



DECEMBER 18
O ADONAI

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*O sacred Lord of ancient Israel,
who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush,
who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain:
come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.*

The Messianic title “Adonai” contains within it an aura of mystery that cannot be easily unpacked. Even the ancient Church had difficulties pinning down its exact meaning; rather than try to translate it into Latin, the writers retained the Hebrew title for this particular antiphon:

*O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel,
qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti,
et ei in Sina legem dedisti:
veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

Most frequently translated as “Lord,” the word “Adonai” was used by the people of Israel as a substitute for the unutterable name of God, revealed to Moses from the burning bush. When the Hebrew people spoke the title “Adonai,” they did so out of reverence for God, for the very name of God, for the One who said to Moses, “I am the God of your father . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6a). When Moses heard these words, Scripture says, he “hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6b).

How astonishing it is that the same God from whom Moses hid his face would choose to redeem us by “[revealing] his sacred face” in Jesus—by becoming an infant, One on whom shepherds gazed in rapt wonder.

How incredible it is that this God—Adonai—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would come to deliver us not from the hands of Pharaoh but from our sins, from death itself. How marvelous it is that this same God who spoke from the burning bush and lay wordless in a manger continues to humble himself even further, coming to his people under the appearance of bread and wine each and every time the Mass is celebrated.

Yet how often do we speak the titles “Lord” or “God” out of reverence, as a prayer of gratitude for this divine work of redemption, as St. Thomas did when he encountered the risen Christ and cried out, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)? How often instead do we use these titles casually, or worse, as expressions of frustration or anger? As we move ever closer to Christmas, when Adonai will be revealed in an infant and called by the name Jesus, perhaps we can cultivate within our hearts a renewed reverence for the name of him who is our Lord and God, and resolve henceforth to speak his name only out of the deepest gratitude and love.