

# Christ in Our Home

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January, February, March  
2024

**LARGE PRINT EDITION**



# **Prayers**

## **Morning**

Creator God, who set the stars in their places and directs the course of the planets; who robed this earth with a thin garment of air, making it a haven of beauty and life; who breathed into each of us the breath of life: We thank you for the gift of air. Create in us such a sense of wonder and delight in this and in all your gifts that we receive them with gratitude, care for them with love, and generously share them with all your creatures, to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen. (ACS, p. 47)

## **Peace**

You calm and quiet us, eternal God, as a mother bird holds her children close; all people have refuge in the shadow of your wings. Spread over us the shelter of your peace. Hold before us the wisdom of your cross, where we are drawn to you not by might or power, but by your boundless love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ACS, p. 48)

# Christ in Our Home

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Heidi Hyland Mann, Linnea Peterson, and Julie O'Brien, editors

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# Lesser festivals and commemorations

*Bold type indicates a festival. Plain type indicates a commemoration.*

- Jan. 1**      **Name of Jesus**
- Jan. 2      Johann Konrad Wilhelm Loehe, renewer of the church, 1872
- Jan. 15     Martin Luther King Jr., renewer of society, martyr, 1968
- Jan. 17     Antony of Egypt, renewer of the church, c. 356; Pachomius, renewer of the church, 346
- Jan. 18**     **Confession of Peter; Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins**
- Jan. 19     Henry, Bishop of Uppsala, martyr, 1156
- Jan. 21     Agnes, martyr, c. 304
- Jan. 25**     **Conversion of Paul; Week of Prayer for Christian Unity ends**
- Jan. 26     Timothy, Titus, and Silas, missionaries
- Jan. 27     Lydia, Dorcas, and Phoebe, witnesses to the faith
- Jan. 28     Thomas Aquinas, teacher, 1274
- Feb. 2**      **Presentation of Our Lord**
- Feb. 3      Ansgar, Bishop of Hamburg, missionary to Denmark and Sweden, 865
- Feb. 5      The Martyrs of Japan, 1597
- Feb. 14     Cyril, monk, 869; Methodius, bishop, 885; missionaries to the Slavs
- Feb. 18     Martin Luther, renewer of the church, 1546
- Feb. 23     Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, martyr, 156
- Feb. 25     Elizabeth Fedde, deaconess, 1921
- Mar. 1      George Herbert, hymnwriter, 1633
- Mar. 2      John Wesley, 1791; Charles Wesley, 1788; renewers of the church
- Mar. 7      Perpetua and Felicity and companions, martyrs at Carthage, 202
- Mar. 10     Harriet Tubman, 1913; Sojourner Truth, 1883; renewers of society
- Mar. 12     Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, 604
- Mar. 17     Patrick, bishop, missionary to Ireland, 461
- Mar. 19**     **Joseph, Guardian of Jesus**
- Mar. 21     Thomas Cranmer, Bishop of Canterbury, martyr, 1556
- Mar. 22     Jonathan Edwards, teacher, missionary to American Indians, 1758
- Mar. 24     Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Bishop of El Salvador, martyr, 1980
- Mar. 25**     **Annunciation of Our Lord**
- Mar. 29     Hans Nielsen Hauge, renewer of the church, 1824
- Mar. 31     John Donne, poet, 1631

## Writers

*January 1–15* Tim Brown is a father, writer, runner, and pastor who loves good stories. He helps people raise money to fuel their missions, pastors an online community, and generally thinks people mean well despite their actions. Often found with a cup of coffee in his hand, he attempts to read and write things that are interesting.

*January 16–30* Jonette Blakney is a pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Parkland, Washington, and lives in Gig Harbor with her spouse, Mitch. She has three children and three grandchildren. Jonette serves on the board of Pacific Lutheran University and loves to sail, run, hike, cook, and spend time with family.

*January 31–February 14* Mary Lindberg serves the ELCA as a pastor and writer/editor. She and her husband have two grown daughters and live in Seattle, Washington. They attend St. John United Lutheran Church.

February 15–29 David L. Miller leads retreats for the Christos Center for Spiritual Formation, Lino Lakes, Minnesota, specializing in the spirituality of Ignatius Loyola. He is the author of *Friendship with Jesus: A Way to Pray the Gospel of Mark* and blogs at [prayingthemystery.blogspot.com](http://prayingthemystery.blogspot.com). David and his wife, Dixie, live in Downers Grove, Illinois.

*March 1–15* Mary Simonson Clark's career journey includes occupational therapy, social work, and theology. She writes, mentors, researches, advocates, and crafts. She and her partner have lived in Boston, Buffalo, and Chicago, but Mary's glad to be back in Minnesota, where their two daughters graduated and where they have a preschool grandchild.

*March 16–31* Jennifer M. Ginn, of Salisbury, North Carolina, is a retired pastor who enjoys writing, coaching, biblical storytelling, and occasional preaching. She is blessed daily by a husband who loves to cook and by two furry children—a Jack Russell terrier and a moody yellow cat.

## **Name of Jesus**

### **And he was called Jesus. (v. 21)**

What's the story behind your name? What are the stories surrounding your surname, or family name?

Names can hold so much within them. They can be reflective of our lineage and family history. They can embody the hopes and dreams of our parents or those who named us. They can even give clues that indicate the year we were born, as names go in and out of popularity. And sadly, some in this world go nameless—at least at times—because of lack of love, care, or concern.

The scriptures contain many names for God: Jehovah, Father, and Mothering Hen, just to name a few. Jesus is named not for his earthly family, but to reflect who the Divine is. The name *Jesus* in Hebrew means “God saves” or “God is salvation,” and that is exactly what Jesus will do and be.

What does your name mean? What does your name mean to *you*? Whatever your name is, know that in Christ, God has named you Beloved.

**Holy One, you name us Beloved through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Thank you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are ignored or overlooked in this world

**Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7**

## **Right relationships**

**And a harvest of righteousness is sown  
in peace for those who make peace. (v. 18)**

*Righteousness* can be a confusing word and is seldom used outside matters of religion and faith. Righteousness is often equated with “perfection.” While that is not totally off the mark, it doesn’t quite describe how the word is used in the Bible.

Righteousness within the scriptures isn’t so much about an individual person as it is about relationships: people in relation to God, one another, creation, and objects like money. Perhaps the best definition of righteousness is “being in right relationship.”

Having right relationships in all facets of life is impossible if left up to us alone. But through baptism we are made inheritors of Christ’s own righteousness. As the key to all other doorways, Christ’s righteousness empowers us to grow toward right relationships with all others. To do so, we will draw on what James calls “the wisdom from above,” which is peaceable, gentle, merciful, and full of good fruits (v. 17).

**God of all, by your righteousness help us  
to be in right relationships in this life,  
especially with you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Struggling relationships

**Psalm 148; Proverbs 1:1-7**

## **Arise and shine!**

### **Arise, shine; for your light has come. (v. 1)**

What gets your attention? In these days of constant distractions from social media, phones, a nonstop news cycle, and the stresses of modern life, our attention is at something of a premium, yes? So, what grabs you amid the cacophony and clutter?

The prophet Isaiah calls us to attention. On the heels of Christmas, we prepare for the Epiphany of Our Lord, God's miraculous revelation through the person of Jesus. But we are to do more than just pay attention. The prophet reminds us that we are to reflect to others the light we see in Christ, shining brightly amid the shadows of this world.

God is trying to get our attention, cutting through the noise of everything else in this moment. Christ is calling out for us to follow him and walk alongside others in this world—especially those who are hurting or in need—and to reflect his divine love.

In other words, let's pay attention and shine!

**Holy Dawn rising among us, get our attention so we may shine with your love. In Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People challenged by distractions

**Psalm 110; Proverbs 1:20-33; James 4:1-10**



## **That we may be a godsend**

**[God] delivers the needy when they call. (v. 12)**

Perhaps at different times in your life you have had a particular person you reached out to when you were in need—a friend, family member, pastor, counselor. For whom are *you* that person?

In the Christmas story we hear that God responds to humanity's cry of "Lord, have mercy!" and sends us a Savior. His birth is both the fulfillment of divine promises and the continuation of God's ever-present movement in the world. From the beginning, God has been about delivering humanity: lavishing care and grace on Adam and Eve hiding in shame in the garden, delivering the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and the exiles from Babylon, and in Jesus, delivering us all from sin and death. Whenever we are in need, God helps and saves us.

One of the most tangible ways God delivers us is through friends and communities who show up when we're at our lowest. And when *we* respond to people in such need, we literally become a *godsend* to them. You may be exactly who God is sending to help someone today.

**Savior, thank you for answering our calls for help.  
Empower us to answer the calls of others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in need today

**Psalm 110; Proverbs 3:1-12; James 4:11-17**

## **Mysterious, expansive love**

**The mystery was made known to me . . .  
that is, the Gentiles have become  
fellow heirs . . . in Christ. (vv. 3, 6)**

Who doesn't love a good mystery? Millions of dollars go into providing movie plot twists, and hours of typing are spent working out a novel's surprise ending.

Yet with our twenty-first-century ears, we might be underwhelmed by the mystery Paul talks about in his letter to the church at Ephesus. We must remember that the first Christian movement consisted largely of people with roots in the Jewish faith. It was the apostle Paul who introduced to the early church the notion that non-Jewish people could also be followers of Christ.

The mystery Paul speaks of here is not one of conversion, but rather of expansive love. He proclaims that God has shown him that the divine love we see in Jesus moves beyond all boundaries, even those of family, heritage, and religious background. God's love is broader than we can imagine!

Thanks be to God for that.

**Thank you, Great Mystery, for including me in your  
family of beloved children. In Christ I pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People excluded by others

**Psalm 110; Proverbs 22:1-9; Luke 6:27-31**

## **Epiphany of Our Lord**

**They left for their own country  
by another road. (v. 12)**

Today the church honors the visitation of the magi, those wandering wise ones who offered gifts upon meeting the Christ child. Though they're often referred to as kings, it's probably more accurate to call them wizards or sorcerers. Which makes me wonder if their gifts—to which the church attributes symbolic meaning: gold for royalty, incense for priestly service, myrrh for burial—were implements used in their magic. After all, an encounter with the Divine and a change of heart often lead one to give up something and live differently.

It's no surprise that the Gospel of Matthew notes that the magi went home "by another road." Certainly, much of that had to do with being warned of Herod's plans. But did they take another road in a metaphorical sense too? Their encounter with Jesus changed them, so of course they didn't return the same way they had come.

How do encounters with Jesus change the paths you take through life?

**Gracious One, encounter us today so that we might  
be changed by your presence. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in the midst of difficult changes

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12**



## **Baptism of Our Lord**

**In those days Jesus came from  
Nazareth of Galilee. (v. 9)**

“In those days . . .” is how the writer of Mark begins the story of Jesus. “Those days” is a pretty familiar refrain; we’ve all had “one of those days,” haven’t we? A day when nothing seemed to go as planned. A day when the other shoe dropped. A day when our world was turned upside down. On “one of those days” God sent the Christ to show us a new way to live *all* of our days.

But why did Jesus have to be baptized if he was without sin? What’s the point of a baptism for the forgiveness of sin, if there is nothing to forgive? Perhaps Jesus entered the waters of baptism not for repentance, but for solidarity with us. What if the Christ stands with humanity right where we are, no matter how we are, and can fully understand “one of those days” by doing so?

Jesus “gets” our good days and bad days alike. As a result, he can lead us out of brokenness to healing, out of struggle to peace, out of death to life.

**Dearest Jesus, you find us no matter how our days  
are going. Thank you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People having “one of  
those days” today

**Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7**

## A new thing

### **The earth was a formless void. (v. 2)**

Beginnings sometimes don't look like much. The ancient Celts who found themselves on the harsh lands of Ireland and Scotland had a saying worth remembering: "Every beginning is weak." In the American context it is often said that you must "start strong," but there is some wisdom in the minds of those Celtic ancestors. Sometimes just starting is enough.

What's sprouting anew in your life? What feels weak, yet promising? Creation doesn't begin with a boom, but rather with the divine Spirit brooding over a "formless void." It was a whole lot of nothing, but in the right hands, with the right power and the right imagination, it could become something.

And it did.

