

Looking to Advent as we grieve our COVID-19 dead

Lament and longing can be companions.

From the Editors in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue



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In her 1993 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison meditated on what language can and can't do. It can't, she said, "pin down" anything. Instead, language reaches. "Its force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable. Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting, or refusing to sanctify, whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet—the choice word, the chosen silence—unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction."

[In this issue](#), we've asked several writers to reflect on the loss of those killed by COVID-19. These words have been written for the specific task that Morrison lays

out: to reach toward the ineffable. How do we talk about the deaths of more than a million people worldwide and hundreds of thousands in the United States? What words do we have to speak about the deaths of our neighbors, our grandparents, those we knew and those who were strangers to us? How do we honor those who are working around the clock to save lives, find solutions, care for the sick? Can words help us? Can we use the power of language to aid, encourage, and heal?

Advent is a particularly compelling time to attempt this reach. During Advent, often called the little Lent, Christians meditate on the world as it is and the world as it might be. We enter a period of self-reflection—not just about our individual selves but also about our social body and the fabric that holds us together. In Advent we are pointed beyond the present moment and our small selves toward the bigger story of which we are a part.

The O Antiphons, known most widely in the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” have been sung by Christians during Advent since the eighth century. Each antiphon contains both a name for Christ and a call for God to break into the world. Each one is a message of both longing and hope that speaks during a time when the sunlight dims and we wait for new light to dawn.

In this issue, poet Diane Tucker offers us [40 new O Antiphons](#), each one crafted to speak into our current realities—realities that include both deep lament and hope in the ordinariness of our struggles.

Lament and longing are constant companions. During Advent, we long for the Messiah. We long for a world reconciled, healed, and whole. This year, we long for simpler things too: to be able to meet together again in person, to send our children to school, to pick up pieces of our work that we’ve had to set down.

Come, the traditional O Antiphons beckon, even demand. Come to a world that needs healing. Come and save us. “Be,” as Tucker writes, “God of all Tomorrows.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Lament and longing.”