

Christ in Our Home

April, May, June
2022

LARGE PRINT EDITION



Prayers

Morning

Your earth has awakened, O God, and so have I. As night gives way to day, may death give way to life. Plant life in me, that with the dirt I might foster your word of eternal spring. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Evening

The earth must rest, O God, and so must I. I also place to rest my failures from today and my fears for tomorrow. I entrust them to you. Take them, till them, and tomorrow make them into something new. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Mealtime

Your earth now feeds us, O God. You call farmers and ranchers and chefs as co-creators with you. And now the fruits of their labor are ours to taste. Help us to savor and share, that all might feast. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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Festivals and commemorations

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

Apr. 4	Benedict the African, confessor, 1589
Apr. 6	Albrecht Dürer, 1528; Matthias Grünewald, 1529; Lucas Cranach, 1553; artists
Apr. 9	Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian, 1945
Apr. 10	Mikael Agricola, Bishop of Turku, 1557
Apr. 19	Olavus Petri, priest, 1552; Laurentius Petri, Bishop of Uppsala, 1573; renewers of the church
Apr. 21	Anselm, Bishop of Canterbury, 1109
Apr. 23	Toyohiko Kagawa, renewer of society, 1960
Apr. 25	Mark, Evangelist
Apr. 29	Catherine of Siena, theologian, 1380
May 1	Philip and James, Apostles
May 2	Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, 373
May 4	Monica, mother of Augustine, 387
May 8	Julian of Norwich, renewer of the church, c. 1416
May 9	Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, renewer of the church, hymnwriter, 1760
May 14	Matthias, Apostle
May 18	Erik, King of Sweden, martyr, 1160
May 21	Helena, mother of Constantine, c. 330
May 24	Nicolaus Copernicus, 1543; Leonhard Euler, 1783; scientists
May 27	John Calvin, renewer of the church, 1564
May 29	Jiří Tranovský, hymnwriter, 1637
May 31	Visit of Mary to Elizabeth
Jun. 1	Justin, martyr at Rome, c. 165
Jun. 3	The Martyrs of Uganda, 1886; John XXIII, Bishop of Rome, 1963
Jun. 5	Boniface, Bishop of Mainz, missionary to Germany, martyr, 754
Jun. 7	Seattle, chief of the Duwamish Confederacy, 1866
Jun. 9	Columba, 597; Aidan, 651; Bede, 735; renewers of the church
Jun. 11	Barnabas, Apostle
Jun. 14	Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, 379; Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, c. 385; Gregory of Nazianzus, Bishop of Constantinople, c. 389; Macrina, teacher, c. 379
Jun. 17	Emanuel Nine, martyrs, 2015
Jun. 21	Onesimos Nesib, translator, evangelist, 1931
Jun. 24	John the Baptist
Jun. 25	Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, 1530; Philipp Melanchthon, renewer of the church, 1560
Jun. 27	Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, 444
Jun. 28	Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, c. 202
Jun. 29	Peter and Paul, Apostles

Writers

April 1–15 Jennifer Ginn is a retired ELCA pastor currently serving as interim pastor. She is also a writer, a coach, and a biblical storyteller. She is married to another retired Lutheran pastor, who teaches ethics and also serves as an interim pastor. They live in Salisbury, North Carolina, with an incredibly smart Jack Russell terrier and a moody yellow cat.

April 16–30 Katie Escalante is an ELCA pastor who serves at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in Waconia, Minnesota. She lives with her husband and two sons in Chaska, and together they love to play outside, go exploring, and soak up family time.

May 1–10 Gene Bradbury is a retired ELCA pastor who lives in Sequim, Washington, and attends Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church. He continues to write and teach.

May 11–20 Melissa Bills, an ELCA pastor, is college pastor and director of college ministries at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. She is especially interested in justice issues, creative worship, and all-generations faith formation. Melissa, her husband, and their two children enjoy hiking and love being outdoors.

May 21–31 Cindi Nelson lives in Overland Park, Kansas, and is a member of Holy Cross Lutheran Church there. She is a retired English teacher who enjoys reading, writing, listening to music, walking, and volunteering. She and her husband have two adult children and six grandchildren.

June 1–15 Brian Malison has been pastor at Christ Lutheran Church, Visalia, California, for thirty-four years. He and his wife, Leanne, have two grown sons. He loves golf, California wine, and collecting things.

June 16–30 Susie Gamelin is a retired pastor who understands that God's call to wash the feet of those who are hurting never ends. Her children, their spouses, and their children fill her with joy. Susie attends Abiding Hope Church in Littleton, Colorado.

Remembering God's faithfulness

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy. (v. 6)

When my friend Lynn received a second breast-cancer diagnosis after fourteen years of clear mammograms following the first one, she was devastated. The second cancer was more aggressive and in both breasts. She faced difficult chemo treatments and a mastectomy. But remembering answered prayers during the first round of the disease gave her strength to push forward.

The psalmist assures us that from grief and pain we can carry seeds that will sow new hope.

God's ancient people remembered when their fortunes had been restored by God, their mouths filled with laughter and shouts of joy. They didn't know now what the future would bring, but leaning on that memory, they moved forward in faith and trust that God would be with them.

God invites us to remember times God has cared for us, and to let those memories be seeds of hope for us. Whatever the outcome, God promises to be present and faithful all the way.

Loving God, from the seeds of past blessings bring new hope alive in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those undergoing cancer treatment

Isaiah 43:8-15; Philippians 2:25–3:1

Confidence turned upside down

**If anyone else has reason to be confident
in the flesh, I have more. (v. 4)**

I've heard them called "bona fides," those credentials Paul rolls out in this passage. His Jewish pedigree would have stood up against anyone's. But when he came to know Jesus Christ, his former confidence crumbled to dust. "Whatever gains I had," he wrote, "these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ" (v. 7).

I got a child-sized taste of Paul's lesson long before I knew his story. When my sixth-grade teacher introduced us to Greek mythology, she said we'd know the name of the ancient goddess of harmony when we thought of the music of a merry-go-round. Writing the name on the board, she asked if anyone could pronounce it. My hand shot up, and I confidently said, "Calliope"; only, my version sounded more like "antelope." Giggles erupted in the classroom; I was humiliated.

Paul, with his sterling qualifications as a Jewish scholar, realized his confidence needed to rest on something more than his bona fides. In time, he was able to say he'd been wrong and declare with new confidence that belonging to Jesus was worth everything.

**Lord Jesus, thank you for making me your own. May
my confidence always be founded in you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA seminaries and their students

Exodus 12:21-27; John 11:45-57



Fifth Sunday in Lent

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

This story raises some tough questions. We might be drawn to Mary pouring costly perfume over her Lord's feet. Can't you just smell the rich fragrance? But Judas was surely right, wasn't he, that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor? Readers might also question Jesus' final words, which seem to privilege his own life over the lives of the poor.

We can probably agree on a few things: Mary's motives are honorable; Jesus will be dead in a week, and this may be Mary's only chance to anoint her Lord. Judas's motives in keeping the common purse are not honorable, as he takes from it what he wants. He will also be Jesus' betrayer.

This story also raises a deep question about holding on and letting go. Judas holds tightly to the moneybag he carries. Mary lets go easily of her entire vial of fragrant, costly perfume. Who gains? Who loses?

If you stepped into this gospel drama, which character might you be? What questions would you raise?

**Generous God, show me each day what to hold on
to and what to let go. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who possess great wealth

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14

Pure praise

**Your righteousness is like the mighty
mountains . . . you save humans
and animals alike, O LORD. (v. 6)**

“Thank you, God, for all the cats and chickens!” Years ago I heard this very prayer from a young niece. An animal lover from the start, by age four she was naming them in her prayers regularly—the ones she’d played with that day or chased in the backyard or seen in a picture book. Her prayers were pure praise!

The excerpt we read today from Psalm 36 is just that: pure praise. Opening with a reproach of the wicked who constantly plot mischief, the psalmist ends with a plea for God’s deliverance from them. The in-between verses get to the heart of things: praising God’s steadfast love, righteousness, and power, imagining a great feast where all drink from the river of God’s delights!

How odd and wonderful that amid lament over mischief-makers, the psalmist turns suddenly to praise of God’s saving work for all humans and animals! Could it be that our best prayers are words of praise like these, entrusting all things to God—even the cats and chickens?

**Thank you, God, for all the creatures of the earth.
Teach us to trust your steadfast love for the
whole creation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Children in foster care

Psalm 20; Exodus 40:1-15; Hebrews 10:19-25

Listen for it

[Some Greeks] came to Philip . . . and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (v. 21)

Though an indirect one, this may be the most important question in the Gospel of John: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip is obviously excited—he first tells Andrew, and then together they tell Jesus. And Jesus says not, “Let’s go meet them” but, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (v. 23). What?

Think about it. A couple of curious Greeks connect with the one disciple with the Greek name, Philip. And in that moment we see one of the times Jesus’ influence widens beyond the Jewish circle. Eventually, his story spreads ever farther through his death and resurrection, which for the gospel writer John is Jesus’ glorification.

Even today, whenever a follower of Jesus hears “We wish to see Jesus” and with an open heart lets go of security, control, or possessions to support a stranger, Jesus’ story spreads wider. Though the question comes in different forms, you’ll know it when you hear it. How will your response glorify Jesus?

Loving Christ, fill us with compassion and courage to accompany those who seek to know you. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are seeking to grow in faith

Psalm 20; Judges 9:7-15; 1 John 2:18-28

The one to watch

**Let us run with perseverance . . . ,
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter
of our faith. (vv. 1-2)**

Many of the newly converted Christ followers in Rome felt pressured to turn away from their faith. They needed encouragement, which the Letter to the Hebrews offered. It recalled leaders from history who persevered against tremendous odds, including Moses, who had led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery to the promised land. The cloud of witnesses of which the letter writer speaks was brimming with leaders whose boldness helped the Christian converts remain faithful.

Who do you call to mind when your faith feels small? I think of my father, my favorite aunt, and a pastor's wife who practiced Bible memory verses with me. In adulthood I realize that all within my cloud of witnesses had human flaws. But they were encouragers, every one, and I want to love them with the love they showed me.