Beginnings aren't always strong. Sometimes they're weak, yet promising. Kind of like Jesus, weak in the eyes of many: a helpless infant; a teacher who started with a small group of followers; an innocent man hanging on a criminal's cross. Yet from that weakness, new life began for all.

**Creating God, bless us as we begin anew this year,  
weak as our start may be. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People starting new endeavors

**Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Genesis 17:1-13;  
Romans 4:1-12**

## **The blessing of peace**

**May the LORD bless his people  
with peace! (v. 11)**

There is a difference between blessing and bliss. Bliss is that feeling you have when everything in the world is going the way you imagined it would, when you feel unstoppable, and when your mind is free from worry. It rarely happens, and when it does, it's fleeting. But in much of today's world, blessing is mistaken for bliss, though they're very different things. So much of the #Blessed movement that has hit social media and inspired framed pictures hung on farmhouse-inspired walls makes this mistake.

Bliss is not the same as blessedness.

Whereas bliss is feeling carefree because circumstances are favorable to you, blessing is a feeling of being cared for no matter what the circumstances. And it's worth noting that the blessing the Lord gives in today's psalm is not of wealth, money, fortune, fame, or family—things often associated with the #Blessed fad. It is peace. Calm. Centeredness in the Divine. That is truly a blessing.

**Blessed One, give us your peace today, the peace  
of Christ that surpasses understanding. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in need of divine peace

**Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Exodus 30:22-38; Acts 22:2-16**

## **Baptized into what?**

**Then [Paul] said, “Into what then were you baptized?” (v. 3)**

We are too often drenched in the wrong things in life.

We are too often drenched in social media, moved by the digital outrage of the moment. We are too often drenched by the nonstop news cycle, tilting at every news windmill that scrolls along the bottom of the screen. We may be drenched in worry about our finances—a genuine concern for those living in poverty, but a false god for many whose needs are met. We are often drenched in anxiety around our relationships, wondering when frayed ends will mend and when mended ends will fray.

We are too often drenched in the wrong things in this life, “baptized” into pain and distraction.

But remember: before any of that, you were baptized into Christ. The Prince of Peace. The one who calms storms, who heals our world’s sickness. And remember that baptism—that drenching in love—is the basis from which you are called to live.

How will you remember your drenching, your baptism into Christ, today?

**Jesus, remind us today that we are baptized in you and sent to live in your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People consumed by worry

**Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Isaiah 41:14-20; John 1:29-34**

## Listening for God

**[Eli said,] “If he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” (v. 9)**

Whose call do you always answer? What name, when it pops up on your cell phone, do you never let go to voice-mail? We all have relationships that take priority in most situations. Who is that for you?

In reading the call story of the young boy Samuel, it's striking to see that Samuel at first doesn't recognize the divine call being sent his way. It's not that he wasn't religious, and it certainly wasn't for lack of attention. It seems the issue was that Samuel didn't expect the Lord to call upon him in that moment.

How about you? How do you know if God is calling you, now?

One key to knowing whether the Lord is calling us is perhaps seen in the person of Eli in this story. Eli was the one who tuned Samuel's antenna to the fact that God was calling him. Perhaps a trusted friend like Eli, one of those people we always answer the phone for, can help us discern God's call in our life.

**God who calls, open our hearts to hear your voice today. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Spiritual directors

**Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Judges 2:6-15;  
2 Corinthians 10:1-11**



## **Being known**

**You . . . are acquainted with all my ways. (v. 3)**

Is there someone in your life who can finish your sentences? Is there someone you never have trouble buying a present for because you know them so well? Knowing someone well, and being known well, can be a most wonderful feeling! Deep friendships stave off loneliness, especially in times of heartache, difficulty, and sadness.

When the psalmist writes that the Lord is acquainted with all of their ways, they do so not in fear or shame, as if the Lord is some divine Santa Claus watching to see if they have been naughty or nice. Rather, the psalmist writes in deep affection, grateful to be known by God because, well, we all want to be known and seen at some level.

The God we meet in Christ Jesus knows us intimately. In our times of deepest hurt and pain, in our times of extreme loneliness, understanding that the Lord knows us and cares for us can bring balm to our weary souls.

**God who knows us, bring us your presence  
and peace when we need it most.  
In Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel unknown in this world

**Judges 2:16-23; Acts 13:16-25**

## What is good?

### Not all things are beneficial. (v. 12)

Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth lays out his thoughts pretty clearly: they need to figure out the difference between what *can* be done and what *should* be done. Freedom is a terrible and weighty responsibility for anyone. "You shall not" commandments are much easier to follow than "you shall" ones. Avoiding an electric fence is easier to do than trying to figure out where to place one.

When thinking of bad habits, it's common to call to mind physical things we do or don't do: overeat, skip the gym, indulge in vices. But a different type of destructive habit is negative self-talk. We can speak to ourselves any way we want, but should we? What is good about that?

As we continue to remember the Baptism of Our Lord, celebrated last Sunday, remember what you were told in your own baptism: that you are God's beloved. Talk to yourself as if you are one of God's beloved children. Because you are.

**Gracious God, you call us your beloved. Help us  
to call ourselves that too. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those with destructive thoughts

**Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Samuel 2:21-25;  
Matthew 25:1-13**



## **Second Sunday after Epiphany**

### **Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (v. 46)**

What are some preconceived notions you've had about others that have been debunked? Or some untrue notions others have had of you? Sometimes people make assumptions about others based on their heritage or home. Nathanael makes such a judgment about Jesus today in hearing that he hails from Nazareth.

Nazareth was a village on the Sea of Galilee. It was humble in Jesus' time and, compared to a city like Jerusalem, it apparently seemed to Nathanael an improbable place of origin for God's Messiah.

But God has always chosen marginal places as sites for glory to be revealed. The womb of an unwed mother, a manger, working-class people who fished and dyed cloth, a persecutor of the faith, an imperfect church throughout the ages: all have been God's unlikely embodiment and emissaries in this world.

Which means that you can be too, no matter how unlikely you think that might be.

**Teach us to love the marginal places of this world  
as you do, Lord. We ask this in Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People misjudged based on  
their background

**1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;  
1 Corinthians 6:12-20**

## **Anointed for service and salvation**

**Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it  
on [Saul's] head. (10:1)**

Anointing oil—usually olive oil, scented or not—can play an important role in church rituals. When God's word is spoken, oil can be used to mark the newborn and the newly baptized with the cross—a sign that we belong to God. God's word and oil can be used in healing rituals as a fragrant and tangible reminder that God is with us in our brokenness and recovery. God's word and oil can be used in commissioning people for ministry in daily life, pastoral ministry, or other special roles. And at the hour of death, the head and hands may be anointed again with the cross of salvation.

Samuel anointed Saul with oil as a sign that Saul would serve the Lord as Israel's first king. Anointing is an ancient practice that many still find meaningful today.

Whether oil was used or not, at your baptism you were marked with Christ's cross forever. You have been claimed by God and commissioned for God's work in this world.

**Giver of life, you have set us apart for your  
good work in this world. Help us to do it. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are nearing death

**Psalm 86; 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1**

## **Like a devoted parent**

**[Peter said to Ananias,] “You did not lie to us  
but to God!” (v. 4)**

Imagine being one of the first believers forming a faith community from scratch, discerning how to worship, witness, and form unity among people of different backgrounds.

As promised, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit among them, and the church was born, “of one heart and soul” (4:32). This new community was God’s own creation. Like a newborn, it was fragile. When Ananias and Sapphira conspired against the infant church, the Holy Spirit rushed in to protect it like a devoted parent. The story is chilling, but at the heart of it is God’s commitment to the newborn church, to keep it from harm as it grew and learned to walk in the world for the sake of the gospel of Jesus.

We know well that the church is still vulnerable to forces that oppose God’s will, so we depend on the promise of the Holy Spirit to move among us, sustain us in faith, and guide our discernment as we seek to live in unity and bear witness to the love of Christ in the world.

**God, keep sending your Holy Spirit among us  
to form and reform our life together in Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: World Council of Churches

**Psalm 86; 1 Samuel 15:10-31**

## **Mercy beyond our control**

### **God changed his mind. (v. 10)**

Jonah is a classic children's Bible story full of wild adventure. It's also the kind of fish tale about which an evangelist would love to boast: "I walked across the city, and my preaching was so powerful that the entire city, even the king, repented and believed in God!"

This story is exciting and fun—but not for Jonah. Jonah rides in the belly of a fish, not seeking adventure but vehemently resisting God's call to go to Nineveh. He resists God's call not because he's lazy or shy, but because he doesn't want the Ninevites, his enemies, to receive God's mercy. But as Jonah learns, God's mercy is not for him to control, but is God's alone.

It's a wonder God chooses us, fickle and often completely unreliable messengers, to bring God's word of love and mercy to the world. Yet, this is an act of God's mercy too, isn't it? Just when we think we are only the messengers, we feel, drop by drop, the shower of God's mercy flowing upon us as well.

**God of love, help us extend to others  
the mercy we've received from your hand.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Outdoor Ministries

**Psalm 86; Genesis 16:1-14; Luke 18:15-17**

## **Confession of Peter**

**[Jesus said,] “. . . and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (v. 18)**

Reports of decline in church membership across denominations in North America are no longer new. At first it wasn't so obvious, but the day came when most of us saw it in our own congregations. It is easy for anxiety about survival to lead to blame or to ricochet from one idea to the next and cause us to lose track of who we are and whose church this is.

Christ built the church on the confession of faith voiced by Peter: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. As a human institution, the church may flounder. It may even dwindle to a remnant. But not even the gates of Hades will prevail against the church Christ built. Jesus promises this to Peter and to us today. We belong to Christ, and it is Christ's church. We are called to faithfully proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and trust the work of the Holy Spirit among us to lead us into our future.

**God, open our lips to preach, teach,  
and live the gospel of Jesus for the sake  
of your beloved world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Congregations that feel discouraged

**Acts 4:8-13; Psalm 18:1-6, 16-19;  
1 Corinthians 10:1-5**

## **The best of all possible options**

### **For God alone my soul waits in silence. (v. 5)**

We know the feeling of being swallowed by the enormity of an emotion or situation—a sorrow or rage, bitterness or helplessness around an event beyond what we can fix. A flood or fire has destroyed our home, a spouse of forty years has left and will not be back, a trusted person has deceived multiple families, and the list goes on. During overwhelming times, we are vulnerable to desperate thoughts and impulsive actions that harm others and us. We want to *do* something, but what?

The psalmist describes being in the grip of something way beyond human control and counsels what is sure to bring us through torrent to safety: *For God alone, wait.* Quiet the voices in your head that plot no good. Pour out your heart to God your refuge. As people of God, wait not in defeat but in hope. In your own helplessness, the power of God's promise will rush in and hold you to reassure you that God is with you, and in steadfast love will deliver you.

**God of hope, help us in this noisy world to find  
a quiet refuge in you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Disaster Response

**Jeremiah 20:7-13; 2 Peter 3:1-7**



## **Stewards of time**

### **The appointed time has grown short. (v. 29)**

I remember the days of getting my children ready for pre-school. On days we ran short of time (it happens!) I'd get them ready with coats and boots on and have them wait by the door. I'd scurry with last-minute things and I'd hear, "Can we play Candyland?" Me: "I'm sorry, there isn't time." Them: "Can we build a fort in the living room?" Me: "No, stay where you are. Your school starts in six minutes." Them: "Can we switch shirts?" "No time! Please, just stay by the door."

There is urgency of time in Paul's advice to the Corinthians. He believed Christ's return was imminent, that believers should avoid distractions of the present age and focus their hearts on the coming new age. As we know, Christ didn't return in Paul's lifetime, and we continue to wait, though not with the same urgency. As followers of Christ, our call remains to be good stewards of time as we keep looking to Christ in trust and hope all the days of our lives.

**God of all time, keep us in your care as we live our days held in your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who feel hurried or distracted

**Psalm 62:5-12; Jeremiah 20:14-18; Luke 10:13-16**



## **Third Sunday after Epiphany**

**Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (v. 17)**

The first people Jesus called as disciples were fishermen. Jesus used a great turn of phrase in saying, “I will teach you to fish for people.” He almost made it sound like fishing for fish and fishing for people share a skill set.

