts in such a way that they might touch their hearts. But the words pass them by.

So I would like to offer help in this book so that readers might experience Advent more intensively and understand the mystery of Christmas better. The book that follows has two parts: one for Advent and one for Christmas.

For Advent I have decided to focus on the O-Antiphons. These antiphons, for the last seven days of Advent before Christmas Eve, continue to move me year after year. I have meditated on them, so that you, dear reader,
might understand these wonderful ancient texts and intuit in them the mystery of Advent. In the process I have focused on two antiphons for each week of Advent and have given concrete suggestions how, with rituals and exercises, you might implement the messages of the antiphons in your own life.

For the feast of Christmas I have tried to interpret the biblical texts that deal with Christmas. We hear these texts at Christmas time, but sometimes they remain foreign or distant. So it is good to consult these biblical texts for their claims about Christmas. This will take us not only through the three gospels that deal with Christmas—Matthew, Luke and John, but I will also take a look at the messages of the Letter of Titus and in the Letter to the Hebrews, the biblical letters we read at Christmas, a time when many people have the chance to read. So it is meaningful to read and meditate on the texts we have heard during the Christmas season to grasp more fully their true messages.

I wish you, dear reader, a blessed Advent and Christmas season. I hope that these texts move you and bring Christ into your heart, so that he might be born in you, and renew, illuminate, and heal your life.

Anselm Grün, OSB
PART 1
Advent Season

The Message of the O-Antiphons
The O-Antiphons

Imagining Christ in Song

From the seventh century the O-Antiphons have been sung at Vespers (Evening Prayer) during the last seven days before Christmas. They all begin with the salutation, “O.”

The O-Antiphons, sung before Mary’s song of praise (the Magnificat), are songs full of yearning. In them we celebrate mysterious images in song. For centuries these antiphons have touched the hearts of monks, as well as others who have immersed themselves in the wonderful words and melodies.

The O-Antiphons describe God, using various traits and images taken from the Old Testament. At first these images referred only to God, but they were applied to Jesus Christ from the beginning of the antiphon tradition. They say something about the mystery of God but also about the mystery of Jesus Christ. In the O-Antiphons the art of interpreting Old Testament text as images for the coming of Jesus Christ into the world becomes apparent. We also see how the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ has been made visible in these old images.
Images open windows through which we can see realities formerly hidden from us. Images want to infuse themselves into us and to change us from the inside out. The images of the O-Antiphons, as Meister Eckhart, the late medieval mystic, once said, are meant to impress Christ within us so that we may also express Christ, so that Christ may become audible and visible in this world through our thoughts, speech, and actions.

These images reveal to us the mystery of God and of his incarnate Son. The O-Antiphons also describe God’s actions with words and images of the Old Testament.

Each O-Antiphon closes with the plea, “Come.” With this appeal for the coming of God in Jesus Christ, the antiphon includes one of seven requests that correspond to seven ancient human longings. If God comes in the person of Jesus Christ, then God will free, save, heal, and illuminate us. We ask that God accomplish in us everything we long for in the depths of our souls.

The O-Antiphons are sung in a special way. They are heard in the second mode, which in the tradition is the mode of young women. Here it is the tone of longing, which takes the singer to the extreme and then concludes with an inner call for the coming of the Lord.

The cantor in our Münsterschwarzach Abbey who had taught me Gregorian chant in the novitiate once told us that the first monks of the abbey (reestablished in 1913) did not have much of a sense of the details of chant. They had to devote themselves first of all to the external building needs of the abbey. But they sang the O-Antiphons of the last days of Advent with a special fervor. They conveyed the idea to the young monks of
the time that these antiphons should be sung slowly and solemnly.

Today the great bell of the abbey church rings during the O-Antiphons in order to announce the mystery of these songs. These O-Antiphons are sung in a special order. On the 17th of December the abbot intones the first antiphon, on the 18th the prior intones the second, and then the oldest confrere, and the next oldest, and so on. It is an honor to intone these antiphons. Vespers are celebrated on these days with liturgical vestments. During the Magnificat the altar is incensed.