We will find human flaws in every encourager we remember. But we can love them for what each was able to give, remembering that Jesus, the only perfect one, is the primary one to watch.

**We pray in the name of Jesus that our eyes
will always be on him. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those alienated from loved ones

Psalm 20; Habakkuk 3:2-15; Luke 18:31-34

Open ears

Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. (v. 4)

My graduate-school poetry professor listened generously. Though he assured us what we said about a poem mattered, I didn't quite believe him and, for several weeks, kept silent. But then a poem we read "clicked" for me. When he opened the discussion by admitting he found parts of it puzzling, he asked us, "How would you work out what happens in this poem?" I spoke with hesitation, posing my theory as a question instead of an answer: "What if . . . ?" To my surprise, he slowly nodded in agreement. "Yes," he said, his eyes bright. "That makes sense." How his words encouraged me!

The prophet Isaiah, thankful for being given "the tongue of a teacher," finds the skill of listening a bit trickier. When Isaiah's ears were opened to his enemies, he heard only insults and abuse. But when he finds God to be his fierce defender, his courage is renewed.

Listening can be riskier than speaking. But opening our ears wider than our mouths opens us to the deeper faith our Lord is always ready to give.

Holy One, open our ears to listen deeply even to our enemies, trusting you as our defender. Amen.

Prayer concern: Teachers

Psalms 31:9-16; Isaiah 53:10-12; Hebrews 2:1-9

Seesaw faith

**My times are in your hand; deliver me
from the hand of my enemies. (v. 15)**

Do you ever find yourself wavering in faith like a seesaw, one moment riding high on God's promises and the next plunging downward in dread? My faith sometimes wavers in this way, especially in times of stress. When it does, I often need to pour out my doubt and anxieties to my husband or a close friend before I can move toward renewed trust.

We hear this very pattern unfolding in many of the psalms, as the psalmist's voice vacillates between despair and hope. Though Psalm 31 is classified as a lament, the psalmist expresses as much confidence as anxiety. Perhaps David, to whom it is attributed, is a lot like us: in one moment desperate for deliverance and in the next filled with trust.

The psalmist can be a partner in our "up-and-down" times. His wavering assures us that when we falter in faith, the Holy One receives our lament graciously, and with loving hands reshapes it into thanksgiving.

**Hold my fears and anxieties in your hands, God, and
reshape them into praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who live with depression

Isaiah 54:9-10; Hebrews 2:10-18

The mind of Jesus

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient. (vv. 7-8)

It was Jean's quiet cheerfulness that drew me to her. She moved quickly, always smiling. I'd find her in the church, busy emptying trash, watering plants, or tidying bathrooms. Some afternoons as I left the building she was happily pruning shrubs or pulling weeds on the church grounds. Already in her eighties, she could have backed away from hands-on property work without anyone wondering why. But her enthusiasm never faded.

Paul's instructions to the believers in Philippi make me think of Jean. He advises them to take on the mind of Jesus, who though he was one with God, humbled himself, even to the point of death. And God exalted him in glory.

I don't think the hope of glory was what gave Jean her smile. I believe she had already found her hope through sharing in the mind of Jesus. Could it be that as we empty ourselves, take last place, and put our hands to humble tasks, we too might more readily sense Jesus' nearness and know him more deeply?

**Lord Jesus, as we seek your presence, open to us
your path of humility and service. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Landscape and construction workers

Psalms 31:9-16; Leviticus 23:1-8; Luke 22:1-13



Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday

[Jesus] answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (v. 40)

Have you ever heard stones shout? I have not. But when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to loud praises and shouts of “Blessed is the king!” and the Pharisees ordered him to silence them, he said there was no use. Even the stones would shout!

Stones shouted a powerful story even for God’s earliest people. The book of Joshua narrates the Israelites’ crossing of the Jordan River on dry land. As Joshua had instructed, they sent twelve men ahead of them, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Each picked up a heavy stone from the dry riverbed. “Those stones will be a sign,” Joshua said. “When your children ask you what they mean, tell them the story: that God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you to cross in safety.”

Throughout the generations, stones held stories of God’s goodness that could not be silenced even by those who would soon put Jesus to death—indeed, not even by death itself. What “stones” in your life are signs of God’s saving work? When someone asks what God has done for you, what story will you tell?

**God, open my mouth to tell
of your faithfulness. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People living with memory loss

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11

Everyone belongs

**This day shall be a day of remembrance
for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival
to the LORD. (v. 14)**

A story with deep roots, the Passover comes alive every year with its telling: The Hebrew captives in Egypt smeared lamb's blood on their doors to protect their firstborn from death. "Passing over" them, the angel of death struck the Egyptian families. In anguish, Pharaoh released the Hebrews from slavery.

Through the centuries, this story reminds Jewish people who they are. Each generation learns and claims it and the unity they share as people precious to God.

Our Christian celebration of communion—begun while Jesus celebrated Passover with his followers—works similarly: We retell the story that tells us who we are. In the body and blood of Jesus we are united as one.

But a story with such deep significance to us may feel foreign to others. Exclusion is never our Lord's intent. May our greeting of newcomers, the language we use in worship, and our invitation to the communion table be always open and genuine.

**As your body on earth, loving Christ,
make us your arms of welcome. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who long to be welcomed

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 36:5-11; Hebrews 9:11-15;
John 12:1-11**

A full measure of love

**I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence
of all his people. (vv. 14, 18)**

As I write about this psalm, the US is emerging from the first wave of a coronavirus pandemic, and churches in my area are beginning to gather in person again. During last year's Holy Week many of us created or watched worship from home, unable to be together in our church buildings. That long separation makes worshiping in the presence of God's people now more fulfilling than ever.

This same equation may explain the psalmist's deep gratitude. Having emerged from a heavy, perhaps life-threatening affliction, of course he is intensely thankful!

Relief from despair does trigger gratitude—gratitude many are feeling now as we return to in-person worship. Yet we know that some will not be coming back, having been homebound for years or struggling with new afflictions. Wherever and however they are able to worship, God's love is guaranteed. We can offer them that assurance through our visits or phone calls—our flesh-and-blood love, here and now.

**Thank you, God, for your people worshiping
at church or in their homes. Be with them
in all places. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Homebound Christians

**Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31;
John 12:20-36**

A meal that unifies

**For I received from the Lord what I
also handed on to you. (v. 23)**

We understand holy communion as a sacrament. But what difference does it make in our lives?

Paul asks that question of the Corinthian believers. He is disturbed by an unseemly behavior among them—those of high status eat their fill and ignore others who might go hungry. Seeing this behavior spilling over into the communion meal, Paul reprimands them.

In this tense moment his words are for the whole church. Every “you” in the original Greek is plural—this meal is neither private nor exclusive. All should feast together equally, so all can engage in mission.

When Jesus first offered this meal to his disciples, he too was caught in a tense moment, facing his own death. He reshaped the familiar Passover feast, calling the bread and wine his own body and blood. This new meal would unify and energize the disciples in their mission, which Paul would join after Jesus’ death.

In times of tension, and every time we share the communion meal, may it strengthen our connection to one another and our mission with neighbors and the world.

Dear Jesus, through your body and blood shared by all, bring us together in purpose and mission. Amen.

Prayer concern: Confirmation students

**Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 70: Hebrews 12:1-3;
John 13:21-32**

Maundy Thursday

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

My former boss was especially sensitive to tension in the office. He brought in donuts as we were hustling to meet a deadline or ordered lunch for us during annual review week. He was kind to provide these “stress-busters,” but appropriately, he never stepped away from the role of boss.

The night Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, he had more in mind than kindness. He washed those road-worn, dusty feet not to cool the disciples’ stress but to offer them a deeper share in himself. He says as much to Peter, who isn’t so sure he’s ready for that. Peter sensed that working for a “boss” would be a lot easier than sharing Jesus’ mission.

But Jesus wasn’t interested in being their boss. He was their savior. What he did for the disciples, he asked them—and us—to do: not to be the boss, but to kneel before others and offer ourselves—and in so doing, to have a share with Christ in ministry.

**Holy Christ, as you live within us, lead us
in your way of love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Pastors and lay leaders in the church

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

Good Friday

[Jesus] learned obedience through what he suffered; and . . . became the source of eternal salvation. (5:8-9)

On Good Friday in the congregations I have served, the crucifixion narrative from John's gospel has been read by members, each portion followed by a prayer and a hymn. As the story advances toward Jesus' death, worship leaders extinguish candles on the altar and lower sanctuary lights until we are nearly in darkness.

Those who listen and those who read aloud find the experience powerful. Together we are lost in the agonies Jesus suffered.

The words today from the Letter to the Hebrews proclaim the truth of Jesus' agonies. Through them he has known our pain. Surely his suffering is greater than any we will experience. Yet it promises us life. We can trust him to lead us from death to life because he went there ahead of us.

When the logic of God's salvation collapses into emotion as Good Friday's events unfold, one truth remains: the unending love of Jesus.

**Holy One, your suffering draws you close to ours.
Make us certain of your power to bring life
from death. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hospice patients

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Psalm 22; John 18:1–19:42

Vigil of Easter

**We have been united with him
in a death like his. (v. 5)**

I spent a few years living in Chimbote, Peru. Our Vigil of Easter began at 4:00 a.m. on Easter morning. With my host family, I woke early to bundle up and walk to the church for the outdoor service. In the darkness, we heard of God's faithfulness and deliverance throughout history and scripture. At daybreak came the Easter proclamation: "Christ is risen!" Life, not death, has the final word.

Before that, though, we waited. We lingered in the sorrow of Good Friday: death is real. We cannot reach the Easter proclamation without the events of Good Friday, without death. We cannot enter into the promise of resurrection without death, both Jesus' and our own. Death is real, but death is not final. As Paul writes, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (v. 5).

Today we wait, and we trust God's faithfulness throughout scripture, throughout history and throughout our lives.

**Faithful God, you are the beginning and the end;
from Genesis to Revelation, you are with us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those whose death is near

**Psalms 46; Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13;
John 20:1-18**



Easter Day

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." (v. 18)

Mary's initial proclamation that first Easter Sunday was not about the risen Christ. Rather, upon finding the tomb empty, Mary ran to Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved and announced, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (v. 2). It is a case of body snatching, not resurrection. For all they know, Jesus is still dead.