I live in a town on the Puget Sound in Washington State that is home to several family-owned fishing fleets. Their boats and net-sheds line the shore of the harbor. Each year the town gathers as the local priest blesses the fleet before the workers head up to Alaska to fish for the season. How surprised these fishing-people would be if they were told they’d be fishing for people from now on! God’s call is often surprising. “Really?” we say doubtfully.

Indeed, doubt is the attitude with which many of the great prophets responded to God’s call. We are all called through our baptism to share Christ’s saving love with the world. We may doubt our ability, but when God calls, God also equips. We have everything we need! Go in peace. Serve the Lord!

**God, you call us to use the gifts given through your Spirit. Grant us courage through Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lay ministries and volunteers

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12;  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31**

## **A call, a relationship, and a future**

### **And Abram journeyed on by stages. (v. 9)**

I wonder if Abraham had always been good at obeying. We have little to go on before this account of God's call, but it seems like he was a good son to his father, Terah. We learn that Abram's wife Sarai is barren, so there will be no future generations; yet Abram and Sarai remain together, childless. After Abram's father dies, they settle into their old age with their nephew Lot.

Then, out of the blue, God calls and promises a new future: from barrenness will come a great nation and a blessing for the world. God says, "Go!" and Abram obeys. If he had words for God at the time, they aren't recorded. Later Abram questions God and at times behaves questionably, but at the moment of call, he obeys and begins the journey with God into a new future.

As with Abram, God calls us into relationship, blesses us, and sends us into the world to be a blessing. God does not say "Go!" and then wait for news from us, but journeys with us, leading us into our future with God.

**God of journey, thank you for calling us  
and accompanying us as we venture forth  
in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in new jobs or retiring

**Psalm 46; 1 Corinthians 7:17-24**

## **An unexpected intercessor**

**[Gamaliel said,] “But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” (v. 39)**

As the church grew in numbers, the apostles were ordered by the religious authorities to discontinue teaching in the name of Jesus. Yet the apostles kept on teaching. When they were brought before the council, they knew they faced potentially serious consequences, even possibly death. Still, they testified that they must obey God and bear witness to Jesus. The council was enraged by this and wanted to kill the apostles.

Sometimes all it takes is one wise voice to change the course of events. In this case it was Gamaliel, a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, respected by all. Though Gamaliel was not a follower of Jesus, the Holy Spirit used his faith in God to direct his understanding that God might be doing a new thing (Isaiah 43:19); if it was of human origin, it would fail on its own. The Holy One calls us today to intercede for others in the name of Jesus—not just for Christians but for all people according to divine justice and love for the world.

**God of all, inspire us to be faithful to you in our proclamation and action, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Judges, attorneys, and jurors

**Psalm 46; Genesis 45:25–46:7**

## **Our hope and home**

### **Therefore we will not fear. (v. 2)**

The Psalms have provided people of faith with words of prayer, lament, and praise to God for thousands of years in every imaginable situation. The beauty and power of the poetic images and the range of human emotions expressed within the Psalms are stunning and timeless.

Psalm 46 speaks a truth about God that is bigger than any challenge or fear we may face in this life. The psalmist does not shy away from naming even the most extreme situations, including natural disasters and war, when declaring God as the one who will subdue all that threatens us in body, mind, and spirit. “God is our refuge and strength” (v. 1), the ultimate source of peace who will prevail. You may be enduring or escaping conflict in your country or home, battling an addiction or diagnosis that threatens your life, or sitting next to a beloved who is suffering. In any and every place and situation, these words of promise are for you. Be still. Do not fear. God is with you.

**God, when we are afraid, protect us in the still pool  
of your peace, through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All seeking safe housing or health care

**Proverbs 8:1-21; Mark 3:13-19a**

## Conversion of Paul

**The Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen.” (v. 15)**

In Acts, Saul (later called Paul) is described as the number one persecutor of people who “belonged to the Way” (v. 2). He took violent action against them with zeal and determination. He seemed to be the last person followers of the risen Christ could imagine joining them in the Way.

The conversion and call of Paul form a great Time after Epiphany story as we recall the surprising people to whom Jesus is revealed and how God works through them to gather all things to Godself (Ephesians 1:10). I love how Ananias was called to be part of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to move Paul to the Way of Christ. Once “breathing threats and murder” (Acts 9:1), Paul would later pen enduring words about love, the fruit of the Spirit, and the peace of Christ that passes all understanding. The Holy Spirit still moves among us. Whether we see ourselves more as an Ananias or a Paul, we are all chosen instruments, called by God to bring Christ’s love and peace to the world.

**Surprise us, God, with new understanding of our call to be an instrument of the risen Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Ecumenical and interfaith partners

**Psalm 67; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 21:10-19**

## **Surrounded by gifts**

**Great are the works of the LORD,  
studied by all who delight in them. (v. 2)**

Years ago I began a spiritual practice that engages the five bodily senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste—to open awareness of simply being alive in the present moment. I particularly like doing this outside and focusing on the natural world, but inside is great too. Try it with me!

Begin by noticing and naming five colors you see. Take your time. Regard each thing. Now, listen. Can you hear four sounds? Maybe birds singing, a cat purring, children, music? Now, notice three smells. I love the smell of fir trees and salty air in my part of the world. Now touch. What two things can you touch? Smooth, furry, prickly, grainy? And what is one thing you taste? If I can't taste anything, I imagine what I would love to be tasting. Now, take a deep breath and give thanks.

I consistently find this simple practice leading to gratitude for the many great works of God with which God delights us so that we might know God's love for us.

**Teach us, O God, to delight in your works, that we may grow in your wisdom, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Artists, scientists, and teachers

**Deuteronomy 12:28-32; Revelation 2:12-17**

## **Language for love's sake**

### **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. (v. 1)**

Idol worship was a hot topic for the Corinthians. Some in the church knew that idols didn't exist, so sacrifice to idols was irrelevant, but others didn't. Paul counsels us to think beyond what we know to inform our life choices and to see with love how our behavior affects others.

A retired pastor told me, "Remember not to preach only to the giraffes." "Giraffes?" I asked. "Yes, don't keep the good news on the high branches with fancy theological words, out of reach to people new to the faith. They need to eat too." It's tempting to trot out big words to show off what we know or to use "insider" language that leaves "outsiders" confused and unfed. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." We are all called to proclaim the gospel in ways people understand. Whether we are preaching, teaching, or visiting in the neighborhood, choosing our words can be an act of love. This neighbor-love builds up the body of Christ and becomes food for the world.

**Jesus, humble our conceit and silence our careless words. Move us to speak and act for your love's sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Sign language interpreters

**Psalm 111; Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Matthew 8:28–9:1**





## **Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

### **Just then there was in their synagogue a man. (v. 23)**

Jesus saw a man suffering with an unclean spirit. We moderns don't use the term "unclean spirit" much anymore. I've wondered what diagnostic name modern medicine might give this "unclean spirit." But then I catch myself. My curiosity about what to call the man's condition can easily distract from the real story, which is: Jesus saw a man, a child of God who was suffering and in need of relief. Jesus possessed not only the power but the compassionate desire to heal him, to return the man to himself as created by God.

Divine power flowed through Jesus in a miraculous way, which began with Jesus seeing the man with compassion. Jesus calls us to see this way: a person rather than a diagnosis, with compassion rather than self-serving curiosity, especially for those called unclean (by any name) and pushed to the margins. In seeing with Christlike eyes, we participate in the healing power of Jesus for the sake of the world in need.

**Teach us, O God, to see as you see, through eyes  
of compassion and love, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran World Relief

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111;  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

## **A new chapter**

### **The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet. (v. 15)**

Moses and the people had been through a lot together! Since escaping slavery in Egypt, Moses had been their leader and prophet. He brought God's word to them and guided them through trials in the wilderness. Even as they complained against him, they depended on him. Now it is time for a new leader. The people are highly anxious. Once again, Moses brings a word of promise from God: God will raise up a new leader among them who will be for them as Moses was and lead them into the promised land.

Change of leadership is hard. Transition is an uncomfortable in-between time. Grief over loss of a beloved leader and of "normal" routine, not knowing what the new will look like, can shake confidence in the future. God's promise to the ancient people is God's promise to us today. God will raise up faithful leaders in each new time. Leaning on the promise of God to provide, we can walk forward with confidence and hope.

**Calling God, lead us in hope and joy  
to new relationships and chapters of life,  
in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Bishop's associates and  
call committees

**Psalm 35:1-10; Numbers 22:1-21; Acts 21:17-26**

## **Pocket power tool**

### **Then my soul shall rejoice in the LORD. (v. 9)**

This psalm should come with a warning label: “Caution: May cause harm if misapplied.” The psalmist is under direct attack, calling on God for rescue and for the ruin of their enemy. The language calling for harm to another is graphic, for sure. Read and apply with care!

During my years as a social worker and pastor, I’ve met people who describe an illness or addiction as “the enemy.” Not all, but some, find it helpful to distance the core of who they are from an internal force ravaging their life. Once, I visited with a young man working so hard to stay clean and sober. He had spent time in jail and lost access to his children. He wanted his life back. He had “tools for sobriety,” he said, then pulled from his shirt pocket a copy of Psalm 35, his “power tool.” When fierce cravings hit, he called on God, “Take hold of shield and buckler, and rise up to help me!” (v. 2). Knowing that God was fighting with him, he told me, “is saving my life right now.”

**God of power, we call on you, and you are there—our help and shield. Thank you, in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All contending with addiction

**Numbers 22:22-28; 1 Corinthians 7:32-40**

## **Don't look back**

**When you search for me, you will find me; . . .  
seek me with all your heart. (v. 13)**

“Don't look back.” That thought was common among residents at the senior care center where I served as chaplain. Remembering earlier times when they could walk, talk, eat anything, and feel less pain often just drove residents into grief. It was hard enough to make a friend, eat pureed foods, and listen to your roommate's TV. Instead of focusing on the past, residents tried to engage with the activities of the present, such as concerts, gardening, dog visits, and dominoes.

“Don't look back.” God said the same thing to the exiles who were sent to Babylon. “Settle down and make a life in the place where I brought you, even if it's not the promised land that you left behind.”

Not looking back proved helpful in the care center and in the Bible. But there is one time when looking back is helpful—when we look back to recall God's blessings throughout our lives. Looking back on God's faithfulness helps us look forward in hope.

**Loving God, help us trust that we will find you  
in every phase of our lives. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Residents, staff, and volunteers at  
senior care centers

**Psalm 35:1-10; Mark 5:1-20**

## Have you not known?

### Lift up your eyes on high and see. (v. 26)

During the early months of COVID-19, many people read piles of books, including mysteries. We were living through mysterious times, so they fit! The dilemma of enduring isolation seemed too hard to solve, so we turned to fictional cases instead.

The Bible contains mysteries of its own. For example, Bible scholars continue to discern Isaiah's authorship, certain it wasn't written by only one prophet but debating the possibilities, especially for chapters 40–66: A disciple—or two—of the “first” Isaiah? A school of prophets? Today's reading presents more puzzles: Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? The verses shift abruptly, and we're left trying to decipher what the words mean.

*Keep reading*, mystery writers would tell us. The end of today's reading points to the solution we can know and trust in any case: God keeps promises. God promises to renew our strength, especially when our lives have been turned upside down. No mystery there!

**God of love, thank you for walking with us through unsettling times. May we trust your promises. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Writers who put mysteries into words

**Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Proverbs 12:10-21;**

**Galatians 5:2-15**

## **Presentation of Our Lord**

**[Simeon prayed,] “Now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word.” (v. 29)**

As a senior care center chaplain, I sat at many deathbeds. Yet each passing felt completely unique. One of the most memorable deaths involved a woman named Amelia who I had never heard speak a word. A stroke had robbed Amelia of speech, but she communicated quite effectively with smiles and gestures. The daughter of missionaries, Amelia still loved attending chapel services and always wanted to sit next to the piano.

To Amelia's deathbed her niece brought a truly wonderful gift: a video of Amelia at a younger age, playing the piano and singing hymns at a church function. There Amelia was, with her high heels and lipstick, and her voice and movements still intact. The younger Amelia sang the older Amelia across the divide from life to death. She went in peace! Like how Simeon and Anna went in peace when Jesus the Messiah arrived at the temple. These faithful ones all went in peace, and their stories of love live on in us.