Each year I feel how mysteriously the O-Antiphons move me. They touch my Advent longing. The meaning of Advent is given expression in them. So in this book I would like to reflect on the O-Antiphons, first for myself so that I can sing them more consciously and understand them more deeply. But I would also like to consider them in such a way that you, dear readers, may feel addressed and may experience in these words the mystery of Advent.

The O-Antiphons are sung from the 17th to the 23rd of December. I want to elucidate them in such a way that they may accompany us and clarify the meaning of Advent during the entire season. For this reason I would like to reflect on two antiphons for each of the first three weeks and one antiphon for the final week. The texts and images can then guide us and open to us the mystery of Advent each week, which closes then with suggestions for the week.

There are seven O-Antiphons. The liturgy loves the number seven. There are seven sacraments, seven gifts
of the Holy Spirit, seven consolations, and seven days of the week. Seven is the number of transformation. Thus is hidden in the number seven of the O-Antiphons a kind of longing that our lives will be transformed by the coming of Jesus Christ and that we will be penetrated more and more by his spirit. Human transformation brought about by the seven sacraments should also be brought about by the O-Antiphons. Singing the mystery-filled words and images allows the image of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Savior, to be implanted in us ever more deeply.

Advent season is characterized not only by the desire and appeal that Jesus might come again once and for all, to call the whole world back into his kingdom and to bring about the end of the world. More importantly it has to do with the desire that Jesus come to us here and now in order to enter into us and to fill us with his spirit.

Singing the O-Antiphons creates the concrete place where Christ knocks at the door of our hearts in order to find entrance into us. In our singing he comes to us. When we sing these antiphons we need not believe everything we sing, but, in our singing, faith takes shape. In our singing, Christ fills us. All we need to do is to let him in. Reflecting on the words and images prepares us to let Christ himself enter into us.

Advent points toward the arrival of Christ—at every moment. But it also means the ultimate return of Christ. However, this ultimate arrival happens not at the end of the world, but in the death of each individual. In
death the world comes to an end for us. In death Jesus comes to us in an ultimate way in order to permeate and transform us forever with his spirit. He wants to transform us once and for all into that unique image that God has made for each of us.

In our singing of the O-Antiphons, something of this transformation is already taking place, as images of Jesus Christ are built up within us and “build” us; they form and shape us more and more in the image of Jesus Christ.

The Church Fathers interpreted the word from the Book of Genesis in this way:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” (Gen 1:26)

We are all an image, an icon, of God. It is our task to become ever more like this unique image of God. If we do, we will become the persons God himself imagined.

Our singing of the images of Christ in the O-Antiphons allows them to implant themselves ever more deeply in us so that we become more and more like the image of Christ and the unique image of God in each of us.

A Weekly Ritual during the Advent Season

In many families it is a tradition on Saturday evening—the vigil of each Sunday of Advent—to sit down around the Advent wreath, to light the appropriate candles, and to sing an Advent song. A good ritual for the Advent season would be to combine the lighting of
the candles on the Advent wreath with a reading—or, if possible, the singing—of an O-Antiphon.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is grasped in spoken images in the O-Antiphons. It is good to first of all reflect on the meaning of the Advent wreath before we turn to the O-Antiphons. The Advent wreath is not only an external decoration. In it a deeper meaning lies hidden.

In antiquity the wreath was a crown of victory. The Advent wreath promises that our lives will be successful. The round form of the wreath shows that our inner brokenness will be mended and that our sharp and brittle parts will be smoothed out. The wreath is also the promise that the family, which sometimes threatens to fall apart, will now reunite around the candles we light on the Advent wreath. This light now shines within us all.

The Bible speaks often about the wreath. I would like to limit myself to a few New Testament verses. Saint Paul, for example, compares our lives with that of an athlete who lives a life of abstinence in order to obtain the victory wreath:

Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. (1 Cor 9:25)

The Advent wreath refers to the victory wreath (crown), which does not wither through death, but rather remains eternal, because God himself places it on our heads.
The Second Letter of Timothy takes up this image:

From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Tim 4:8)

This is an Advent text. During Advent we all wait for the appearance of Jesus Christ—not only at the end of the world, but also here and now. When Jesus enters my heart, he crowns me with the wreath of righteousness; everything in me is set right, everything becomes right and just. Thus I become just in my very being, and I can live honestly and genuinely.