It is not until Jesus says her name—"Mary!"—that she recognizes and responds to him (v. 16). As Jesus had said of himself, the good shepherd, "The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3).

Jesus leads Mary out of grief and into rejoicing, out of the tomb and into resurrection proclamation, out of weeping and into commissioning as the "apostle to the apostles," the one sent to preach resurrection to those who would continue that proclamation. To the disciples, Mary *then* announces, "I have seen the Lord."

**God of new life, thank you for this joyous day
and the promise of resurrection. Alleluia! Amen.**

Prayer concern: The worldwide church
celebrating Easter

**Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;
1 Corinthians 15:19-26**

God's new creation

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth . . . be glad and rejoice forever. (vv. 17-18)

"Help! Help! Help meeeee!" cried my young son in desperation. I ran to see what was the matter. It turned out that my child had learned to climb onto the kitchen counter in search of snacks, but then couldn't figure out how to get down safely. He was stranded.

Throughout scripture, from the Prophets to the Psalms, from the Gospels to the Epistles, the writers cling to the promise that those who call upon the name of the Lord will be heard and saved (Joel 2:32; Romans 10:13). The cries and calls of God's people come as a result of being lost, feeling lonely or forsaken, or enduring suffering.

In the prophet Isaiah's vision for a new creation, God says, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear" (v. 24). Before they have a need, before they are metaphorically stranded on the kitchen counter and are afraid, God will answer the call. The promise of God's new creation is peace, joy, and the flourishing of life for all of creation.

**Saving God, you promise to hear us when we call
and help us when we need you—and even before!**

Thank you. Amen.

Prayer concern: For the healing of creation

**Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24; Joshua 10:16-27;
1 Corinthians 5:6b-8**

Even this day

**This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it. (v. 24)**

In the face of grief and loss, anniversaries of specific days can be challenging. I was approaching the anniversary of a big loss in my personal life, and I was dreading the arrival of that day. It loomed on the calendar despite my best attempts to ignore it.

Then a small voice within recalled a refrain from a camp song: "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Even this day of loss and grief belongs to God and not to the pain of the past. Even on this day, God's steadfast love meets me where I am, surrounding me and supporting me.

This psalm for the Easter season proclaims that God's steadfast love endures forever, even in death, even through death, even to the bringing of new life. That anniversary no longer haunts me. Though I remember and honor it, it doesn't derail me as it once did. God has brought new life where there was loss. "The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation" (v. 14).

**O God, you know our grief and pain. Be especially
close on tough days. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are grieving

Judges 4:17-23; 5:24-31a; Revelation 12:1-12

First fruits and sweet corn

In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. (v. 20)

I spent a few summers selling produce at one of those roadside stands for a local multigenerational farm. The best perk of the job was that we were often the first to get homegrown sweet corn, before the harvest was plentiful enough to sell daily, and it was a treat! The first fruits—or vegetables—of the corn harvest were crisp and sweet and delicious.

Biblically speaking, the first fruits were the first of the harvest offered to God both as the finest, juiciest “crème de la crème” of the crop and in prayerful hope of bountiful harvest for the rest of the crop.

Jesus as the first fruits of those who have died is the choicest portion of the resurrection of the dead, and also the guarantor for the rest of those who have died or who will die. “For as all die in Adam”—a reference to our shared humanity and our finitude as humans—“so all will be made alive in Christ” (v. 22). Even now we can taste it—sweet and delicious!

Abundant God, new life blooms, grace fills our hearts, and we trust the resurrection promise! Amen.

Prayer concern: For farmers and favorable weather

**Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 2 Samuel 6:1-15;
Luke 24:1-12**

Good news travels fast

**We are witnesses to these things,
and so is the Holy Spirit. (v. 32)**

Prior to our reading, the apostles were jailed for healing and teaching in Jesus' name. Miraculously, they were then freed from their cells. Once they are found, our text addresses the question of authority. Human authority has prohibited the apostles from teaching about Jesus, yet the city is filled with the good news.

As I write, vaccines have become available to ward off COVID-19, and it seems we are seeing some hope-filled light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. Many people are asking what the future of the church will be. While I don't have the answers, and change can be unnerving, texts like today's give me hope. The message cannot be silenced or thwarted by human authority. The promise won't be lost due to human error, natural disaster, or any other crisis.

The good news of Jesus Christ—the proclamation of welcome and grace, of forgiveness and reconciliation—is contagious, ever spreading to include all people regardless of human limitations and even human authority.

**God of inclusive grace and love, fill us with boldness
as we live out your gospel in daily life. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran World Relief

Psalm 150; 1 Samuel 17:1-23; Acts 5:12-16

Outsiders and outcasts

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone. (v. 22)**

Do you know anyone who has been hurt by the church? Or anyone who has felt rejected by the Christian community? Or anyone who feels like an outsider in their congregation?

In construction the cornerstone was traditionally a principal and foundational element of a building, the model and guide on which the other stones were based. Jesus is the chief cornerstone for our community. Throughout the gospels, he is constantly going to people on the margins of society and outside the community. Much like how the builders rejected the stone that is Jesus, the church has rejected many people. So that is where Jesus goes and calls us to go—to the outsiders and outcasts.

Sometimes people came to Jesus, but most often Jesus went to where they were, met them as they were, and loved them there. He is our cornerstone, our guide and example. How might you connect with the least, the lost, the last, and the lonely in the days to come?

**Give us your awareness, Jesus, of those
on the margins, and your heart to go to them
where they are. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For the least, last, lost, and lonely

Psalm 150; 1 Samuel 17:19-32; Acts 5:17-26

Held by God

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. (v. 4)

Recently, I was riding in the back seat of a car with a toddler who did not want to be in her car seat. She screamed and cried as if it was torture. Neither reading a book nor playing peekaboo soothed the tears, so I started singing Sunday school songs. It wasn't until I sang "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" that the crying slowed and then stopped. Though the little one surely didn't grasp the precise meaning of the words, we who are older find great comfort in knowing that we and the world are held in God's hands.

Though infamously known for the fireworks of beasts, horsemen, and visions of the "end," Revelation begins with grace and peace. Not human grace and peace, but the grace and peace that come from the one "who is and who was and who is to come" (v. 4). Throughout Revelation every prophecy of judgment is accompanied by promise; every vision of terror is met with words of hope. Our God, the Alpha and the Omega, holds the beginning and end and everything in between in loving hands.

Thank you, God, for holding us all and the world in your hands, from the beginning to the end. Amen.

Prayer concern: For parents of young children

Psalms 150; 1 Samuel 17:32-51; Luke 24:36-40



Second Sunday of Easter

**Thomas answered him,
“My Lord and my God!” (v. 28)**

It was the week after Easter, and though the others had insisted, “We have seen the Lord” (v. 25), Thomas was not yet convinced. He needed Jesus, the risen Christ, to bring peace to his heart. Contrary to what we’ve often been taught, it isn’t doubt that defines Thomas.

In John 11:16, Thomas is willing to go with Jesus to death and tells the other disciples they should come too. Thomas is brave.

In John 14, Jesus says that he is going ahead of his followers to prepare a place and that God’s house has many rooms. Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus says, “I am the way” (vv. 5-6). Thomas is honest.

Now in this moment, Thomas wants what the others had already received: to see the Lord. Once again, through closed doors Jesus appears. Once again, he extends peace. Then he offers himself to Thomas. Thomas proclaims, “My Lord and my God!” in both praise and confession of who Jesus is.

Thomas the brave. Thomas the honest. Thomas the faithful, confessing Christ as the risen Lord!

Risen Christ, bring your peace to our hearts. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those for whom God feels distant

Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Revelation 1:4-8

Mark, Evangelist

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (v. 1)

The gospel writer Mark, remembered by the church today, ends his gospel abruptly. In the original conclusion, the women went to the tomb, a man in white told them Jesus was risen, the women ran away, “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). End scene. Drop curtain. Turn off the lights. The good news of Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t get preached, because the women are afraid.

And yet, here we are two thousand years later. Clearly, the word got out. News this good cannot be contained. “The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” is just the beginning, and there is no end in sight. It isn’t because of the right preacher or programs; rather, our God is uncontainable—the Spirit brings the word and creates faith in the least likely of people and places. The good news of Jesus Christ is still happening all around us. Thanks be to God!

**Jesus Christ, Son of God, open our hearts
to your good news all around us.
In your name we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those struggling with fear and anxiety

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 57; 2 Timothy 4:6-11, 18

Not just the band

**Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD! (v. 6)**

One of my young son's favorite books is about a giraffe who can't dance, at least not to the music played at the party. As the giraffe slinks away ashamed, he is met by a cricket who tells him that we can all dance and that everything makes music, from the grass to the breeze to the trees.

It isn't just lute and harp, strings and pipe, or words about God's mighty deeds that combine to praise God, though certainly we give thanks for the gift of vocal and instrumental music. Rather, "everything that breathes" praises the Lord: spring flowers proclaim new life after winter; the birds chirping in the morning sing of a new day; the bees and bugs buzz and hum their praise; the slow, steady breath of my sleeping little one is peaceful praise of the God-breathed Spirit in all of us.

Where do you see and hear all that breathes praising the Lord today?

Thank you, God, for your mighty deeds! We join the joyful praise all around us, through Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Music teachers and all creation

Psalm 122; Esther 8:1-17; Revelation 2:8-11

God's job or mine?

Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say. (v. 11)

How often do you defend yourself in an average week? "I didn't mean to . . ." "That wasn't my fault . . ."

From news reports to daily conversations, I hear so many people defending themselves against any number of things. I confess that I am equally guilty of often jumping to my own defense. As part of Lutheran liturgy, in the Kyrie we say or sing, "Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord" (*ELW*, p. 99). It is God's job to help us, to save us, to comfort us, and to defend us, and yet so often we try to do those things for ourselves. When a pastor pointed this out to me, he asked, "How is that working for you and the rest of the world?"

What if instead of jumping to our own defense we took a moment to reflect on the possible truth of a situation? What might we learn? And in letting God do God's job, what freedom might we find?

When we stop focusing on helping, saving, comforting, and defending ourselves, we are freed and reoriented toward others.