**God of peace, may we put our trust in your word.**

**In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Families sitting with loved ones  
in their final hours

**Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84; Hebrews 2:14-18**

## **God is God, and you're not**

**I do it all for the sake of the gospel,  
so that I may share in its blessings. (v. 23)**

Meeting Paul must have been like encountering a powerful windstorm. Paul's beliefs blew strong on serious topics like church corruption, moral uprightness, God's grace, and Christ crucified. Paul's style as a religious zealot was countercultural in Corinth. Yet at the heart of Paul's message was a timeless truth: you must get over yourself so you can represent someone much bigger—Jesus.

"God is God, and you're not." I heard that phrase once from a speaker at an ELCA Youth Gathering. The words echoed Paul's message from 1 Corinthians. I wonder what happened to the youth at that assembly who heard the speaker's words. Some undoubtedly became Young Adults in Global Mission. Out in the world they went, ready to proclaim their faith. In cultures where talking about faith is more common than in ours, these young people surely also heard the gospel proclaimed to them. Paul's words came to fruition. Christ's gospel is bigger than all of us, and we share in its blessings.

**Saving God, we thank you for those who taught us  
about your power and love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Young Adults in Global Mission serving  
throughout the world

**Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Isaiah 46:1-13;  
Matthew 12:9-14**



## **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

**[Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. (v. 35)**

Have you ever prayed with your doctor? As a chaplain I witnessed many experiences of prayer, but I rarely saw a doctor pray with a patient—until one evening when I was out visiting patients who were going to surgery the next day. While I was in one room, the surgeon arrived. She happened to comment on the patient's lovely manicure. The patient held up her hands to show off her nails. Then, instead of laying her hands back down, she took both of the surgeon's hands in her own. She asked, "Will you pray with me?" I found myself holding my breath, wondering about the doctor's response.

Bless that doctor's heart—she closed her eyes and listened as the patient prayed for God to work through her hands. Faith and healing came together, as they did in Mark 1, when after a day of restoring Simon's mother-in-law and many others, Jesus got up before dawn and went to pray. Prayer gets our hearts in the right place so that God can work through us.

**Healer God, may we reach out to you  
for strength and new life. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Medical personnel entrusted with  
God's healing work

**Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c;  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23**



## **Enduring suffering**

### **They will perish, but you endure. (v. 26)**

Please read the first half of Psalm 102 (vv. 1-11). In these early verses the psalmist cries out to God in despair about illness, enemies, and separation from God. The psalmist's laments remind us of one of the toughest jobs we share in this life: listening to someone in despair. Perhaps the despairing one is our partner who was just laid off, our neighbor who can't afford their rent, or our child who is bullied at school. Whatever the circumstances, our job is to not run away. We are called to listen carefully and to trust that God is listening. This act requires both courage and humility.

Sometimes we ourselves are the despairing ones, grateful for another person willing to listen to us and pray with us. Now please read the second half of Psalm 102 (vv. 12-28). In this half of the psalm, the psalmist witnesses to us that God has heard their cries. The psalmist reminds us of what we've learned: that beyond despair lies new life.

**Loving God, help us to give others our full attention  
so we can reflect your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Counselors trained to listen and help  
those in despair

**2 Kings 4:8-17, 32-37; Acts 14:1-7**

## **A double witness**

**Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city.” (v. 36)**

I was one of five siblings born in the span of eight years. When we were young, our squabbling sometimes became too much for my mother. On those days she would say, “I’m going to send one of you to the attic and one to the basement.” Apart from not teaching us much about conflict management, my mother’s system worked in the moment to defuse the problems. Being the faithful Bible reader she was, my mom may have learned her self-preservation strategy from today’s reading.

Paul and Barnabas got into a spat and set off in separate directions, Barnabas to Cyprus and Paul to Syria. What do we know about the argument between Paul and Barnabas? We know that these former besties were drawn apart by their different approaches to church conflicts. Also, that their partnership suffered, but their mission remained aligned. God continued to use both Paul and Barnabas to spread the gospel. Now there were two missionary journeys rather than one!

**Eternal God, may we meet at your gospel message of love, even if we can’t meet on other things. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA missionaries and global partner congregations

**Psalm 102:12-28; 2 Kings 8:1-6**

## **The cost of discipleship**

**But [Jesus] sternly ordered them  
not to make him known. (v. 12)**

As a pastor, I have often been asked, “Why did Jesus tell others to keep his work secret?” I answer by saying that Bible scholars puzzle over this question as well. One of the reasons might be that Jesus could have been in danger if he were “found out” too soon. The authorities were always worried about the power of this prophet, and they could have easily arrested Jesus earlier.

Ironically, of all the commandments in the Bible, this is the one that we modern disciples follow the best: we are really, really good at *not* telling others about Jesus. What qualms do we feel when we consider sharing our faith? Do we fear we will offend someone? Be ostracized ourselves? We often wish we could share our faith, and we feel an aching loss when we remain silent about the Jesus we love.

Today’s text assures us that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus reminds us that multitudes of people still need a word of hope. Even us. Especially us.

**Dear Jesus, give us strength to open our hearts  
and use our words to proclaim you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Bible scholars who help us learn anew

**Psalm 102:12-28; Job 6:1-13**

## Passing the baton

**Elisha said, “As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” (v. 2)**

Our younger daughter ran track, so we spent many hours at track meets. As we watched relay after relay each week, we noticed how the high schoolers got better and better at passing the baton.

Today’s reading tells the story of one prophet passing the baton to another. Elijah is ready to make a dramatic exit after a stellar prophetic run. His follower, Elisha, is determined to smoothly receive the baton so that he can continue Elijah’s work. But Elijah does not seem too concerned with passing the baton to Elisha. Three times Elijah says he’s going ahead—to Bethel, Jericho, and the Jordan River. Three times Elisha insists on staying close by so he can receive the baton and run his lap. Finally, Elijah departs for heaven in a whirlwind, and we’re left to wonder if Elisha received the baton. Reading on past today’s verses provides our answer: other prophets see Elisha coming in the distance and declare that the spirit of Elijah rests upon him.

**God of wisdom, thank you for all the teachers who have led us to you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Mentors making a difference for children and youth

**Psalm 50:1-6; 1 Kings 11:26-40;  
2 Corinthians 2:12-17**

## **Be the light**

**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth. (v. 2)**

In her poem “The Hill We Climb,” Amanda Gorman, National Youth Poet Laureate and speaker at President Biden’s inauguration, declares that we need to find the courage to witness light and spread light. Gorman’s words echo Psalm 50, in which we hear that God shines forth like the rising of the sun. Psalm 50 is known as a prophetic psalm, a sign of what God can and will do. Amanda Gorman’s words serve as a prophecy for our times, reminding us of our call to work for the harmony and justice that God envisions.

Psalm 50 is the appointed psalm for this Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus’ transfiguration. At the transfiguration, Jesus also climbs to a high place. There, he reveals both his glory and the disciples’ mission. Jesus shines forth, as the psalm reminds us. And Jesus’ disciples are reminded that they are part of the covenant faithful who are chosen to see and be God’s light. God chooses to be the light in their hearts—and ours—that shines for others to see.

**This little light of yours, O God—please make it  
shine in us! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Young people advocating for justice

**1 Kings 14:1-18; 1 Timothy 1:12-20**

## **Leaning on the promises**

**For we do not proclaim ourselves;  
we proclaim Jesus Christ. (v. 5)**

The apostle Paul preached frequently about pointing our lives toward God's glory. Who do you know who reflects the glory of God? Such people are very special.

I found myself asking that question when I faced a sudden illness. After years of walking with others who were facing illness and mortality, I found out how scared I was for my own well-being. To still my fears, I reached out to a friend of deep faith. How did I know she would reflect God's glory? I had witnessed her facing major changes in her life, including health scares, divorce, and deaths. I saw how resilient and Spirit-filled she was as she navigated some really hard times. I called my friend, and she shared a simple but profound lesson about getting through hard times: Focus on the steadiness of God's promises, rather than simply being overwhelmed by your own ups and downs. Remember God's promise that Paul announced: God shines in times of darkness, lighting our way in faith.

**Empowering God, may we lean on your promises  
for our core strength. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Friends who walk with us in good times  
and bad

**Psalm 50:1-6; 1 Kings 16:1-7; Luke 19:41-44**



## **Transfiguration of Our Lord**

**From the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (v. 7)**

Peter, James, and John ascend what may have been the 9,000-foot peak of Mt. Hermon. Knees shaking and hearts pounding from the climb, they look to their leader, Jesus. What they see instead is a transfigured savior speaking with Moses and Elijah, the greatest leader and the greatest prophet of their Jewish tradition. The disciples' first instinct is to build three dwelling places, like they would have at the annual Feast of Tabernacles. Jewish people still celebrate this ritual today to commemorate the truth that God was present even before the temple was built.

Up on the mountain, God's voice proclaims, “Jesus is my beloved Son; listen to him.” The disciples *have* listened to Jesus. They've heard his miracles, his parables, his “Come and follow me.” They've heard Jesus tangle with authorities and preach to large crowds. Now Peter, James, and John hear Jesus utter some of the words they treasure most of all: “Get up. Do not be afraid.”

**Strengthen our spirit and resolve  
so we can follow you, dear Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Mountain rescue teams serving  
stranded hikers and skiers

**2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

## Word of the day

**The LORD will guide you continually . . .  
and make your bones strong. (v. 11)**

“What’s the word of the day?” I asked Ida as she sat in the senior care center lobby, waiting to go to dialysis. “The word of the day is . . . *neighbor*.” Or she might say “. . . *love*” or “. . . *righteousness*.” Ida always chose a perfect word of hope and found a good reason to back up her selection. Ida had more of a right to complain than most anyone in the care center, yet she wore a radiant smile and maintained a fierce resolve.

What’s the word of the day in Isaiah? The word is *fast*. “Is this not the fast I choose?” asks God. Breaking others’ yokes of oppressive loneliness and despair. Genuinely caring for others. Ida understood this fast, because aides, nurses, and daughters genuinely cared for her body, mind, and spirit. Ida also personified the fast Isaiah described—by sharing the “bread” of her wisdom in the lobby, her resilience in the dialysis unit, and her trust in God with all of us. Even while her kidneys grew weaker, God made the “bones” of her faith strong.

**May we choose the fast that is acceptable to you,  
God of love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Kidney dialysis patients and  
their caregivers

**Psalm 110:1-4; Exodus 19:7-25; Hebrews 2:1-4**



## Bible humor

### Let me hear joy and gladness. (v. 8)

Right about now, revelers are parading around New Orleans for Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) and around many countries for Carnival, spreading exuberance. They are getting their exuberance out before the traditionally understood solemnity of Lent begins tomorrow on Ash Wednesday. Our psalm today reminds us that we, too, seek joy. There's a lot of joy and silliness to be had, even in the Bible. For example . . .

When is baseball mentioned in the Bible? *In the big inning!* When is tennis mentioned in the Bible? *When Moses served in Pharaoh's court.* What kind of lights did Noah use on the ark? *Floodlights.*

Humor is a great gift from God that keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously. Being able to laugh at ourselves reminds us that we don't save ourselves or justify ourselves. Those are God's jobs!

On silly days like Mardi Gras, on solemn days like Ash Wednesday, on all the days that God keeps creating, we can ask God to "put a new and right [and light!] spirit within me" (v. 10).

**Restore to us the joy of your salvation,  
dear Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Thanksgiving for friends who help us  
lighten up

**Psalm 110:1-4; Job 19:23-27; 1 Timothy 3:14-16**

## Ash Wednesday

**[Jesus said,] “For where your treasure is,  
there your heart will be also.” (v. 21)**

This year Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday fall on the same day! Our text for today from Matthew ties these two celebrations together beautifully with words about love and sacrifice.

Because today is Valentine’s Day, we might receive heart-shaped candy boxes filled with chocolates. These boxes were first introduced in 1868. After recipients ate the candy, they preserved the boxes as a place to put treasures from their valentine.

Because today is also Ash Wednesday, we may go to church and receive ashes on our forehead in the shape of a cross. Our pastor will say these words from Genesis: “[Remember that] you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:19). On this special day we contemplate what’s temporary (even our bodies), and what lives on beyond us—God’s love and sacrifice. Jesus says it’s the treasure within our hearts that is worth sharing now and that will be shared by God forever.