Also, the message of the First Letter of Peter to his readers sounds like an Advent promise:

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. (1 Pet 5:4)

The Advent wreath makes us aware of the coming of Jesus. In the death of every person it is not anxiety that meets us, but rather the chief shepherd, the shepherd who has already led us to green pastures. It is the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ himself. And he will crown us with a wreath of glory that will not fade. Not only a wreath of justice but also of glory, it shows us the beauty of the original image in which God has made each of us. Its glory will not be taken away from us in death but instead will shine in its true radiance.

The Letter of James places the wreath into our everyday lives. It will protect us. The wreath is the promise
that we will not lose ourselves in the hazards of daily life but rather stand firm:

   Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. (Jas 1:12)

   The wreath of life has already been promised to us—under the condition that we stand firm and love God in our daily lives. The one who loves God has already received the crown of life and he experiences what true life is like—it is happier than the life of those who shine only outwardly. The image of the wreath also appears often in the Book of Revelation. The Seer urges us to be true until death:

   I will give you the crown of life. (Rev 2:10)

   The 24 elders who stand before the throne of God wear golden wreaths on their heads. (cf. Revelation 4:4) They symbolize to us the glory that awaits us in death. The wreath refers to Mary and to Jesus. The liturgy has interpreted this passage in Revelation as referring to Mary:

   A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. (Rev 12:1)

   This description refers also to us when we, in faith, like Mary, come to depend completely on God.
Jesus himself wears a golden crown:

Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand! (Rev 14:14)

When Christ lives in us—when we receive Christ at communion or when we imagine in our meditations that he is within us—we wear a golden crown with him. This crown makes clear that no one rules over us, but instead we have become truly free in Christ. Examining the Advent wreath in the light of these biblical texts can strengthen our faith. In faith we are already wearing a crown. In faith we trust that we will overcome obstacles in life and that our coming together as a family will be blessed.

On Saturday evening—on the vigil of each Advent Sunday—one more candle is lit on the Advent wreath. When this happens we should reflect on the symbolism of the different candles, each of which has its own meaning:

The first candle expresses our longing for unity. I yearn to be one with myself, content with my life story, but also to be one with God.

The second candle refers to a polarity—between man and woman, between young and old, or between light and darkness. All opposites within me will be illuminated; the conflicts within our families will also be filled with light. These opposites will not lead to discord as
they do in many families. When all polarities are filled with light, they strengthen the light for us all.

The third candle symbolizes a kind of trinity. We have within, three parts: body, soul and spirit—or head, heart and belly. All three parts are to be illuminated by the light of Christ. Thus the promise is fulfilled that Jesus gave in the Gospel of Luke:

“If then your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays.” (Luke 11:36)

We ourselves become light for others.

The fourth candle refers to earthly things and everyday life. Four stands for the four elements and thus for things of the earth, the world and everyday life. Our daily lives and their mundane activities are to be filled with the light of Christ. When our daily life reflects the light of Christ, the light in our house will become brighter. Everything will gradually be illuminated by his light.

That is the promise of the Advent wreath, until we celebrate the light at Christmas that shines forth from the child in the manger.

The evangelist John says:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:9, 14)
The Advent wreath and its four candles express what will be developed in the images of the seven O-Antiphons. I would like then to connect the interpretation of the O-Antiphons with each of the respective weeks of Advent.
First Week of Advent

The first week of Advent has to do with the movement from busyness to peace. If we want to celebrate the arrival of Jesus, we must first of all arrive at home within ourselves. We must—as the first candle makes clear—become one with ourselves and find harmony within ourselves. Only then are we able to become one with Christ.

Advent is the time of our arrival within, of coming to peace and of reaching our center. If we have arrived within ourselves, then the word of God can also arrive to touch our hearts.

The first two antiphons describe this coming of God in Jesus Christ as revelation and liberation. They address important longings that arise within us whenever we try to become quiet.