God, you are our help, salvation, comfort, and defense. Help us to trust you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are unjustly incarcerated

Psalm 122; Esther 9:1-5, 18-23

Enemies and comfort zones

The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.”

He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” (v. 10)

I don't think I have any enemies. Well, except one girl back in high school who declared that we were mortal enemies. I don't know how that came about.

What's more, neither I nor anyone I know well has been persecuted for their Christian faith. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for my friends of other faiths.

Today's text focuses on Paul's shift from persecutor of believers to propagator and evangelist of the good news of Jesus. I'm struck by Ananias's faithfulness to God's call to go to and care for the man who had been “breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (v. 1). From Abraham to Moses, from Samuel to Isaiah, the biblical refrain when God calls your name is, “Here I am, Lord.”

Ananias does protest God's call—another biblical norm—because he has heard about this man Saul and the “evil he has done” (v. 13). Yet, when God says to go to Saul, Ananias does. Indeed, God often calls us outside of our comfort zones. But God also shows up in ways we could not have imagined.

**Open our hearts to your call, O God, and help us
to follow you in faith, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those persecuted for their faith

Psalm 30; Isaiah 5:11-17; Revelation 3:14-22

Into the pit

**Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning. (v. 5)**

My dad once gave me a cross necklace, on the back of which was inscribed "It was then that I carried you," from the "Footprints" poem that was popular at the time. Though the poem has faded in popularity, the necklace and that line still hold strong meaning for me. Some of the lowest, hardest moments of my life have also been when God felt closest to me and most tangible. In each time of sorrow or struggle, the family and friends who cared for me were the hands and feet of Jesus carrying me through the night to the next morning.

Our psalmist has cried to God for help, and God has heard and provided healing. Before the celebration of healing, though, God went down to the pit to meet the individual in the midst of suffering—in the messiness, murkiness, and pain of life. Then God carried them out of the pit, turning their mourning into dancing.

Likewise, Jesus, who knows the pain of betrayal, the cross, and death itself, meets us in our deep pits of suffering, grief, and the unknown—and carries us out.

**"O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me" (v. 2). In Jesus' name
I thank you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are ill

Isaiah 6:1-4; Revelation 4:1-11

Upside down

To the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might! (v. 13)

“Look, Mom, I’m upside down!” my son says as he lies on the ground after a somersault. He also loves to hang his head off the couch and take in the world from that perspective. “You look so funny!” he giggles. I remember doing the same when I was little: how silly faces looked upside down, how the floor became the ceiling. As an adult, I’m rarely upside down, if I can help it.

Angels, elders, and living creatures numbering thousands—the typical motifs of the book of Revelation—are often baffling and off-putting for contemporary readers. The central message is one we see throughout scripture: God’s way of doing things is often upside down compared to our own.

Myriads and thousands sing praise to the Lamb who was slain. When we imagine power and wealth, might and honor, we don’t imagine a lamb, let alone a slaughtered one. But God turns the world’s ways upside down: power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing all go to the peaceful, gentle, slain—yet risen—Lamb. With the four living creatures we say, “Amen!”

**Jesus, our Lamb, we give you all blessing,
honor, and glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel powerless

Psalms 30; Genesis 18:1-8; Luke 14:12-14



Third Sunday of Easter

**[Jesus] said to [Peter] the third time,
“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (v. 17)**

These verses in John swim like a school of fish diving and dipping. At the center is Peter: Peter going fishing. Peter dressing to jump into the water. Peter hauling in the net. Peter, who will soon lead the Easter people. Finally, in the last verses of chapter 21, we hear Jesus' commission of Simon Peter and of us: to love and to feed his flock. “Simon, do you love me?” Each address to Simon Peter points him toward others. “Simon, son of John, do you love me? . . . Take care of my sheep.”

Jesus' question to me relates to a second one: Do I *know* that God loves me? I recall the story of a man in his later years gazing out over the mountains and saying, “I think God must love me very much.” The confident assurance of God's love makes it possible for us to love God in return and to demonstrate that love by serving others. “Do you love me? . . . Feed my sheep.” Our ministry to others begins by saying, “I think God loves me very much.”

**Loving God, grant me the heart to love others
as Jesus calls me to do. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel unloved

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14

Philip and James, Apostles

**Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you
all this time, Philip, and you still do not
know me?” (v. 9)**

It began with Philip's dissatisfaction: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (v. 8). Isn't this a dissatisfaction we all experience at times—the longing to see and to know God? In response, Jesus told Philip, James, and the other disciples to open their eyes.

An old inspirational song may speak to Philip's situation. Written by Stuart Hamblen, the song declares, “It is no secret what God can do.” The works of God are indeed all around us. They are not secret, but they are often found in unexpected people, places, and things: In ordinary bread and wine. In water and the preached word. In communities racked by poverty. In children's openness to the world. In a parent changing diapers. In a caregiver bathing an elder. In a stable and a NICU. In an execution chamber and the cross of Golgotha. Most of all, “what God can do” is seen in Jesus: “Whoever has seen me,” said Jesus, “has seen the Father” (v. 9).

**Creator God, help me to open my eyes and
my heart to see you in unexpected places. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For ophthalmologists
and optometrists

**Isaiah 30:18-21; Psalm 44:1-3, 20-26;
2 Corinthians 4:1-6**

Who waits for whom?

**The LORD waits to be gracious to you; . . .
blessed are all those who wait for him. (v. 18)**

We wait anxiously for the plane. When it finally arrives, we embrace our family enthusiastically. Isaiah's vision is of God waiting graciously—but no doubt eagerly too—for the people to return to God, their home.

When did you last experience that tense moment of anticipation as you waited to welcome someone? Our daughter and son-in-law taught in Japan for four years. Upon their return, we waited eagerly for that first glimpse of their faces in the distance. But they, too, were waiting anxiously to see us.

Indeed, Isaiah reminds us that waiting goes in two directions. While God waits for us, "blessed are all those who wait for [God]." But we are an impatient people. Even when we pray, we want God to respond immediately. Perhaps when we find it hard to wait for God, that experience can help us grasp the love-filled heart of the Holy One waiting for us. Above all, the promise is sure: the Lord "will rise up to show mercy to you" (v. 18).

**Welcoming God, provide me with the patience to
wait for you, trusting that you are gracious. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For loved ones awaiting times
of reunion

Psalm 121; Ezekiel 1:26–2:1; Acts 26:1-18

Ministering in the dark

**For God, who said, “Let light shine
out of darkness,” made his light shine
in our hearts. (v. 6)**

The old preacher in Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) says, “History could make a stone weep.” Those who have lived through wars, disasters, or a death in the family know this. Sorrow is part of life on earth. What is the Christian’s response?

The followers of Jesus are called to be wholly present—and a holy presence. The apostle Paul admonishes the Corinthians to let their light shine out of darkness. In the darkness of grief and fear, we crave a light to show us the way. When a minister walks into a room after tragedy has occurred, he or she becomes a sacred presence. It may be as simple as sitting on the sofa and listening. When a young couple lost their child to heart failure, the pastor came knowing that no words could fix the pain. But she was a holy presence, the Christ-light in a place and time of darkness.

Paul writes that “it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry” (v. 1). We are not alone as we enter the darkness of sorrow and fear with others.

**Caring God, give us patience and courage to be the
light of Jesus for others. In his name we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For those who suffer loss today

Psalm 121; Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

To be called by name

**[Peter] turned to the body and said,
“Tabitha, get up.” (v. 40)**

There is more to today's reading than the miracle performed by Peter. First, there is the only explicit mention of a woman disciple in the Bible: “Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha” (v. 36). Second, there is the way Peter performs the healing of Tabitha: he calls her by name—“Tabitha, get up!” This is not an unusual practice in the New Testament.

At Bethany Jesus stood before Lazarus's tomb and “cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’” (John 11:43). Mary came to Jesus' tomb and saw a man she thought was the gardener. She recognized Jesus only when he called her by name: “Mary!” (John 20:16).

We too have been called by name in baptism: “Morgan Marie Dole, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” We are named and valued in a world that sometimes seems indifferent to us. In turn we bestow value on others by calling them by name. It is a gift easily practiced and often appreciated.

**God, give us the patience to value each person
we meet today. Help us remember and
use their names. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are homeless

Psalm 23; Ezekiel 11:1-25; Revelation 5:1-10

A manual for the journey

**He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake. (v. 3)**

In Matthew 5, Jesus taught his followers what we call the beatitudes. In chapter 6, he prayed with his disciples what we now know as the Lord's Prayer. I have come to understand these teachings as an essential part of our manual for life's journey. I would add to these the comforting words of Psalm 23.

This psalm, often heard at funerals, should be read not only in that context but as part of our daily lives. It reminds us that we have a companion on the journey who does not push his sheep, for they would then scatter. Rather, a good shepherd "leads me beside still waters" (v. 2). A good shepherd "restores my soul" (v. 3).

Writer and poet Wendell Berry found renewal in his "Sabbath walks." His Sunday mornings in the woods became a natural path to prayer and led him to write hundreds of "Sabbath poems." Nature itself became part of Berry's manual. The beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and Psalm 23 are gifts to take on our daily travels through life. What would you include in your own manual?

**Holy God, walk with us this day and guide
our thoughts and decisions so we may honor
your name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For those traveling today

Ezekiel 20:39-44; Revelation 6:1-7:4

Who will be on the bus?

**Who are these, robed in white,
and where have they come from? (v. 13)**

The picture the writer of Revelation places before us is the gathering of “a great multitude” (v. 9). They come from all nations and include speakers of all languages. It reminds us of the Day of Pentecost when many were heard speaking in languages other than their own.

Who do you count among this crowd standing before God on the last day? The message is one of unity. It will be a universal crowd come to worship and praise God. It's a lesson we need to hear today as violence and politics continue to divide us. The writer of Revelation tells us we will all stand together in God's realm. “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

C. S. Lewis's story *The Great Divorce* (HarperOne, rev. ed., 2015) tells of a bus ride from hell to heaven. Those who get off the bus are not always the ones we expect to see in heaven. Others who get off the bus are surprised by who they find already there. Who do you expect to see robed in white? We may be surprised!