**May the ashes on our foreheads serve  
as a witness to others today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Church musicians preparing for Lenten  
worship services

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17;  
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10**

## Under the bow

**[God said,] “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant.” (v. 13)**

A young mother weeps at the side of a torrent rushing through a flooded ravine. She watches in vain as rescue workers pick their way through mud and scrub brush, searching for her five-year-old son. All the while, relentless rain pours from leaden skies, unleashing a cascade of destruction, sweeping homes from their foundations.

Today’s disaster is not a worldwide catastrophe, but surely it belies God’s ancient promise never again to drown all life in a deluge. What can it mean to the young mother whose tears fall like rain? Can grace and redemption embrace her child and penetrate her sorrow?

This is the dearest hope of our hearts, a hope that lingers in believers and unbelievers alike. Every head turns to look when rainbow colors encircle the horizon after a storm. Something deep within us clings to the hope—indeed the promise—that everything that happens—*every single thing*—happens under the bow of God’s all-embracing love.

**May the colors of the rainbow embrace the earth and fan hope in the love of Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who have suffered in disasters

**Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:1-14; 1 John 1:3-10**

## Love's laughter

**According to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD! (v. 7)**

It's fifty-five years ago now, but I still remember the day I met Kevin. On a crowded band trip, I plopped down on a cymbal on the seat beside him. He turned, smiled, and told me someone had stuck gum on the cymbal, which was now affixed to the seat of my pants. We laughed.

I remember this every time he comes to mind, and every time, love's gentle laughter heals my heart again. It's a taste, a little sacrament, of God's love.

With steadfast, unyielding love, the Holy One remembers all that we are—the ups and downs, the good we have given, the foolishness that makes us wince, and the wrongs we wish we could erase—and calls us *beloved*.

So, lift your heart into the warm rays of eternal love streaming from the cross of our Lord Jesus. Pour out your burdens, and feel God's smile embrace your fearful, wounded places. You just may hear the voice of divine kindness, even as I hear Christ say, "I remember you. You are the kid who sat on a cymbal."

**Remember me according to your unfailing mercy, O Lord, for only your love can set me free. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Forgiveness for troubled hearts

**Daniel 9:15-25a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5**

## **It's who we are**

**Baptism . . . now saves you . . . as an appeal  
to God for a good conscience. (v. 21)**

My house is on Old George Way, but that is not where I live. Nor is your street name and number where you live. We live inside the mentality, the inner world, and the disposition we carry into each moment and encounter. A thousand things affect this: how well we slept, whether we are sick or well, something we saw on TV, or the last thing someone said to us.

Like sparrows in a winter wind, our hearts and minds get buffeted about, moods swinging wildly unless we cling to the core of who we are. For we are not the thoughts or moods of the moment, nor what others say, but something more.

This *more* is the life of Christ, crucified and risen, living within us, shaping our hearts, pointing our way, and ruling our destiny. *You are aliens and strangers in this world*, says 1 Peter. The world may chase success and wealth, pride and acclaim, favoring privilege over principle. But our conscience is captive to the Love who claims us.

**Remind me who I am, O Lord, that I may live  
the love you are in me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Friends and family with dementia

**Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32; Matthew 9:2-13**



## First Sunday in Lent

**As [Jesus] was coming up out of the water,  
he saw the heavens torn apart. (v. 10)**

I close my eyes and see. Jesus stands in the stream, his back to me, his feet sinking into the silt. The sky opens as he rises from the water, golden light flowing from the hidden Source of our souls in whose image we are.

The Spirit glistens white and hovers over Jesus as he stands there, surrounded by a clutch of needy, sinful, broken souls who come to this place hoping for the healing they cannot give themselves. In my mind's eye, Jesus turns and motions for me to stand beside him in the muddy water.

He wants me, he wants all of us to stand there with him as the heavens open and the light of God appears. "Come close," he says. "I want you to see what I see, feel what I feel, know what I know, and love what I love."

It's a sweet and rending grace, for Jesus bathes us in quiet streams of compassion, then breaks our hearts at the suffering of this world he so loves. But all in all, I know of no better way to become a human . . . being.

**Let me see what you see and love what you love,  
Jesus, that I, too, may see the heavens open. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are hungry in our land and  
around the world

**Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22**

## One more time

**[God] raised us up . . . and seated us with him  
in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (v. 6)**

I am here again, Jesus, sitting in this chair beside you. This is my place. That's what you tell me. It's why I keep coming back here, hoping to feel the freedom and love my heart has craved since the earliest days of my life.

So, please, *one more time*, take me to your side. Melt my heart in the warmth of your welcome. Let me feel the smile of your grace until I know that *everything* you are is mine—all the love and forgiveness, the joy and beauty, the resurrection and the life. All of it. Mine.

I claim it. I claim *you*, Lord Jesus, as my own, not by grasping but by gladly receiving the life you so gladly give.

So, dear reader, join me, won't you? Take your place beside Jesus. Speak the truth of your heart—joy or pain, want or expectation. Open your heart, and he will lift you into the immensity of his love. Joy will wash over your sadness, and you will breathe the sweet air of heaven.

After all, everything he is is yours, freely given.

**Dear Jesus, lift me into the fullness of your  
presence. May all that you are flow into me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel discouraged  
or defeated

**Psalm 77; Job 4:1-21**

## **Just like them**

**Have . . . sympathy, love for one another,  
a tender heart, and a humble mind. (v. 8)**

I've arrived at the age of those I most needed when I was young. Their faces pass before my mind and bless me, even though some are more than forty years gone. And I wonder: Have I become more like these souls who showed me what it is to be human?

They'd all known hardship. Most had suffered losses that dampened their eyes decades later. But bitterness was unknown among them. They breathed kindness and a gentle humility that did not insist life should be easy or go their way. They needed less, demanded less, and loved more, grateful for the gifts life had given.

They left a great deal of joy and blessing in their wake, extending far beyond their time, through the hearts they touched, like mine.

Love made them the way they were—and still are. Somehow they looked around and knew: the fields and faces, streets and graces were a sacrament of Love's embrace. So, like them, I seek the great heart of Christ, praying to be made human, like them.

**Lord Jesus, open my heart to share the rich  
blessings you pour out upon your saints. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Senior citizens

**Psalm 77; Job 5:8-27**



## **Songs in the night**

**I commune with my heart in the night;  
I meditate and search my spirit. (v. 6)**

Sometimes I wake with songs singing in my mind. Most are old songs and hymns resonant with a love far warmer than February mornings in much of North America. They wake my heart to the gift of a new day. Hearing them, I smile back at the Loving Mystery who sends them my way.

It has always been so. Believers in the God who so loves us have long sung their joys and sorrows, hungry for words and melodies that fill their hearts and comfort their sadness. Feeling lost and alone, the psalmist wrote, "I commune with my heart in the night," struggling to remember what it was like to feel God's love. Many translations render this verse, "I remember my songs in the night."

Of course. For words stagger and fall when the heart is heavy and the night is long. But our songs transport us from desolation into God's loving nearness, healing our hurts and lifting us to laughter when nothing else can. So I'll sing along, or at least smile, when music opens my eyes.

**Wake my heart each morning with the melody of your love, O Lord, that I may sing your praise. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Musicians and composers

**Proverbs 30:1-9; Matthew 4:1-11**

## The real reason

**I will establish . . . an everlasting covenant,  
to be God to you and to your offspring. (v. 7)**

Everything changes. Nothing remains the same, except this promise: *I will be your God*. There are no *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts*; no small print; no hidden conditions or exceptions.

God appears in some mysterious way to Abraham and Sarah and promises to prosper their descendants and bless the world forever through their family, though as yet they have no children.

God gives no reason for specifically choosing them. God simply shows up and makes an irrevocable promise to be their God, no matter what, even if they mess up their lives and laugh at God's seemingly ridiculous plan—which they assuredly will do.

This tells us almost everything we need to know in order to risk trusting this God: It tells us God comes to messed-up human beings, refusing to wait for us to show some initiative. It tells us God likes to give gifts because, well, that's just the way God is. And it tells us God wants our friendship, for God-only-knows what reason. But maybe it's because God truly is love, after all.

**I lift my life to you, O Lord, trusting that you love me  
and will always welcome me home. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Healing for troubled families

**Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18;**

**Romans 3:21-31**

## Always enough

**He did not hide his face from me,  
but heard when I cried to him. (v. 24)**

A lazy afternoon. "Sorry I'm so quiet," Dixie sighs, looking up from her book. "I'm not much company today."

"It's all right," I respond. "Your presence is enough." And it is. It's enough to know she is here with me and I am not alone, like so many who have lost their loves. It is for this, after all, that we are made—not the state of marriage necessarily but to know and share the comfort of other hearts.

Wonderfully human, this need. It stirs our hunger for others and for a much greater Heart. We long for the Blessed Presence who is loving and powerful, and who refuses to run away or hide when we are hurt or afraid, forgotten or rejected.

We fly into the mercy of God on the wings of this need. Like Jesus himself, we pray our distress, begging to feel the beams of Love's presence enfolding us whole. Hungry to be heard, we call out to the One who is always there, whose face never hides and whose presence is always enough.

**Let me rest in the presence of your love, Lord Jesus,  
knowing you are always enough for me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are alone and lonely

**Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-12**

## Images

**[Jesus] was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (v. 25)**

Images imprint themselves on our hearts. We recall them when we hunger to feel what we most need. So it is that I recall a painting that hung in a long-ago Sunday school room: Jesus blessing a gaggle of children. I remember because I will always be one of those little ones in need of blessing.

Perhaps that is why a twisted crucifix has also engraved itself on my heart. A brown-skinned Jesus hangs heavily on the nails, scarred and lifeless, his body shredded by torture. I saw it in a Spanish cathedral and couldn't bring myself to take a picture of it. It's too brutal. But I cannot forget it. Every year, I find it on the internet and let it take me in.

Looking at it, I see the suffering of forgotten people in places I will never be. I feel the Love who embraces them all and forgives everyone, everywhere, everything. And I weep, loving the One who bears suffering and shame, that I may know the Great Heart for whom our aching hearts long.

**Imprint your image on my heart, Lord Jesus, that nothing may erase the beauty of your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Sunday school teachers and children

**Psalm 22:23-31; Genesis 16:7-15; Mark 8:27-30**



## Second Sunday in Lent

**[Jesus said,] “Let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.” (v. 34)**

“What are you willing to die for?” The question came out of the blue during my certification interview as I was preparing to be ordained.

I stumbled, then mumbled something inane about the great creeds of the faith. It was all nonsense, of course, and naïve. I should have known better. Only love can liberate a human heart to sacrifice itself for something greater.

Don't just think of great deeds or a soldier dying in battle. The reality is closer to home. Imagine a parent or spouse giving up the kind of life they always wanted for the needs of their beloved. Picture an anonymous soul giving their time, comfort, and energy just because someone needs what they can give.

It happens all the time. And it's beautiful, every time. For every time we pick up the cross of loving this world in all its broken splendor, we participate in the life of Jesus—alive with the Love that he is.

**Thank you for those who have  
loved and sacrificed for me, Lord Jesus.  
They shine with your beauty. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Volunteers at shelters and food banks

**Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31;  
Romans 4:13-25**

## Shared delight

### **Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. (v. 3)**

A mother entered the library as I walked toward the door. Her daughter, maybe three, bounced eight feet ahead, her head bobbing, dark curls dancing, a portrait of delight at the sheer joy of being alive. Her mother and I shared a silent smile and kept on our way.

Would to God that we shared more such moments. They are a sacrament of God's joy, God's delight, which shatters our sober, staid notions of what God is like.

Consider Abraham and Sarah. They laughed at God's lunacy when the Lord said Sarah would have a child at her advanced age. "Don't laugh," God said. "It's going to happen, and when it does, name the child *Isaac*."

There are a couple of ways to translate this name. One is "May God laugh with delight," which suggests God was more than a little pleased with Isaac's birth. I suspect God was just as pleased to turn the sarcastic snickers of the parents-to-be into shared delight—God, Sarah, Abraham, all of them, joined in one heart, laughing.