In quiet, things become clearer to us. We yearn for inner freedom. We ourselves will begin to live instead of our lives being lived for us.
O Sapientia—O Wisdom

O Sapiéntia, quæ ex ore Altíssimi prodísti, attingens a fine usque ad finem, fórtiter suavitérque dispónens ómnia: veni ad docéndum nos viam prudéntiæ.

O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and reaching from the beginning to end, you ordered all things mightily and sweetly: Come, and teach us the way of prudence.

The Old Testament understands wisdom as something that issues forth from God. Wisdom itself is God and, at the same time, that which comes from God and streams out toward God’s people. Often it is represented as an independent force, or even as a person.

In the prologue to his gospel, John the Evangelist answers the older Wisdom texts with his discourse about the word of God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

In a similar way, in the Book of Proverbs, wisdom speaks of itself:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (Prov 8:22-23)

Everything has come about through the wisdom of God. Already in the beginning it was with God. And God himself is wisdom.
The Book of Sirach expresses it in a similar way. Both books—the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Sirach—are Wisdom Books. They have joined the wisdom of Israel with the wisdom of Greece and Egypt and have collected sayings that summarize the wisdom of the peoples. In both books wisdom is seen as a person who emanates from God. This is what wisdom says in the Book of Sirach:

"I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss." (Sir 24:3-5)

The first O-Antiphon refers to these scripture texts when it says, "O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High." Wisdom is from God and is God. The antiphon relates wisdom to Jesus Christ. In him the wisdom of God is concentrated. He has become wisdom for us. Paul speaks of the wisdom of the cross that undermines the wisdom of the world. For those who believe,

Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:24)

Jesus fulfills our longing to be wise. Jesus is the wisdom of God become man. When we look to him, we see more deeply: We understand our own lives and we understand deeper connections in the world.
The first O-Antiphon describes this wisdom: “You reach from one end of the world to the other, in power and gentleness you order all things.” Wisdom dwells in the whole world. Everything that has been created has been created through wisdom and permeated with wisdom. Everywhere in creation we meet the wisdom of God, realized in God’s becoming human in a new way in Jesus Christ. Through wisdom God touches all of creation.

Advent is not only an event between God and humans; it also happens on a cosmic scale. When God comes to earth in his Son, the cosmos itself changes. The divine seed is planted in the earth. The earth is no longer without God. It is permeated by God’s wisdom.

Not only wisdom but ultimately love too permeates all things. Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit and naturalist, speaks of the “amorization” of the cosmos. In God’s becoming human in Jesus Christ, God permeates the whole world. Everywhere—in people, plants, animals, in matter itself, we come into contact with this love made human.

The antiphon proclaims that wisdom, which is love, orders everything in power and gentleness. This event is brought to completion in Jesus Christ, who brings together the poles of power and gentleness. He is full of dynamis, full of the power of the Holy Spirit. He preaches with such a power that demons must retreat. But he orders the world and its people in gentleness as well. He treats people gently, especially broken people. He heals their wounded hearts. He surrounds them with
his gentleness so that they will treat themselves gently instead of denying or judging themselves.

We yearn for Jesus to bring together power and gentleness in us. We want to emerge with power before others, to form our lives with power, to lead our company, to bring something about in our parish or in society. But we do not want to use the kind of power that will run over and suppress others. That’s why power needs gentleness or mildness. The word “mild” comes from the word “to mill” and means to make fine and tender. We should live with others tenderly and affectionately, to see and work with them as precious people.

In Latin the opposites, power and gentleness, are rendered as fortiter et suaviter. It means powerful ordering, but also pleasant, sweet, mild, and delightful dealings with people and things. Whoever deals with others suaviter also awakes in them their tender and delicate sides. Whoever deals with things in this way handles them—as Benedict of Nursia demands of the cellarer—as something precious, as sacred instruments of the altar. (cf. Rule of Benedict 31:10)

Which wisdom does the Bible refer to? In this instance language can give us a clue. The Greek word for wisdom, sophia, means that wise people have healthy senses and that they perceive things as they are. It assumes that people do not falsify things, that they do not project their own needs into things.