**Loving God, remove our prejudices and give us
loving hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For our divided world

Psalm 23; Ezekiel 28:25-26; Luke 12:29-32



Fourth Sunday of Easter

**My sheep hear my voice. I know them,
and they follow me. (v. 27)**

Two shepherds bring their sheep together at night for protection, but how will they separate them in the morning? At dawn the shepherds stand before the merged flock and call in their own familiar ways. Each sheep knows its shepherd's voice and follows.

While in Jerusalem, Jesus was approached by some who asked if he was the Messiah. He said if they had been watching him, they would know. "The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me, but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice" (vv. 25-26). Those who had asked the question remained separated from Jesus' flock, apparently because they had not been listening to his voice.

We too are called to listen for Jesus' voice. It may be heard in conversation, in prayer, through music, art, and literature. Sometimes it comes through the words of a caring friend. We learn to recognize Jesus' voice by hearing his words and the stories about him in the Bible. When something we hear in daily life matches the Jesus of scripture, we can trust and follow that voice.

**Shepherd of all of us who hear so many voices,
help us recognize your voice when you call. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People struggling with trust

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17

Singing while driving

**Make a joyful noise to the LORD,
all the earth. (v. 1)**

Psalm 100 sits as part of a choir of voices beginning with Psalm 95. They are like singers or sections taking turns: "O come, let us sing to the LORD" (95:1); "O sing to the LORD a new song" (96:1; 98:1); "The LORD is king!" (97:1; 99:1). Psalm 100 waits its turn to solo: "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth."

The choir invites all the earth to sing: sky, sea, mountains, fields, all creatures and peoples. Those who live by faith are urged to join in singing. Do others hear our song? I admit that I get a few strange looks when another driver looks over at my car and catches me singing while I'm driving. Hey, my hands are on the wheel! I'm not holding sheet music!

It seems right to make a joyful noise to the Lord. I find it makes the day more beautiful. The only occasional negative comes when my daughter cries out from the back seat, "Dad, do you *have* to sing?" Why, yes—yes, I do! The psalm choir invites us all to sing wherever we are.

To you, O God, we give thanks for the beauty of the earth and sing of the gifts you have given us. Amen.

Prayer concern: Musicians of all kinds

Ezekiel 37:15-28; Revelation 15:1-4

Gathering sticks

Join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. (v. 17)

The parable of the two sticks reminds me of gathering firewood. Around a campfire we experience the warmth of the fire and of one another. Ezekiel's sticks are not for burning, but the result is similar. They suggest a reunion, like that celebrated on Mother's Day or Memorial Day, at a class reunion or a small-town homecoming, when families gather to share their common heritage.

Ezekiel's parable is about the reunification of Israel and Judah. God will gather the exiles together and establish one nation. The language here is symbolic. Each ancestral chief possessed a staff with his name on it. Judah's stick represented the southern kingdom; the stick of Joseph, father of Ephraim, represented the northern kingdom. It was time to "join them together into one stick, so that they may become one."

God does not wish for people to be estranged. We are brought together to celebrate our unity. As God's people, created in God's image, we can be united as one stick, held by God's hand.

Loving God, bring us together across our differences, and unite us in love. Amen.

Prayer concern: People estranged due to anger

Psalm 100; Ezekiel 45:1-9; Acts 9:32-35

At the Spirit's pace

Who was I that I could hinder God? (v. 17)

I've visited Times Square in New York City a handful of times in my life. I love the lights. I hate the crowds. Specifically, I don't like being blocked in and prevented from walking at my own pace.

The book of Acts shows us again and again that the Spirit of God travels at its own pace and is not hindered by those who would try to get in the way. In today's reading the Spirit has fallen upon people outside what were usually thought to be the boundaries of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Peter is challenged to see where the Spirit is moving. Through prayer he discerns that his job is to get out of the way, to let the Spirit lead, and to follow where the Spirit goes. "Who was I that I could hinder God?" he asks, when other apostles and believers question his actions.

Where do you see the Spirit on the move? What might be its destination? What would happen if you set aside your own plans where they differ from those of the Holy Spirit and followed the Spirit's lead?

Restless Spirit, move through and around us.

Set the pace and help us follow. Amen.

Prayer concern: People who are in a time of transition

Psalm 100; Jeremiah 50:17-20; John 10:31-42

Every voice in praise

Let them praise the name of the LORD. (v. 13)

My favorite local trail to hike is called River Trail, because it follows a curve of the Upper Iowa River. As you hike, the river tumbles along on one side and glacier-carved bluffs rise up on the other. The trail ends at a riverbank full of smooth rocks, perfect for skipping.

Cliff swallows dive into nests under a bridge. Geese splash and preen. Wildflowers, trees, rocks, birds, water, sky, clouds, grass, mud, sun, wind: each element of creation greets you as you travel the path and take your rest.

The psalmist is not content to simply summarize God's creation under the heading "Nature." The goodness of God is too extensive! Each distinct element of the cosmos—heavenly beings, human beings, plants, creatures, weather, landscape—has its own voice of praise and its own reason for praising.

What is your reason for praising God this day? And how does the whole creation around you open your heart to sing joyfully to the Lord?

God of beauty, open my heart to recognize you in creation. Open my mouth to sing your praise. Amen.

Prayer concern: The health of the creation

Ezekiel 2:8–3:11; Revelation 10:1-11

Water, water everywhere?

**To the thirsty I will give water as a gift
from the spring of the water of life. (v. 6)**

Common and crucial to all existence is the need for water. It is essential for survival. It is necessary for life. Even Jesus, on the cross, said, "I am thirsty" (John 19:28).

Many of our ELCA partner ministries—Lutheran World Relief, ELCA World Hunger, Lutheran Disaster Response—take up the cause of helping people secure clean water.

Water is a gift and a symbol of life. Here in Revelation water is a sign of the eternal life and salvation promised to all creation when God comes to dwell among us. Water is a sign of life conquering death, joy rising above grief, and health triumphing over pain. Here, in the new Jerusalem, the fully realized realm of God, there will be no thirst—physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Those of us who are blessed with easy access to water whenever our bodies thirst would do well, with each glass we pour, to remember God's promise in Revelation and recommit to acts of faith that quench the thirsts of our neighbors, nearby and all around the world.

**Saving God, give us your living water.
Renew our hearts and help us trust you.
In Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who lack clean, reliable water

Psalms 148; Daniel 7:13-14; Revelation 11:15

Matthias, Apostle

One of these must become a witness with us to [Christ's] resurrection. (v. 22)

Some call it “rock, paper, scissors.” Others call it *roshambo*. In the Philippines it’s *Jack en Poy*; in France, *pierre, papier, ciseaux, puits*. It’s a simple game, suitable for figuring out which team gets the ball or who gets the last cookie from the plate. Is it a little strange that the disciples also used a game of chance to do something as important as picking a new apostle?

Justus and Matthias were both worthy of the role. They were nominated by their peers, who vouched for their faith and character. Casting lots was a way to affirm in each of them their gifts of faith and proclamation. Both were called and equipped, even if only one could be chosen.

We too are called and equipped to be witnesses to the resurrection. *How* and *when* and *where* the Spirit will choose to use our calling remains a beautiful mystery. Justus did not become the twelfth apostle, but I am certain that the Spirit continued to use his gifts. And I am certain that the Spirit has a plan for your gifts as well.

Spirit, reassure us that our gifts are needed and valuable, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Synod assemblies electing leaders

Isaiah 66:1-2; Psalm 56; Luke 6:12-16



Fifth Sunday of Easter

**[Jesus said,] “You will look for me. . . .
Love one another.” (vv. 33-34)**

“Let’s play a game,” Adam said as we drove home from school. “When we pass that person walking over there, I’ll honk the horn. Then we’ll both wave out the opposite window.” It was a silly and harmless prank to confuse a poor pedestrian. We honked the horn; the person turned and looked.

Jesus wants the world to turn and look to him. But he doesn’t honk a horn to make it happen. Jesus trusts that *love* will make people turn and look—*his* witness of love and *ours*. Love is the way Jesus will be seen.

What made you first turn and look toward Jesus? Who has loved you along your journey of faith? What acts of love in this world inspire and encourage you? How are you revealing Jesus to the world through your commitment to love as you have been loved?

St. Teresa of Ávila said, “Christ has no body now but yours.” While we await Christ’s return, you are what this world can see. Let it see love.

**Jesus, teach us to love as you love. Help the world
see this love in all we do. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Deacons and all who serve the church

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6

Of one voice

**How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity! (v. 1)**

In seminary our daily chapel services always included the Lord's Prayer. Most days we would sing it. A professor commented, "Ask a group of pastors to say the Lord's Prayer together, and it will sound like chaos, because they will lead rather than listen. But *sing* it, and they will all start and end in unison. Singing forces us to be of one voice."

Unison, union, unify, unity: these words have to do with being one. Oneness is God's dream for the human family. It is good, pleasant, and precious when we sing our faith together and are of one mind about sharing God's love with the world in word and deed.

When Jesus prays for his disciples before his arrest, he prays that they might be one, the same way that he is one with God. This is our prayer too: that God would unite us in heart, mind, and spirit with all who share this faith, for the sake of mutual joy and shared commitment to bring God's gifts to the world.

**Uniting God, draw us together in faith and send us
out with courage. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Seminary chapel ministries

1 Samuel 20:1-23, 35-42; Acts 11:19-26

The last brownie

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (v. 18)

Quiz time! One brownie is left on the plate, and you want it. Do you (1) take it and eat it—yum! or (2) ask the other guests if anyone wants it, and then take it and eat it—yum! or (3) cut it in half, leaving half on the plate for others, and take and eat the portion you cut? Bonus question: There's half a brownie left on the plate, and you're interested. Do you eat it, or do you again cut it in half?

We may not be ancient farmers who practice gleaning—though the local farmers' market donates end-of-the-day produce to the community food pantry—but we know that loving our neighbors means making sure others' needs and desires are met along with ours.

Each command in our reading today represents a different way to care for a neighbor's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Love of neighbor is one of the cornerstone commandments of our faith. It means taking real steps to ensure that neighbors have enough food, are treated with honesty and respect, and are blessed into God's safekeeping.

And sometimes it means sharing that last brownie.