**Open my heart to see the beauty of human love  
and joy, knowing that you, Lord, are in all of it. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Abused children

**Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Hebrews 1:8-12**

## Heaven's light

**But as it is, they desire a better country,  
that is, a heavenly one. (v. 16)**

We are born on fire, convinced we are intended for a great love. It's universally human. "Our hearts are restless until we rest in thee," St. Augustine wrote sixteen hundred years ago, and it's as true now as ever.

No matter how hard we try or how much we cram into our days, nothing is quite enough to still the inner restlessness. We hunger for that "better country" where the heart's ancient longing finds the home for which every human soul is created.

Such was the hunger that stirred Abraham and Sarah to leave the place of their birth, trusting God's promise to bless their journey. They are a portrait of life and faith.

We live day-to-day, hoping to enter that better country we cannot yet see. But amid the mundane, moments come that glisten with the Love who draws us on—a brilliant sunset, an infant's smile, the sublime sweetness of loving and being loved. Each glimmers with heaven's light, fanning our hope, guiding our way, drawing us home.

**Breathe your peace into my soul, Lord Jesus, that  
I may know the sweet grace of being home. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are dying

**Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; Genesis 22:1-19**

## One smile

**Seek the LORD and his strength;  
seek his presence continually. (v. 4)**

Morning comes. I sit in the corner chair, open my Bible, and seek the face I long to see: Jesus. It's rather like coming home after being away, when I enter the door and ascend the stairs, eager for the smile of the soul with whom I have lived for more than fifty years now. Without that smile, I wither.

My morning practice is tried and true. From their beginning, the people of Israel recited the stories of how God had chosen, loved, freed, forgiven, and blessed them. They read and remembered, longing for the light of God's presence—"seeking God's face," as many versions translate this verse.

Centuries separate us from those ancient days, but this ever-so-human need remains. We long for the blessed face who shines the light of everlasting love on our little lives. In Love's holy presence, we are renewed and restored into the souls the Holy One created us to be, alive and well in the warmth of divine favor.

All it takes is one smile.

**Enfold me in the light of your presence, Lord Jesus,  
that I may live this day for you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Marriages

**Jeremiah 30:12-22; John 12:36-43**



## Searchlight

### **You shall have no other gods before me. (v. 3)**

During Lenten worship, our congregation prays the ten commandments as part of the confession of sins. We walk through the whole list, one by one, pausing for reflection. Memories of deeds done and undone race through my mind. I cringe.

I'd rather avoid the whole thing. It trains a searchlight on seventy years of living, making me painfully aware of hurts I've caused, relationships I've betrayed, and good intentions on which I've failed to act.

But this encounter with myself also moves me to pray for people and hurts I cannot repair, begging God to comfort those who are beyond my reach. I picture them encircled in rays of sunlight, God's love penetrating to wounded places in their hearts, healing what no one else can.

Each one becomes a beloved soul, treasured by God. I see them with compassion, the way God sees them—and me. It's a moment of knowing who we are—beloved sinners, all of us, welcomed home.

**Receive me into the arms of your healing love, O Lord. Cleanse my heart and make me whole. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Healing and forgiveness in our society

**Psalm 19; Exodus 19:1-9a; 1 Peter 2:4-10**

## Creation's song of praise

### The firmament proclaims [God's] handiwork. (v. 1)

Scientific reports often enthrall me. Lately, I'm interested in noises made by nature that we don't or can't normally hear but that can be recorded and adjusted so they're audible. I'm fascinated by the many sounds research has identified, including ocean waves' hum, the earth's chorus recorded by NASA in outer space, sand dunes' singing, aquatic choirs, and even plants communicating with each other! I'm amazed at how God created a universe that constantly proclaims God's handiwork—even without speech (v. 3).

I long to recognize creation's testimony to our Maker. But do I wait patiently, like Elijah (1 Kings 19:12-13), to hear God speak out of the silence? Since I'm also part of God's awesome, often-silent creation, do I have a wordless song? I wonder if my actions praise God and share our Creator's righteous glory with all people. In harmony with nature, does my heart rejoice as its meditations proclaim that God is my rock and redeemer?

**Creator God, we thank you that we are part of your awesome creation. Hear our songs of praise! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Scientists who record creation's songs

**Exodus 19:9b-15; Acts 7:30-40**

## **We know something!**

**We proclaim Christ crucified, . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God. (vv. 23-24)**

“I know something you don’t know!” You may have heard this taunt used by children to exclude one another. Children, like adults, soon decide that knowledge is desirable. Knowing how to work the system, gain influence, and access resources or opportunities is key to achieving worldly success. Insiders—people who know society’s rules—can exclude folks they deem undeserving of power or prestige. This all seems smart by society’s standards.

But along came Jesus to fulfill God’s “foolish” plan that vulnerability, weakness, and a humiliating crucifixion would result in power. Jesus even was an ally who welcomed outsiders to be his insider friends. Judged by the world’s form of wisdom, none of this makes sense. Yet God’s plan worked gloriously! Jesus’ death on the cross made salvation available to all. Now we can say and share with others, “We know that Christ crucified is God’s power and wisdom!”

**God of vulnerable power, thank you for sending your Son to save the world in unexpected ways. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Folks serving without power or prestige

**Psalm 19; Exodus 19:16-25; Mark 9:2-8**



## **Third Sunday in Lent**

**After he was raised from the dead,  
his disciples remembered . . .  
and they believed. (v. 22)**

Have you ever said, “Give me time to let that sink in”? It’s hard to process information that’s different from our past experiences, current understandings, or future expectations. It seems the disciples needed time after they experienced Jesus’ death and resurrection to understand what he’d meant about raising a destroyed temple in three days (v. 19). It’s a gift to have time to develop new understandings that alter our viewpoints.

In these days of countless divisions, we can offer the gift of listening and time so people can reflect and gain new insights. We can walk with our neighbors as they shift their perceptions—perceptions we also may have held. We might kindly engage a person by saying we once felt as they do. Then we can share and explain experiences that led to our new, changed beliefs. Jesus gave the disciples time to reflect on his teachings; then they believed. Let’s also give each other time to reflect and gain new insights.

**God of insight, thank you for experiences and time  
to reflect so that our belief in you grows. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Users of ELCA Racial Justice  
Ministry resources

**Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

## **To get a good job, follow Christ**

**For the wisdom of this world  
is foolishness with God. (v. 19)**

A 1965 slogan, "To get a good job, get a good education," encouraged youth to stay in school. That's often good advice. But many of the early disciples were fishermen with little formal education. Jesus called them into jobs of service. Jesus also trained educated followers to serve. So, anyone can serve; as the saying goes, "God doesn't call the equipped but equips the called."

Education is one way God equips some followers. Yet it's problematic if we think that faith and intellect are opposed; that a "good job" leads to power, prestige, and possessions, not service, sacrifice, and salvation. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we learn *God's* wisdom. It's wise to know we "belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (v. 23). It's wise to know that a truly good job lets our abilities and training serve others.

How about this new slogan: "To get a good job, follow Christ; to gain God's loving wisdom, read God's word."

**God of true wisdom, keep us ever focused on your word and on following your Son. In his name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Seminary professors and theologians

**Psalm 84; 1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22**

## **We can advocate too**

**[Christ] entered into heaven . . . to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (v. 24)**

*Merriam-Webster* says an advocate “supports or promotes the interests of a cause or group” or “pleads the cause of another.” Effective advocacy often involves frequent, face-to-face contacts to develop relationships with decision-makers.

The book of Hebrews lays out a theology of Jesus as *our* advocate. By his one-and-done death and resurrection (v. 26), Jesus “appear[ed] in the presence of God on our behalf.” Of course he didn’t need to *develop* a relationship with God; along with the Holy Spirit, Jesus and God the creator are eternally connected. Indeed, all three are God, and *all three* advocate for us.

So then, how can *we* advocate for justice, for groups working for the good of all, and for neighbors in need? We can always pray for our neighbors. And as earthly advocates, we’re more effective when we work *with* each other. Together, we can develop relationships with decision-makers and strive for abundant life on behalf of all.

**Heavenly God, as Jesus is in your presence on our behalf, help us advocate with our neighbors. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The ELCA e-Advocacy network

**Psalm 84; 2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19**

## **An immeasurable relationship**

**For a day in your courts is better than  
a thousand elsewhere. (v. 10)**

When prayerfully facing a difficult decision, do you make pro and con lists of the factors to help identify the better choice? But not all points are equally important. So you could draw a force-field analysis of various arrows to weigh the pros and cons. Or you might construct a decision-making matrix with numerical values for the choices' attributes. Comparing is complex!

The psalmist quantitatively compares “a day” of lowly work in close relationship with God to “a thousand [days]” elsewhere. But time isn't the deciding factor—a relationship with God is *immeasurably* better! To walk righteously and trust God is the qualitatively superior choice because it means knowing the blessings of God's favor, care, and goodness. I, too, can't measure or even comprehend the abundant blessings of being in relationship with God. As the psalmist concludes, “O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you” (v. 12).

**God, we praise and thank you for bringing us into  
immeasurably good relationship with you! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Data analysts who aid decision-making

**Ezra 6:1-16; Mark 11:15-19**

## **Have patience!**

**But the people became impatient on the way.  
The people spoke against God. (vv. 4-5)**

The Israelites whined, "We wanna go home! We're hungry! We're thirsty!" This reminds me of family road trips when we adults answered a child's queries, "Are we there yet? How much farther?" with a children's song that urged everyone, "Have patience" and "Don't be in such a hurry," because hurry causes worry (Hernandez & Powell, 1977). The song also reminds us that God is patient. In the wilderness, God faithfully provided the Israelites with healing, food, water, and arrival in the promised land. Yet, despite God's proven faithfulness, we're often impatient.

What causes our impatience? Maybe we have real pain or needs. We might be annoyed when God doesn't grant our selfish request. We may want to be in control. Or does it go deeper? Sometimes I fail to trust God. Then I become insecure and fearful; as the song says, "[I] only start to worry." As kids must trust adults on road trips, we will do well to have patience and trust our Heavenly Parent during our life journeys.

**God our provider, forgive our impatience. Help us trust in you, knowing that you are faithful. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Safety for people on road trips

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Genesis 9:8-17;  
Ephesians 1:3-6**



## **We can claim it!**

**O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever. (v. 1)**

After holding on the phone for customer service or waiting in a long checkout line, I've complained, "It took *forever!*" That's a huge exaggeration. Yet there are times in life that feel like forever. Children waiting for loved ones, fun experiences, or "big kid" privileges think the wait takes forever. If we're anticipating good or bad news, fear of forever delays can seize us. When we have severe illnesses, lengthy recoveries, or critical needs, improvements or changes often seem like forever processes. Human thinking is limited by our world's time constraints; we can't comprehend forever.

Yet Psalm 107 speaks of "forever." It starts by reminding us that God's "steadfast love endures forever." Can we even begin to understand God's enduring love and wonderful works for all of us (v. 21)? Even if we don't fully comprehend God's constant love, can we recognize it by faith? Yes! We can't explain it, but we can claim it: God's love is forever!

**Eternal God, even though we cannot comprehend  
your forever love, we gratefully rejoice in it! Amen.**

Prayer concern: People waiting for life-changing news

**Daniel 12:5-13; Ephesians 1:7-14**

## Getting the sequence right

**For we are what [God] has made us,  
created in Christ Jesus for good works. (v. 10)**

How many good works have you done in your life? Surely too many to count! But are they enough to earn your salvation? Never! Luther said we're simultaneously saints and sinners and that we're justified by grace alone. In the words of the writer of Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith . . . ; it is the gift of God—not the result of works" (vv. 8-9).

Yet verse 10 says we're created for good works. Is this a contradiction? No. It's a matter of getting the cause-and-effect sequence right. Luther explained, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (*Freedom of a Christian*, 1520). In other words, we're freed *from* trying to save ourselves, which is impossible anyway. Counting our good works is futile. But grace through faith frees us *for* good works that serve God and our neighbors. We're saved *by* grace *for* good works.

**Merciful God, thank you for freeing us  
by grace through faith, that we may do  
good works of love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA ministers of word and  
service (deacons)

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Numbers 20:22-29;  
John 3:1-13**



## Fourth Sunday in Lent

**God did not send the Son . . . to condemn  
the world, but . . . that the world might  
be saved. (v. 17)**

What's your first reaction if someone sneaks up and shouts, "Gotcha!"? You may fear you're being accused of wrongdoing. Do you ever imagine this kind of "gotcha God"? When difficult things happen beyond our control or plans, we may feel God is punishing us. Or if things go wrong for someone else, we might assume God is condemning them. Granted, our unloving choices do and should have consequences. But God didn't send Jesus into the world just to catch us in our sins and condemn us. God isn't *that* kind of gotcha God.