The Latin word sapientia comes from sapere, which means “to taste.” For Latin people that person is wise
who has good taste and who tastes things as they are. Those people are wise who can taste and accept themselves, the ones who can find reconciliation within. Because they can taste themselves, a pleasant flavor also emanates from them. When we speak with them, we experience a pleasant flavor without a bitter aftertaste.

The word wisdom is related to the Latin word *vidi*, which is translated as “I have seen.” Wisdom is seeing but seeing things as they are. It consists of looking more deeply and seeing things in their essence in order to see the mystery of things. Seeing in such a way is a contemplative seeing that ultimately sees God in all things.

We ask for the wisdom of God with deep yearning. The human spirit inevitably experiences darkness and bewilderment. Today we are often bewildered because we are offered so many varieties of wisdom. It is hard to find our way through all of this. We do not know whom to follow or whom to trust. We often see only superficially when we see all the facts reported to us by the media.

But how should we interpret and understand the facts? We long for God himself to come in Jesus Christ. We hope that he will reveal to us the way of wisdom and insight.

In the Latin version we ask that he teach us the way of prudence, *prudentia*. Prudence is different from wisdom. But they belong together. Prudence is the ability to decide things correctly. Amid the many spiritual and ideological recommendations that are given to us daily,
Advent Season

we need prudence to be able to decide which path will truly lead to life.

In our translation we hear the words wisdom and insight. We yearn for God himself to come into our world and to lead us in the way of wisdom. Only when he shows us the way can we then follow him in his ways. But it also has to do with the light God has given us so that we can see more clearly. This is the only way we can have a deeper insight into the interconnectedness of the world and also of our own lives. We would like to look into the incomprehensibility of our world and the reason for our lives.

In these times when everyone speaks his opinion and declares that he has found the solution to all the problems of the world, we long for the clarity that God himself gives us. Advent is the promise that God himself—the source of all wisdom—will come to us and teach us how we should proceed on our way. Along along with the eclipse of God’s image that we experience today, we yearn that God might illuminate our seeing and show us his friendly face.

In this first week of Advent, as we become quiet and arrive at peace, we will also long to see clearly and to gain a deeper insight into the mystery of our lives. We want to peer into our own souls, which we often do not understand because they are so unsettled. Our emotions change constantly because we are overcome with fear, resentment and jealousy and cannot see our way clear. Wisdom helps us to perceive the origins of these emotions and to see things more clearly.
O Adonai—O Lord

O Adonáï et Dux domus Israel, qui Móysi in igne flammæ rubi apparuisti, et ei in Sina legem dedísti: veni ad rediméndum nos in brácchio exténto.

O Adonai and Ruler the house of Israel, you appeared to Moses in the flame of the burning bush, and on Mount Sinai gave him your law. Come, and with an outstretched arm redeem us.

The Jews had such a resistance to uttering the name of God that they used other names instead. One of the names was Adonai, which means “Lord.” God revealed himself in the thorn bush as

“I AM WHO I AM.” (Exod 3:14)

This experience was so sacred for the Jews that they did not trust themselves to utter the name. With the name Adonai, God is seen as Lord and king over all the nations. With this name the second Antiphon calls on God. God is Lord and leader of the House of Israel. In his revealing of himself in the thorn bush God says to Moses,

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and
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honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.”
(Exod 3:7-8)

Our God is a God who sees the suffering of his people. That is the assurance of Advent: God sees our need, our sadness and our doubt. He sees our inner taskmasters who push us to become faster and better, to achieve more, to become more perfect, and to look good to everyone else. These taskmasters oppress and overextend us. As Lord and leader of his people, God is also our liberator. When God rules inside of us, others stop ruling us. We are no longer ruled by our needs and passions. When God rules inside of us we become truly free. Christmas is the fulfillment of the promise God made to Moses in the burning bush. At Christmas God actually comes down to us to become one of us. At Christmas he wants to move into our hearts in order to rule there and to free us from all other secret rulers who have established themselves there.

In Advent we acknowledge again and again that God sees us. In one of the Vesper hymns we sing:

Full of compassion you see your world threatened by ruin and death. You take on the world’s misery and you heal what guilt has corrupted.