**God of love, teach us to humbly serve
our neighbors. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who tend land and livestock

Psalms 133; 2 Samuel 1:4-27; Acts 11:27-30

Overthinking it

[Jesus said,] “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” (v. 28)

These days we can read online reviews for nearly every product we might purchase. Add publications like *Consumer Reports* and we can do serious research before buying anything from running shoes to refrigerators.

Gathering information can help us make smart decisions. But it can also immobilize us. Too much information can leave us stuck overthinking and never taking action.

The lawyer in today's reading knows the law and the scriptures. He just doesn't know what to do with the information. Jesus encourages and convicts him, saying, “You know the most important things: love God and love neighbor. Get out there and do it!”

Being people of faith doesn't mean we have to know everything before we take action. We don't need to get bogged down in exhaustive research. We don't need to overthink it. We have everything we need to get started.

Love God. Love neighbor. Do this, and you will live.

Spirit, release us from overthinking, and empower us to love the world. In the name of Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are lonely, grieving, or afraid

Psalm 133; Leviticus 19:9-18

Listen loud

**We sat down and spoke to the women
who had gathered there. (v. 13)**

Paul's missionary journeys took him across the ancient world. He planted churches and guided new communities of faith. To do this sustainably and with integrity, Paul couldn't just barge into new communities and make demands. No, he had to do what any good missionary does. He started by listening.

By the river on the sabbath, Paul and his companions sat down to learn from women in the local community of Jesus followers. He went to the place where the community worshiped, ran errands, and did business.

ELCA Global Missions grounds its work in the principles of *accompaniment*, defined as "walking together in a solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality" (www.elca.org/Our-Work/Global-Mission). Accompaniment asks us to listen faithfully and intently to ministry partners and community leaders. We learn the context, work together, and build relationships. This is how the roots of God's healing and hope are established.

**Patient Jesus, teach us to listen louder
than we speak. Walk with us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA Global Mission and our
partner ministries

Psalms 67; Proverbs 2:1-5; Acts 15:36-41

Inexhaustible

**May God continue to bless us; let all the ends
of the earth revere him. (v. 7)**

The psalmist today is overjoyed at the thought that God's blessings and saving power would be known among all nations. Are we similarly overjoyed when we consider the ways God's love reaches beyond our own spheres of influence and our own limits and prejudices?

God's blessings are inexhaustible, and God's love is infinite. Whenever we feel nervous about how far God's love can or should stretch, we can return to today's psalm and sing, "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you" (v. 3). Let us sing it until we believe it.

For God is gracious to all, and God's blessings are continuous action in the world. May we open our hearts to the grace and love of God that show up among us, even in unexpected ways. And may we trust that God is free to love and bless whomever God wants to love and bless.

May we be overjoyed at the expansiveness of God.

**Joyful God, teach us to value your blessings
wherever they fall. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those with whom we disagree

Proverbs 2:6-8; Acts 16:1-8

No light needed

**They need no light of lamp or sun,
for the Lord God will be their light. (22:5)**

The motto of Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio—my husband's and my alma mater—is “Having light, we pass it on to others.” Is this not what we are here for—to share Christ's light and our gifts, whatever they may be, as God shares light with us forever?

Yet sometimes my light may be just a light. When my two children were young, they had nyctophobia, a fear of night or darkness. A nightlight placed in each of their rooms made them less afraid as they grew older. I, too, confess to traveling with a nightlight to illumine a hotel room, though more to avoid tripping over something than out of fear.

As we read today's focus passage, we see that Revelation uses symbolism to convey hope to those who were being persecuted at the time, as well as to us today. According to John's vision of the new Jerusalem, we have nothing to fear, for God will be the only light we ever need.

**Holy God, thank you for the eternal gift of your light.
In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those living with depression
and anxiety

Psalm 67; Proverbs 2:9-15; Luke 19:1-10



Sixth Sunday of Easter

He took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. (v. 9)

When I was growing up in southern Ohio, most businesses were closed Sundays. Many people I knew spent the day in family and church activities. Today for many in the US Sundays are vital for catching up with family matters. Some who wish they could attend Sunday worship or take a full day for rest don't have that luxury—they work several jobs to feed and shelter their families.

If we read a bit beyond today's passage, we find some Jewish leaders upset to learn Jesus healed a man on the sabbath; they saw it as defiance of God's command to keep the sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8-11). Already searching for reasons to persecute Jesus, the authorities decided his actions justified their plans.

Yet Jesus understood sabbath not as something God uses to make our lives harder but as a holy gift of rest and liberation; as an absolutely appropriate time—perhaps the *most* appropriate time—to bring healing to another life.

**God, help us use sabbath time to realign ourselves
with you and to love our neighbors, as Jesus
demonstrated. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People for whom it is difficult to find
sabbath time

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22–22:5

What a promise!

[Jesus] ordered [the apostles] . . . to wait [in Jerusalem] for the promise of the Father. (v. 4)

Imagine the surprise and amazement the disciples experienced when Jesus, who had shown himself to them several times after his resurrection, told them to wait for “the promise of the Father.” They might have looked at one another, perhaps mouthing Jesus’ words, “‘Baptized with the Holy Spirit’?” (v. 5). What did he mean? The disciples (meaning “learners, followers”), now called apostles (meaning “ones who are sent”), would have the Holy Spirit within them as they embarked on their journey to share the good news of Jesus in Jerusalem and “to the ends of the earth” (v. 8).

Today a promise might be made with a handshake, a signed contract, or a spoken vow, as my husband and I exchanged at our wedding fifty-seven years ago. While all these promises are important in our world, God’s promise of the Holy Spirit is more meaningful than any human-made promise. Two thousand years later you and I still carry the fulfillment of that promise—the gift of the Holy Spirit—within us.

**God, by your Holy Spirit, inspire us to do your work
on earth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those surviving broken promises

Psalm 93; 1 Chronicles 12:16-22; Revelation 21:5-14

Sing out!

**Clap your hands, all you peoples;
shout to God with loud songs of joy. (v. 1)**

I was never one to clap along to the music in church—until I joined my church in Kansas. Now I find it a wonderful way to praise God. Today's psalmist urges all, "Clap! Sing with joy! Play instruments to God's glory!"

I love to watch children's faces as they sing, clap, and move to the songs they share as part of worship. The happiness is clear, not only in the kids but among others in the congregation receiving their message. My church choir is similar—well, not as youthful! But age doesn't matter as we glorify God in words and music. Some of us have even been moved to tears by beloved hymns and have struggled to end on a harmonious chord as our choir director smiled with relief!

Psalm 47 is an "enthronement psalm," in which God is exalted over all. God's promises to Abraham and Sarah and their family were fulfilled, and with this psalm, the people paid tribute to God for all they had been given.

What song do you feel led to sing—or even shout!—in praise of God's goodness?

**Glorious God, thank you for the music
in our lives. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Music teachers, choir directors,
and other musicians

Psalm 93; 2 Chronicles 15:1-15; Revelation 21:15-22

The greatness of Jesus

**. . . so that . . . you may know . . .
what is the immeasurable greatness
of his power. (vv. 18-19)**

Paul's prayer of thanks for the Ephesians' faith leads to prayers that they will come to know Jesus more fully and to know "the immeasurable greatness of his power." But what kind of greatness and power is this?

In 1935 historian H. G. Wells rated Jesus "Greatest in History" based on the questions "What did he leave to grow?" and "Did he start [people] thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him?" Those might be valid gauges of human greatness—Wells admitted he was focusing on Jesus the *man*. But while Jesus "grew" disciples and powerfully drew people to know God's grace, the power and greatness to which God raised him go far beyond that.

The same power that raised Jesus Christ from death was also "made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9) on the cross. Jesus lived out greatness through love, nonviolence, and forgiveness. These forms of power and greatness undergird "the hope to which he has called [us]" (Ephesians 1:18).

Jesus, help us appreciate what your power and greatness mean for the sake of the church. Amen.

Prayer concern: Missionaries and church leaders

Psalm 93; 2 Chronicles 34:20-33; Luke 2:25-38

Ascension of Our Lord

**He opened their minds to understand
the scriptures. (v. 45)**

Talk about an emotional roller-coaster! Not knowing what to expect next, the disciples struggled to understand the events befalling Jesus. All that Jesus had told them before his death had come true: he was the Messiah whose sufferings and resurrection were foretold in the scriptures. Now he was preparing his frazzled followers to receive the Holy Spirit and continue to spread the gospel. Though the eleven disciples had at first expressed disbelief about the women's report of the empty tomb, Jesus' appearances and how he "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" seem—at least according to Luke—to have laid their skepticism to rest. A shift has taken place, not unlike the process by which a seed becomes a fruit-bearing plant.

I enjoy gardening: sowing seeds in the tilled soil, watching and tending their growth, awaiting the harvest. Jesus has spent several years with his disciples, sowing seeds and tending the growth of new understanding in their hearts. Now he has completed his earthly mission and is lifted up into heaven. It's his followers' turn—including yours and mine—to sow seeds.

**God, thank you for pouring out
your Spirit on us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Gardeners

Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1:15-23

Believe on the Lord

[The jailer] said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (v. 30)

Paul and Silas tended to get into what US Representative John Lewis called “good trouble” by bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus. After the guard in charge of them saw the prison doors opened and their chains unfastened, he asked a question many people have asked since: “What must I do to be saved?” The prisoners responded, “Believe on the Lord Jesus” (v. 31). After the guard cared for them in his own home, Paul and Silas baptized his entire family, who turned to God.

Sometimes witnessing to Jesus has that result; other times the outcome is different, yet not to be discounted. After retiring from teaching, I tutored adults who wanted to finish high school. One of my students, a Muslim woman, wanted to improve her English, so sometimes we just talked. We compared our religions—you might say we witnessed to each other. Neither of us converted to the other’s faith, but amid our differences, perhaps the strongest testimony to God’s greatness was that we discovered the similarity of our belief in one God who longs to be in relationship with all creation.