Rather, God is a God of infinite love, far beyond our understanding. God sent Jesus to save us and to welcome us into the divine family of abundant mercy, forgiveness, and grace. So, God *is* a gotcha God, after all, but in a very different way—like when a family adopts a pet and celebrates their "Gotcha Day." God has *gotcha*—and everyone else—in love!

**God of life, thank you for sending your Son to us  
and being a gotcha God of love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who think God only  
condemns them

**Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22;  
Ephesians 2:1-10**

## **Creation's healing abilities**

**The LORD showed him a piece of wood;  
he threw it into the water, and the water  
became sweet. (v. 25)**

The Israelites endured three days without water and then found only non-potable water. A common guideline says we can only survive about three days without water. The Israelites were in serious trouble! Moses cried out to God on behalf of the Israelites. God responded and met their need by showing Moses a piece of wood in nature to heal nature's bitter water.

Dr. Terence Fretheim of Luther Seminary commented extensively on how God has created a world in which nature's diversity can often heal itself! But as species become extinct, decreasing biodiversity, the earth's ecosystems lose their resilience to change and are less able to sustain health. Some people who rely most directly on nature live in persistent poverty, thus suffering the greatest harm when environmental changes occur. God calls us to care for our human and nonhuman neighbors. It's vital that we protect God's awesome creation so it can sustain and heal itself—and us!

**Creator and Healer, thank you for making  
our wondrously diverse world. Help us to  
care for it! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Environmentalists who care for creation

**Psalm 107:1-16; Hebrews 3:1-6**

## **God is good all the time!**

**God is faithful, and . . . will also provide the way out so that you may . . . endure it. (v. 13)**

When we're struggling, folks sometimes echo the above verse, saying, "Don't worry, God won't test you beyond your strength." When I'm told this, I feel alone. I'd prefer they promised to help me bear my burdens (Galatians 6:2). Even more, I'd like them to remind me that Jesus invites us to take his yoke—like a yoked team of animals working together (Matthew 11:28-30), except that Jesus carries most of the burden so our portion is light. Above all, when people quote 1 Corinthians 10:13, I want them to say *all* of it: testing *will* come, but this verse assures us that "God is faithful, and . . . with the testing he will also provide the way out" of problems so we can endure.

God's faithfulness inspires a common call-and-response in which the leader proclaims, "God is good," and the community responds, "All the time!" Then the leader repeats, "All the time," and the community reaffirms, "God is good!" This is why we can endure—because all the time, our God is faithful and good.

**Faithful God, help us bear each other's burdens.**

**Remind us that Jesus helps us to endure. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel alone during struggles

**Psalm 107:1-16; Numbers 20:1-13**

## **Follow to know where you're going**

**[Jesus answered,] "I know where I have come from and where I am going." (v. 14)**

In the darkness of a recent power outage, I stumbled around. I honestly could say, "I'm totally in the dark!" I'm also "directionally challenged." The saying "She can't find her way out of a paper bag" describes me. When I enter office hallways or come upon unfamiliar intersections, I become bewildered. And this is often true in my life—I can be in the dark, metaphorically speaking, and bewildered about which way I should go.

Busy schedules, the world's demands, and alluring promises about paths to success can cause us to feel lost in making daily and lifelong decisions. Thankfully, Jesus tells us he's the light (v. 12), and he knows where he's going. So if we follow Jesus, our journeys will be well lit, and we can know where we're going. We'll still face decisions, but our divine Compass—Christ—will clarify our path by pointing us to love of God and love of neighbors. It makes best sense to follow Jesus—he loves us, is our guiding light, and knows where he's going!

**Loving God, thank you for giving us your Son to light our paths and guide our journeys to you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA college and university advisors

**Psalm 107:1-16; Isaiah 60:15-22**

## **Forgetting can be good**

**[The LORD says,] I will forgive their iniquity,  
and remember their sin no more. (v. 34)**

Did you learn multiplication through repeated practice? Or memorize lines for a play by rehearsing them over and over? Lack of repetition can lead to forgetting information. But forgetting can be good. I'm grateful God forgives and forgets my sins!

At the same time, "Forgive and forget" is a standard to which only God can truly be held. In certain cases of trauma and abuse, we can't afford to forget or we may stay in danger. "Forgetting" may also take the form of repression, which isn't healing at all. And if we inflicted pain on another, we must remember our misdeeds to learn from and avoid repeating them.

In the case of less traumatic acts, forgiveness can be achieved by setting the hurt behind us so it no longer blocks a relationship's healing and growth. Even that kind of "forgetting" is hard. But in this case we can choose not to rehearse wrongs by repeating them in our thoughts and conversations. Forgetting past sins in this way may allow us to heal.

**Gracious God, when we can't or shouldn't  
forget sins, help us forgive by laying them  
before you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Mediators working toward reconciliation

**Psalms 51:1-12; Isaiah 30:15-18; Hebrews 4:1-13**

## **No excuses**

**For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me. (v. 3)**

Every New Year I resolve to apologize without making excuses. Similarly, this psalmist confesses their sins without making excuses—such as blaming tricky situations, brutal circumstances, temptations, enemies, or God. The psalmist also knows that only God can make them right by creating something new (v. 10). Luther believed this psalm demonstrates true repentance.

True repentance is hard. Excuses are easy. Do I make excuses because I don't really want to admit my sin? Or do I wrongly think I can make things right by myself without God? Instead, I need to recognize my sin, admit it, repent, ask forgiveness, change my behavior, and move on. We can get stuck in remorse if we turn away from God's ever-present grace. This gets in the way of us moving forward into loving service toward God and our neighbors. Maybe Lent is also a good time for resolutions. We can resolve to admit our faults without making excuses, recognize God's grace, and then move on to serve.

**Renewing God, help us repent of our sins  
without excuses. Restore us to serve willingly  
with joy. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People working to repent  
without excuses

**Exodus 30:1-10; Hebrews 4:14–5:4**



## From “I” to “we”

**Although [Jesus] was a Son,  
he learned obedience. (v. 8)**

Even the Son of God gave up control, and through his death he became our salvation. Our lessons in giving up control start in childhood. Growing into family and community expands our “I” sentences into “we” sentences.

My ten-year-old nephew Tyler recently gave me a tour of his newest Lego masterpiece: a two-story house, complete with a family and plenty of conveniences. “I made an elevator up to the roof patio,” he said proudly. “But see, it has a code. Only I know it!” A tiny car sat in the driveway, with two people in the front seat. “I can open the garage door,” he said. “Or if I don’t want to let Mom and Dad in, I can close it again, quick.” Tyler was clearly in control!

Because he is growing up in a faith-filled family, I trust that Tyler will learn to think differently both about his Lego creations and about his life. Moving from “I” to “we” is hard. But living in self-giving community is what Jesus has modeled for us. And surely he knows best!

**Patient God, guide me in following Jesus’ model,  
turning control into cooperation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Presidents of congregation councils

**Psalm 51:1-12; Habakkuk 3:2-13; John 12:1-11**



## Fifth Sunday in Lent

**[Jesus said,] “And I, when I am lifted up . . . ,  
will draw all people to myself.” (v. 32)**

It's logical that Greek questioners would approach Philip, a disciple with a Greek name: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (v. 21). Jesus takes their inquiry as a sign; now is the time to fulfill his purpose. And he must do that through the cross.

If you are a planner, you probably start with a goal and then map out the steps. Jesus knew his goal: to draw *all* people to himself. His followers tried to walk in his steps. It wasn't easy. They found themselves more often sticking together than reaching outside their circle. Jesus' eyes, however, were on those who did not yet know him, no matter their ancestry, language, or customs.

Where are your congregation's eyes focused? Outward toward those whose nationality, social status, or skin color doesn't match their own? Are their ears open and eager to hear questions from those who might not “fit in”? Jesus' plan to draw *all* people to himself continues to unfold. How can you partner in this work?

**God of all, your generous plan is for  
all people. Make us partners in it, we pray.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Refugees sponsored by churches

**Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10**

## Seeing deeply

**Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory. (v. 10)**

The stone tablets of the law Moses carried glowed so fiercely that his face reflected their glory. No one could look directly at him! But Paul rejoices in the new covenant, bright with the life-giving glow of the Spirit.

Imagining Moses' distorted face brings to my mind the first few weeks in my former congregation. Still under COVID-19 restrictions, everyone wore a mask. Some people I recognized by the distinctive design of their masks. Gradually, I learned to call these masked faces by name.

When the masks came off, however, this pastor was in trouble! Once again I struggled to match faces with names. As we laughed together at my stumbles, a new closeness grew, through which we felt the Spirit at work.

No doubt we will still need to reach for our protective masks at times. But once the danger has lessened, the joy of seeing each other's whole faces outshines our caution. We were created to know one another fully, in the joyful freedom of God's love!

**Holy One, enable us to see and know each other more fully, in the light of your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Health care workers required to wear masks

**Psalm 119:9-16; Isaiah 43:8-13**

## **Joseph, Guardian of Jesus**

**... and Jacob the father of Joseph  
the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus  
was born, who is called the Messiah. (v. 16)**

Today we remember Joseph's role in the Messiah's birth. Look earlier in chapter 1 to see Jesus' ancestry detailed by Matthew, with Joseph squarely anchored in that lineage of forty-plus generations. He would become a key piece in Jesus' story!

On a visit with a church couple who struggle with chronic health concerns, I caught up with their story through Clarice, while Barry sat quietly in front of a large jigsaw puzzle. Several spots still had holes, and he'd given up on one of them. "That piece is just not here!" he complained. I eyed the open spot for a moment, fingered a piece that looked like a fit, and slid it in. Beginner's luck, I assumed. Then Barry exclaimed, "Clarice, you won't believe this! I've hunted an hour for this one piece, and Pastor went right to it!"

The right piece can fill out a jigsaw puzzle or a life. Joseph was that piece for the holy family. In whose life might God place you as just the right piece?

**All-knowing God, through your love use me  
to make a difference in someone's life.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who live with chronic illness

**2 Samuel 7:4, 8-16; Psalm 89:1-29; Romans 4:13-18**

## **A promise to count on**

**I am with you, . . . according to the promise  
that I made you. . . . My spirit abides  
among you; do not fear. (vv. 4-5)**

God's people had returned to their homeland from exile in Babylon. But with no temple and no leadership, how would they worship? How would order be established? The prophet Haggai foresaw a new community identical to the old: a restored temple, prosperity in the land, and a ruler from the line of David. But scholars tell us that different systems and new forms of worship had already taken hold. The old would never be fully restored.

We church folks know a little about exile and its damage. At the beginning of the pandemic, our church buildings were closed. Those who wanted to worship had to "tune in" from home. Even as congregations resumed gathering in person, fewer attended in person. Moving forward, churches may never fully rebound.

But God made a promise we can count on! Haggai spoke it to Judah's ruler and people: "My Spirit abides among you; do not fear." No matter how full or empty our pews, the Holy Spirit will never leave us. That promise stands firmer than the church itself!

**Faithful God, teach us to trust your promise  
never to leave us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Rural churches striving to grow

**Psalm 119:9-16; John 12:34-50**

## **Learning from the best**

**Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (vv. 4-5)**

Have you ever worked alongside folks who simply had to have their own way? Sometimes in churches, workplace teams, or families we find one person who cannot go along with the will of the others. No doubt Paul faced at least two or three such strong-willed folks in the church at Philippi. “Lone rangers,” we might call them.

Instead of targeting one person, however, Paul addresses the whole community of believers. He bases his instruction on the one they worship, Christ Jesus. Learn humility by watching Jesus, he pleads. But his message goes deeper: let Jesus’ mind be your mind.

A tall order for them and for us! How can we have the mind of Jesus? In this Lenten season, might an intentional effort at humility—taking last place instead of first, or listening rather than arguing—intensify your closeness to the One who humbled himself for God’s purpose? His humility offers us eternal assurance that all of us, lone rangers included, will know him fully.