Because God sees us, he descends to meet us. Or as Luke expresses in his beautiful Benedictus, God visits us to give us salvation, redemption and healing. Because of his merciful love God will visit us as a light radiating from above (cf. Lk 1:78).
As in those times when Israel was oppressed in Egypt, God looks down to us today from above. He sees what we are suffering from, how we are not understood by those who surround us, how we reside in a foreign land, and how everything has become cold around us. Advent is a longing for God to come to us: in our foreign land, our suffering, and our cold. Then our foreign land will become a home. Together with him we will move from alienation to a place where we feel at home.

The second O-Antiphon tells of a God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and who gave him the law on the mountain. Both are healing acts of God. In his appearance in the thorn bush God heals Moses, who had experienced himself as a failure. He had to flee into a foreign land. He had the feeling of being dried up, of living on the margin, and of being worthless. The thorn bush is an image of this worthlessness. But it is in this thorn bush that God appears to Moses—in a flame that shoots out of the bush.

Moses looks more closely:

The bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. (Exod 3:2)

The Church Fathers related this paradox to Mary, who gives birth to God and is not consumed. But the thorn bush is also a wonderful image for us. When God enflames us with his fire, we burn without being consumed. We remain completely human—with all our failures and weaknesses. And yet in God’s becoming human we are filled with divine love. We remain weak
and frail people, but we also become a place for God who wants to shine forth within us in our foreign land, in the homelessness we suffer as Moses did, as he shines forth in Jesus Christ.

For the Israelites, the giving of the commandments on the mountain is a healing act of God. The Israelites understood the law as a guide to freedom. God’s laws were wise laws for which they were grateful. With his commandments God made it possible for the Israelites to live with one another in peace and inner and outer freedom.

With his laws God also shows us a way to succeed in life. Before God reveals the Ten Commandments to Moses he says,

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Exod 20:2)

The commandments are the custodians of the freedom into which God led his people out of the house of bondage. God gave us commandments so that we will no longer become slaves to our own needs or to other rulers. With God’s commandments we can awaken and live our lives with open eyes.

In the appeal that he come to us, we ask the God of liberation and healing, “O come and free us with your outstretched arms.” All of Advent is this appeal to God that he come and free us from our entanglements. We are entangled in difficult relationships. We are caught up in the hurts of the past. We feel bound by the neces-
sity to function in society. And we feel bound by inner fears that often load us down with senselessness—for example, the person who is afraid of driving home the same way. She believes he has to make a detour because she is afraid that otherwise something bad will happen.

Today we are burdened by many fears that take away our freedom. We ask that God free us from all these chains. And we ask that God lead us out of the land of alienation and enslavement where we are always adjusting ourselves to the expectations of others.

Advent is the time when we long for true freedom. We trust that the coming of God in the birth of his Son will lead us into this freedom.

In the Latin we hear at this point of the outstretched arm—*in brachio extento*. We ask that God stretch out his arm to free us. May he not simply watch as we fail. In Jesus Christ we ask that he show his power to us. May he appear powerfully in this world so that all people and things that have claimed power may become powerless and that we may live honest and free lives.

**Suggestions**

Dear reader, during the first week of Advent let these images of wisdom and the burning bush accompany you. Wisdom is the deeper knowledge of things. People have yearned for it for ages. They have wanted to see more deeply, to see through things, to see clearly, to know the origin of things. Consciously walk through the streets with the eyes of wisdom, and then listen
deeply in your hearts. Is what I see true reality? Should we be occupying ourselves with hectic activity? Or is this the expression of a deeper restlessness, ultimately the restlessness Saint Augustine spoke of: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you, my God”?

When you walk through the countryside, try to look more deeply so that you see the wisdom of God at work in everything. Trust that everything you see has been created and formed by the word of God. The Word of God, which wants to become flesh at Christmas, enters the world in this new way in order to be the innermost cause of all things.

Take the image of the burning bush, dear reader, and meditate on it. Sit down in a comfortable chair and notice your breath and how it flows through your whole body. Then imagine: I am the burning thorn bush. I am dried up, restless, empty, disappointed by life. I am at the edge of all that is happening in the world. I am not playing a role in the world. And yet I am in the place where God’s glory shines forth.