**Thank you, God, that we are saved
by your grace alone. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those wrongfully imprisoned

Psalm 97; Exodus 33:12-17; Revelation 22:6-9

Come to us

**The one who testifies to these things
says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen.
Come, Lord Jesus! (v. 20)**

Reading these verses from Revelation, I recalled a well-known Advent hymn by Charles Wesley:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us;
let us find our rest in thee. (ELW 254)

Some describe Revelation as a book of hope amid confusing visions. John portrays contests between good and evil, which often puzzle readers today. Even Martin Luther admitted to not fully understanding everything he read in scripture, thus offering us the incentive to keep seeking and learning by studying, reading, listening, and praying. However, these final verses of Revelation are easier to comprehend than many of the earlier ones, because of John’s hopeful message that Jesus Christ is the beginning and the end—eternally present with us. So with John we pray these powerful final words—“Come, Lord Jesus!”

**Loving God, guide us to understand your word
that we may know the hope that is ours
in Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Biblical scholars

Psalm 97; Exodus 33:18-23; John 1:14-18



Seventh Sunday of Easter

**... I in them and you in me, that they
may become completely one. (v. 23)**

For a seventh-grade literature project on a simplified version of Homer's *Odyssey*, I divided my class into small groups, each responsible for a chapter. At first they bickered about who would do each task. But finally they worked together. It was delightful to see how the groups' work led to a chronological and cohesive depiction of the story.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 is for unity among his disciples as an extension of their oneness with Christ and God. We would like to envision the disciples always working well together without bickering. We would like to imagine them being strengthened by one another, speaking as one for the sake of the gospel. Sometimes it was so, but not always: the book of Acts recounts conflicts among Peter, James, Paul, and other church leaders. Of course, human fears and weaknesses contribute to church conflicts still today. But the clincher is that we are united in Christ due to *God's* work, not ours, and because we are already one in Christ, we can work through our disagreements in love.

**Merciful God, we pray for unity among nations and
within the church as we live out your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People in war-torn countries

**Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14,
16-17, 20-21**

The end result

**Fire goes before him, and consumes
his adversaries on every side. (v. 3)**

My husband and I craved a new adventure and found the opportunity to help set a controlled burn of prairie grass on a ranch in Kansas too good to refuse. We spent part of the day learning about setting fires correctly and the importance of cleansing the earth of dead plants that are not good for grazing cattle. After dusk the burnings started, supervised by cowboys and firefighters in small firetrucks. We have incredible pictures of the flames spreading like red-orange ribbons around the hills. It was frightening, yet thrilling, to see the power of those fires snaking so near us. But we wouldn't see the end result until a month later, when new prairie grass emerged.

The psalmist describes God's glory and omnipotence seen in lightning, fires, mountains, and clouds and how God uses these forces to ward off evil and clear the way for new growth. The end result won't be seen until the full realization of God's kingdom, but in the meantime we watch in awe as God's goodness brings life out of death.

**God of nature, thank you for your magnificent
creation all around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Firefighters

Psalm 29; Exodus 40:16-38; Acts 16:35-40

Visit of Mary to Elizabeth

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. (v. 41)

A visitor can prompt various emotions: fear, gladness, anxiety, relief. Elizabeth was delighted by Mary's visit. Filled with the Holy Spirit at Mary's greeting, Elizabeth realized the child Mary carried in her womb was holy.

In Menotti's opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a shepherd boy and his mother welcome three kingly visitors into their small home. They are following a star, seeking a special child who does not need their treasures but will build his kingdom on love. Amahl, unable to walk without aid, is so moved by the men's quest that he offers his crutch as a gift for the child. On doing so, he finds himself miraculously healed!

Elizabeth and Amahl each received a significant gift on the occasion of a very special visit. We read in Luke how the Holy Spirit affected Elizabeth. The composer Menotti was himself cured of lameness. No doubt this experience influenced his writing of *Amahl*.

May the Holy Spirit's presence in your life fill you with healing and joy today.

**Thank you, God, for the Holy Spirit's work
in our lives. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For all travelers

1 Samuel 2:1-10; Psalm 113; Romans 12:9-16b

Choose your name

Let us make a name for ourselves. (v. 4)

As commencement speeches get made at this time of the year, graduating students often hear, “You can be anything you want to be.” Speakers wish to inspire young minds that their only limitations are the ones they place on themselves. “Go make a name for yourself,” grads hear.

“Making a name for yourself” likely means taking on names given or earned, but that may not be truly *you*. Names such as teacher, CEO, EMT, supervisor, mechanic, retailer, Rotarian, parent—they only tell part of the story of who you are, never the whole story. We can make a name for ourselves by taking on many names while ultimately remaining confused about who we really are.

May I suggest that the best name to be known by is one we do not make for ourselves, but one that is given in the waters of baptism—child of God. When we see and believe ourselves to be known, claimed, loved, forgiven, and blessed by God, we truly know who we are and whose we are.

Holy God, regardless of how we are named, help us know we are your children. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those graduating this spring

Psalm 29; Ezekiel 3:12-21; Luke 9:18-27

Life in the balance

O LORD, how manifold are your works! (v. 24)

If the earth had less atmospheric pressure than it does, water would quickly evaporate. If it had more, not enough sunlight would hit the earth's surface. The earth's axis tilts at about 23.5 degrees. If the tilt were greater or less than that, surface-temperature differences would be too great to sustain life. If the amount of iron in the sea and soil were greater than it is, iron poisoning would make life impossible, and if it were less, crops could not be grown. These and many other specific details reveal how life is possible on earth.

When you consider it, life on planet earth is precarious. But we don't think about that. We carry on with life without giving a second thought to how just the right amount of this and that makes life possible. None of this is lost on our Creator God, who holds it all together and through whom life as we know it is possible. How manifold—and astonishing—are your works, O Lord!

Creator God, thank you for your care of creation.

Help us be good stewards of your earth. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who study and care for the earth

Isaiah 32:11-17; Galatians 5:16-25

Adopted

You have received a spirit of adoption. (v. 15)

The party at the pizza parlor was in full gear. Dozens of people gathered round. Food and drink were enjoyed. Laughter was shared. Joy had exploded. And at the center of it all was a little girl ten years of age. The adoption papers had gone through. Grandparents, who thought they were long past parenting, became parents again. And a little girl had a family—one larger than she had ever dreamed of. The crowd that had gathered, all from the grandparents' church, would fill her life with what she had previously been missing—copious amounts of family love.

The church can be the best family a person can hope for. That's because, when Christians get it right, they remember that their invitation into Christ's family happens because of grace. We are all adopted in. Mercy, not merit, defines our acceptance as children of God. And maybe no one had a greater sense of what that was like than that ten-year-old girl.

**Heavenly Parent, thank you for accepting us;
help us accept others. In Christ's name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those awaiting adoption

**Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Isaiah 44:1-4;
Galatians 6:7-10**

Speaking up for Jesus

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” (v. 12)

Dialogue overheard at a restaurant: “I don’t feel right doing that.” “Why not?” “Because I don’t.” “But why?” “Because . . . because I’m a Christian.” “What does that have to do with anything?” “It’s just something Christians don’t do.” “Why?” “Well, why don’t you come with me to my church on Sunday; you might understand.”

Let’s be honest: Talking about our faith and identifying ourselves as Christian isn’t easy. You never know how it will turn out.

Of all the events on Pentecost—a sound like a powerful wind, dancing tongues of fire, people communicating in languages they did not know before—the greatest oddity might just be Peter speaking passionately and convincingly of his faith in Jesus. Peter, whose foot was often found in his mouth, and who denied knowing Jesus. But here he is, boldly proclaiming what matters most—Jesus.

Is it too much to hope that the Holy Spirit would give us such faith too?

Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with boldness, that we might declare your praise. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who profess their faith
at uncertain occasions

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; 2 Kings 2:1-15a; Luke 1:5-17



Pentecost Sunday

**But the Advocate . . . will . . . remind you
of all that I have said to you. (v. 26)**

Many churches ask their youth to affirm their baptism on Pentecost Sunday. It fits. We ask the Holy Spirit to be stirred up in these young people to confirm their faith, guide their life, empower their serving, give them patience in suffering, and bring them to everlasting life (ELW, p. 236). Big requests of the Holy Spirit for a teen.

Thirteen or fourteen seems the wrong age to ask a person to affirm their baptismal vows. Some of us far removed from that age might forget how tough adolescence can be. Between body changes, the importance of peers, demands at school, extracurricular activities, and now the world of social media, being a teen is not easy.

And along with all that, we introduce Luther's Small Catechism and hope it sticks!

But what we really do is love them; more, we tell them *God* loves them. And sometimes it seems it doesn't stick. But sometimes it does. They hang around, or return. And the wonder of Pentecost keeps on happening.

**Holy Spirit, guide my life, help me in serving
and suffering, and bring me to eternal life. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The youth in our churches

Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21

The mystery of God

**But we speak God's wisdom,
secret and hidden. (v. 7)**

Some things defy reason.

We hang hummingbird feeders in our yard. We are delighted whenever one or more of the tiny birds come to enjoy the sugar-laced nectar. A radio program reported recently that hummingbirds along the West Coast winter in Mexico and summer between California and Alaska. The report said certain hummingbirds have been known to fly hundreds of miles in a migration, arriving at the same exact locations year after year. How do they know where to go? That is one of the great mysteries pondered by bird-watchers, though there are a few theories.

Paul reminds us that the cross also defies reason. Who would have thought God would choose the crucifixion event to reveal God's glory? It makes no sense from our perspective. But what defies reason even more is that God would love us so much as to "migrate" from the far reaches of heaven to make a home among us.

Some things defy reason and can only be received by faith.

**Loving God, thank you for defying reason to
claim us and save us. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People of faith who work in science

Psalm 48; Joel 2:18-29

God's collection

**I will gather you from the peoples,
and assemble you out of the countries
where you have been scattered. (v. 17)**

I am a collector. I know many collectors. I run into them at yard sales and flea markets. The things people collect are almost infinite. Stamps, coins, and baseball cards just scratch the surface. There are people who collect only certain vintages of postcards, pottery by only certain makers, only certain types of toys, and only certain genres of music LPs.

I once asked an experienced collector, my uncle, what he loved to collect the most. "Dollar bills," he said, "and I'm hoping to collect the full set!"

Collectors call a person who desires to collect the full set a completist. Some spend their entire life attempting to complete a full set of something.