**Lord of our lives, thank you for living among us  
as our example and our Savior. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Children in troubled families

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-8**

## **Stars in the world**

**Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may . . . shine like stars. (vv. 14-15)**

Having never taken a course in astronomy, I assumed for years that stars reflected the light of other bright bodies near them. But no, stars generate their own glow. The word “star” in ancient Greek can also mean “light,” and perhaps that word better suits Paul’s thinking. He knew that only by the light of the “word of life” (v. 16) could the Philippian believers shine brightly. Their lives should radiate not their own glory, but the word of life at work in them.

In a culture of achievement such as my own, shiny trophies are awarded to athletic teams and individuals who excel in their sport. Often schools display these trophies in hallways or gym foyers. Of course, teachers, parents, and grandparents want to cheer for students whose talents gain them such recognition. We want them to shine like stars!

But who will reflect the light of Christ for them? Is there a young person you are teaching to hold onto the word of life more tightly than to the world’s glory?

**Shining Lord, let my life and my love always reflect your brightness. Amen.**

Prayer concern: High school coaches

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:1-9**

## All in!

**Immediately [Bartimaeus] regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way. (v. 52)**

In these verses we meet two kinds of Jesus-followers. First are those who have just heard some hard teaching about who will be first and last in the kingdom of God, plus a shocking prediction of death. They stick with him but are filled with dread.

Just outside Jericho, a very different follower approaches Jesus. Sitting by the roadside, a blind man named Bartimaeus cries out for attention. When Jesus calls him forward to ask, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus doesn’t hesitate: “Let me see again” (v. 51). Once healed, he, too, sticks with Jesus. Even when Jesus says, “Go on your way,” Bartimaeus chooses Jesus’ way as his own. From courageous roadside beggar to eager Jesus-follower, Bartimaeus is “all in”!

When in your own life have you experienced Jesus’ healing presence? As you stick with him, how might you encourage someone else to do the same? What would it take for you, like Bartimaeus, to be “all in”?

**Loving Savior, thank you for touching my life. Strengthen my faith so that I am eager to share it. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who long to speak more boldly about their faith

**Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16**





## **Sunday of the Passion / Palm Sunday**

**Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “. . . Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (vv. 9-10)**

This story gets noisy! Watching the Messiah ride into town, the crowd lets praises fly with wild, contagious joy!

Wild joy on Palm Sunday? I've never been able to create that! My first congregation tried borrowing a donkey. He came with instructions: "Don't try to ride him." Fact is, once he was unloaded, he wouldn't move another step. The teenager dressed as Jesus tried pulling him along, with no luck. Soon the palm-branch wavers gave up and the "Hosanna" chorus quieted.

In another congregation we practiced our loud "Hosanna in the highest!" in advance. But snaking in a long line around the parking lot, the voices got way out of sync. By the time the organist began "All glory, laud, and honor" (ELW 344), no one had energy left to sing.

This Palm Sunday, don't let the "Hosanna" fade away! Sing out your praises! The more joyfully we receive the Messiah on the donkey, the deeper our love will be on Good Friday as we follow him to the cross.

**Jesus, from palms and praises to scorn and pain,  
you gave yourself for us. Thank you! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Worship planning teams

**Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11;  
Mark 14:1-15:47**

## **Monday in Holy Week**

### **The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (v. 3)**

In your favorite movie, whether a 1950s classic romance or a contemporary thriller, you can probably name a scene during which the world stands still. A first kiss, perhaps, or a last surge of courage in the face of death. Whatever the moment, it's unforgettable.

The aroma of Mary's perfume, poured over the rough callouses of Jesus' feet, creates such a moment. The world stands still. Made from precious nard, that perfume would have cost nearly a year's wages! It was meant to anoint a body for burial. But on this night Mary pours it out—all of it—on Jesus' feet.

Breathe deeply! Take in the fragrance! Feel the love that binds Mary and Jesus together.

Judas breaks this moment with an angry question, not from his heart but from his pocketbook. Even in the church we juggle pocketbook and heart. But isn't the love of the Savior, enfleshed every time we receive his body and blood, worth the pouring out of both heart and treasure, no matter the cost?

**Jesus, Mary poured out all she had for you.**

**May we be bold to do the same. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Treasurers of congregations

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15**

## **Tuesday in Holy Week**

### **For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. (v. 25)**

The Corinthian believers are quarreling over which teacher deserves their loyalty. Paul draws their attention away from personal attachments, to the cross of Christ. To call the cross the source of their salvation seems foolish to them. But God's foolishness is indeed wiser than our wisdom.

We adults often discount the wisdom of those who seem naïve, especially the young. Truth is, even our youngest churchgoers can be wise teachers. When my congregation wanted to create a leadership role for young children, a craftsman in the church stepped forward. He fashioned a wooden kid-sized cross, decorated with colorful beads. The kids loved it! As worship ended, they rushed forward, eager to carry the children's cross. Each Sunday a different young cross-bearer led the children out, followed by the crucifer and worship leaders.

The children's giddy delight took hold in the congregation. A little godly foolishness can be a dose of wisdom for us all.

**Jesus, you called children to your side.**

**Teach us to honor their wisdom and**

**take pleasure in their joy. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who strive to involve children  
in worship

**Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; John 12:20-36**

## **Wednesday in Holy Week**

**Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, . . . let us run . . . the race that is set before us. (v. 1)**

Who is in your cloud of witnesses? Perhaps a parent, grandparent, or long-ago best friend? Just before today's verses, the writer of Hebrews names witnesses in the faith who cheer us on even now: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Samuel, and others.

During a small-group adult Bible study I was facilitating, two readers became the voices of brothers Jacob and Esau, competing for their father Isaac's blessing. Jacob cheats Esau, conniving to win the blessing for himself. After Curtis read Esau's despairing plea, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also" (Genesis 27:38), he announced tearfully, "That was me. Esau is me!" Curtis had felt again his childhood hurt over his father's preference for his brother. But in speaking Esau's question aloud, he'd also realized that God knew his own story. What a gift!

Scripture stories are full of characters God knows deeply, with voices like our own. What voices in scripture have cheered you on?

**Dearest Jesus, thank you for scripture stories  
that draw me closer to you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Siblings who struggle to feel valued

**Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70; John 13:21-32**

## **Maundy Thursday**

**Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” (v. 8)**

In this story Jesus gets “up close and personal” with his disciples. In a much older story, God’s boundaries feel tighter. When God calls to Moses from a burning bush, Moses replies, “Here I am.” But God pushes back: “Come no closer! . . . the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:4-5).

Now Peter’s boundaries are tight. He pushes back when Jesus comes too close. After all, foot-washing is a servant’s job. But in this moment Jesus wants to demonstrate love through serving. Peter says no, with feeling!

The intimacy of this way of loving makes Peter squirm. Closeness to Jesus may do the same to people we know. Some may fear he will challenge their lifestyle, while others may routinely avoid close commitment. But what Jesus says to Peter holds true for us: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” How might you encourage someone you know to let Jesus come closer?

**Holy One, you served others in love.  
Teach me to follow your model, even when  
closeness feels uncomfortable. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Residents and workers at  
homeless shelters

**Exodus 12:1-4 [5-10] 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

## Good Friday

**[Jesus] said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (19:30)**

As the passion story is read on Good Friday, emotion builds. We follow Jesus through betrayal, flogging, ridicule, and excruciating pain. Hanging on the cross, he lovingly commends his mother to the care of the disciple John. He asks for water but receives only sour wine. Finally, he releases his spirit in death.

This story feels most powerful to me when read by congregational voices, both adult and youth. Each episode may be accompanied by prayer, a hymn, and the extinguishing of a candle. The story’s slow movement offers time for reflection.

Those who read it aloud may struggle with their own emotions. I have watched a reader pause in the moments of Jesus’ agony, then labor through tears to speak his final words. When we stumble over words that touch us deeply, we bless one another. What a gift, then, to hear the story together, in all its starkness and tenderness.

This Holy Week, with whom will you share the Good Friday story?

**Dear Jesus, strengthen me to draw near  
the cross on Good Friday. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Acolytes, crucifers, and lay readers

**Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16-25**

## **Vigil of Easter**

**United with [Christ] in a death like his,  
we will certainly be united with him  
in a resurrection like his. (v. 5)**

The first three verses of this Easter Vigil passage are often heard at funeral services. There you may see signs that witness to those words: the baptismal font, where in baptism we die to sin and are raised to new life; the Christ candle burning with the light of Christ, which is present in the living and the dead; the pall covering the casket or urn, a reminder that Christ's righteousness clothes us into eternity. We are Christ's forever.

At the Saturday evening Easter Vigil, as we anticipate Jesus' resurrection, water from the baptismal font might be sprinkled on us by worship leaders. Or we might dip our fingers into the font and touch our foreheads, remembering our baptism and promised resurrection. We might even witness the baptism of a child or adult.

On this Easter eve, whether at a Vigil service or in your home, you can remember with water that you are held by God forever. Let that promise carry you joyfully into Resurrection Day!

**God of new life, renew in us your promises. Bring us  
with awe and wonder to resurrection joy! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who mourn loved ones at Easter

**Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 143; John 20:1-18**



## Easter Sunday

**So they . . . fled from the tomb, for terror  
and amazement had seized them;  
and they said nothing to anyone. (v. 8)**

Jesus is a most unsettling character: his teachings, his reckless socializing with the unclean, his baffling parables, his criticism of religious officials, his unexplainable healings. Even his own followers don't know what to do with him.

After his death, the two Marys and Salome finally do know what to do. Here is a task they can handle—anointing his dead body. They head to the tomb, but how will they get in? Again they are baffled, finding the stone removed. From inside the tomb a white-robed man speaks, saying the risen Jesus is headed to Galilee. “Go and tell the others,” he instructs. But terrified, they run away.

Wait . . . is there more? Was the rest of Mark's account lost? Though some biblical editors have offered alternate endings, many doubt their authenticity.

What if Mark *meant* to leave the ending just as it is? How will your life and mine tell the rest of the story?

**Risen Christ, I believe you are alive!  
Empower my life with yours so I can  
be bold to tell your story. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who question their faith

**Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11**



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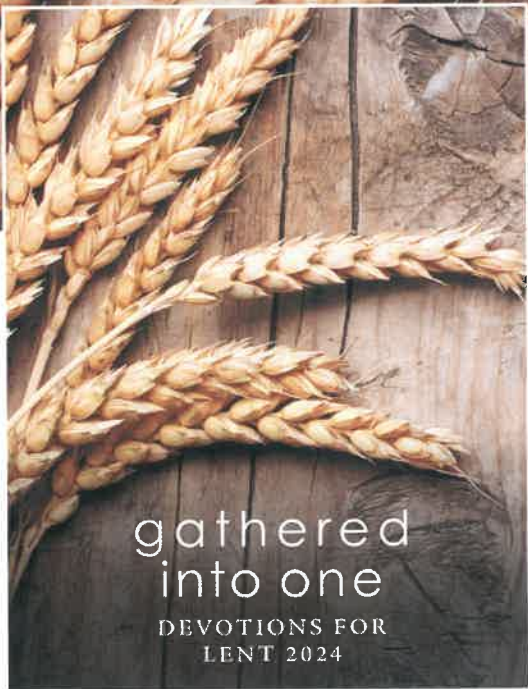
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March 7

**1 Corinthians 12:14-15, 18**

The body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. . . . But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

**Unity in diversity**

Our bodies are incredible. Your heart beats and your lungs breathe your entire life, without you consciously thinking about it. Eyes are masterful instruments that refract light. Many people blink every three to five seconds. The tongue has 8,000 tastebuds. You have 100,000 miles of blood vessels. Everything works together to make possible all the things you do.

Paul pictures the church as a body, the body of Christ. When the church functions as it is meant to do, the many parts do not try to one-up or criticize each other. The foot doesn't see itself as less important than the hand. The church needs all the parts to contribute their gifts and work together as one.

What would happen if all the hands went to one church and all the feet went to another? Ditto eyes and ears. In a polarized society, we are at risk of that today. The problem Paul sees in Corinth is still with us.

God creates a kaleidoscope of people and gifts. Our differences are a strength, not a weakness, when we listen to one another and learn how to work together.

**Prayer**

God, for the great diversity in the church and

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