God is a completist. God reveals God's self, first in the Old Testament and then in the New, as one who desires to assemble, or collect together, all people. And it appears God will spare no effort to gather the whole set of us. Thanks be to God!

**Searching God, find and claim your children
throughout all the world and all of time. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who don't know about
God's love for them

Psalm 48; 1 Corinthians 2:12-16

Holy influences

**I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight. (v. 30)**

One of my favorite photographs is of me at age four in the backyard with my dad. He has a hoe in his hand, and I have a stick. He was gardening, and in my young mind so was I. In reality I was probably getting in his way, but the picture shows my dad's delight to have me at his side.

An Israelite understanding, captured by the writer of this part of Proverbs, personified Wisdom as the first of God's creations (vv. 22-26). Some Christian scholars have understood this passage as referring to Jesus: that Proverbs' Wisdom is John's Word made flesh. In Proverbs we see God the creator, who "established the heavens, . . . made firm the skies, . . . marked out the foundations of the earth" (vv. 27-29). And right beside God is Wisdom, "like a master worker," participating in the grand unfolding. And God's emotion in the midst of it all: delight.

**O God, help parents and other adults experience
delight in the children you entrust to their care
and reflect your wisdom and love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Parents with young children

Psalms 48; Numbers 24:1-14; Luke 1:26-38

God's masterpiece

**You have made [human beings] a little lower
than God, and crowned them with glory
and honor. (v. 5)**

A little lower than God? Really? It sure doesn't feel like that sometimes, does it?

How can acne be glorified, where is the honor in irritable bowel syndrome, and how is failing eyesight a little lower than God? And these are just limitations that can take place with our bodies. Think of the less-than-divine happenings in our minds: greed, envy, pettiness, hatred, vindictiveness.

The story is told of admirers asking sculptor Michelangelo how he chiseled beauty out of rock. "I saw the angel in the marble," he said, "and carved until I set him free."

God sees in each of us a masterpiece, and God seeks to set it free. Isn't that what Christian ministry is too—bringing out the best in others? Are we not called to see beyond the limitations, both outside and in, and be the presence of Christ as we help raise others up to be the masterpieces God is making them to be? I believe so.

**God, help us look beyond limitations
in ourselves and others to see your handiwork.
In Christ's name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: That all might be treated with honor

Proverbs 3:13-18; Ephesians 1:17-19

The long run

Suffering produces endurance. (v. 3)

The only reason I would go for a run is if someone were chasing me. But I have a parishioner who has run in fifty-five marathons. Fifty-five times 26.2 miles equals 1,441 miles! That's like running from Buffalo, New York, to Miami, Florida.

No runner will tell you that running is painless. Beyond fatigue, there are blisters, cramps, thirst, and more. Yet the runner pushes on.

And no human being will tell you that living life is painless. Suffering, at one level or another, is built into the human drama. Paul tells us that we will experience our share of loss, hurt, anxiety, injury, and crisis.

My friend the runner tells me that what helps her press on when it's hard is the support of fellow runners. Having others come alongside and give her words of encouragement makes all the difference.

As we run through life, may our suffering be met by the help of others so we might endure, grow in character, and have hope. And then may we share what we have been given.

**O God, be by my side when I am suffering,
that I might know hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are suffering alone

Psalm 8; Proverbs 3:19-26; Ephesians 4:1-6

Barnabas, Apostle

[Barnabas] exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion. (v. 23)

She was literally scared stiff. She had been on the rock wall in one place for too long. She didn't move. Though she was fully harnessed, fear had overcome her. The trained guide who oversaw the climb began to ascend the wall despite his lack of safety gear. He climbed to her height and calmly encouraged her to let go of one rock in order to grab another. Following his direction, slowly she began her descent to solid ground.

There are times we all get stuck and need help. Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement," was one such helper for the new believers in Antioch, for a fledgling Jesus follower named Paul, and for the church in Jerusalem. Barnabas was the answer God used to help others get unstuck.

One of a pastor's greatest gifts is to have a Barnabas or two in the congregation to calm fears, assess a troubled situation, and see a way to a safe future. In a world paralyzed with fear, those who can "talk us down from the wall" speak the very words of Christ.

God, send peaceful and wise encouragers to guide us when we're afraid. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are stuck in life

Isaiah 42:5-12; Psalm 112; Matthew 10:7-16



The Holy Trinity

**All that the Father has is mine. . . .
[The Spirit] will take what is mine
and declare it to you. (v. 15)**

Maybe the hardest topic to teach about in confirmation is the Trinity. Using an egg or referring to the three forms of H₂O never fully captures the concept of God as Three-in-One for young teenagers. Nor for adults.

When I was growing up, there were triplets in my school: three sisters who looked so much alike I could never tell them apart. They never dressed the same, but their mannerisms and conversation styles were identical. Often one sister started a sentence, only to have another finish it. It was like they were thinking the same things.

When it comes to the holy Trinity, I tell confirmation classes about those triplets. And I say to them that what was true about those sisters might be true for our God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit don't dress alike, but they have the same genetic makeup and cannot be differentiated. Like the triplets, they are so close that they finish one another's sentences. And what they say most is "You are loved and forgiven."

**Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier: Invite us
into your holy oneness. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The work of Christian theologians

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5

God the reliever

**We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers. (v. 7)**

Orioles. Blue Jays. Cardinals. Have you ever wondered why so many baseball teams are named after birds? Fans find delight in the drama of baseball. It is not a fast-paced game. It is rhythmic and subtle; it captures your attention through the little things that take place on the field.

The pitcher has thrown a masterful game. But now, the fourth time through the batting order, he's tired and the batters are catching on. It's the bottom of the ninth with runners on second and third and no outs. The game is close; a run will tie it up. And out of the dugout comes the manager to make a pitching change. On comes the reliever to try to limit the damage. And with a blazing fast-ball and a deceptive slider, the next three batters are all called out on strikes.

Of course the analogy pales in comparison, but we too, who often try our best but still come up short in life, have one who comes in and saves us from trouble. We are like birds set free from doom. "Our help is in the name of the LORD" (v. 8). Our help is in Jesus.

**God, save us from times of trouble and deliver us
from evil. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are in trouble

Proverbs 7:1-4; Ephesians 4:7-16

Never again

Keep my teachings as the apple of your eye. (v. 2)

On this day in 1940 the Auschwitz concentration camp opened in Poland. Over the next five years more than six million people, most of them Jewish, would be exterminated at this and other such camps. On this day in 1942, thirteen-year-old Anne Frank began writing a diary. Three years later she would die in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Today we remember the horror of this pure evil, and how innocent goodness can be overcome by it. We do well to also remember the words on the fence of the Dachau concentration camp: "Never again."

To keep the teachings of God is to remember what they point to—the in-breaking of the reign of God. God, through the risen Jesus, is on the move. But in our world there are still myriad examples of injustice, violence, and death. Evil appears to swallow the good. But the people of God are not deterred; we commit to keeping the teachings of God so that in small ways, and sometimes large ones, we serve as the instruments by which God's desire for a blessed humanity is realized.

**O God, help us remember and learn from the past,
heeding your call to justice and peace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The church's work for justice

Psalm 124; Proverbs 8:4-21; Ephesians 5:15-20

Truth + Love = Growth

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into . . . Christ. (v. 15)

The preacher, I believe, is called to be a truth-teller. This explains why there are some Saturday nights when I find sleep difficult. Preparing to speak truthful words can be unsettling.

But sometimes the preacher needs to be told the truth. A parishioner called. She told me that, as a person living with a disability, she could no longer worship in our sanctuary. The lack of space for her wheelchair and a narrow bathroom doorway had become barriers to her. As an able-bodied person, I needed to be told the truth about how others experience life.

Personal growth happens when truth is shared lovingly. Truth has the tendency to alter our world and introduce us to a reality beyond our narrow experience. So whether it is a white person learning about racism from a Black person, a selfish person being confronted by a loving friend, or a pastor discovering what life is like for someone who uses a wheelchair, we are in the process of growing up in every way into Jesus.

Holy God, expand our realities so that we might love others and become like you. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are disenfranchised

Psalm 124; Daniel 1:1-21; Luke 1:46b-55

Mom's finger

I said, "Here I am, here I am." (v. 1b)

My mom had a powerful pointer finger. It was often aimed right at me while her well-deserved words, "Stop that right now," rang out. Is God's finger rightfully pointed at us in Isaiah 65? Our complaints that God has failed us are met with anger, or perhaps the disappointment and sorrow of a loving Parent who has always been among us even as we complain about a divine absence: "Here I am, here I am."

We like to aim our fingers at those who can't seem to understand this. *I myself*, we think with confidence, *have never doubted God's presence or my life as God's child. I've never failed to pray, be grateful, or comfort the broken-hearted. I've fought injustice.* Then: *Oops.* I see Mom's finger and hear her command: "Stop that right now." We know that when we point our fingers of judgment at others, three of our fingers point right back at us. We sit in the misery of knowing we too can be doubting whiners.

Then God's voice breaks through our misery, calling, "Here I am, here I am"—and pouring out blessings we don't deserve (vv. 8-9).

Holy God, hold out your arms to us, then beckon us to follow Jesus. Help us say, "Here I am!" Amen.

Prayer concern: Orthopedic hand surgeons

Psalm 22:19-28; Isaiah 56:9-12; Romans 2:17-29

Downs and ups

**But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid. (v. 19)**

My husband died last year. His battle with dementia ended as his perfect new life began. My journey through his illness and dying, death and resurrection has been, well, "interesting." I find myself wandering from "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 1), through lament that I am a worm (v. 6), to the joy of rescue (vv. 21b-22). Sob, laugh, repeat. Caring friends ask me how I'm doing. I can only reply, "*Today I'm . . .*"

Today I know where this down-and-up ride has taken me. It has driven me to know that God has stuck with me like a burr in a dog's hair, from forsakenness and worminess to Roman candles and trumpets. God has never left me, from times of helplessness like that of a baby, through eons of sadness as heavy as Good Friday's sky, to my loud, off-key songs of praise to anyone who will listen and others who run.

You've never hidden your face from me, faithful God; you've never stopped listening to me. Today I live for you.

**Lord Jesus, our cry of forsakenness
echoes yours. Thank you for being close to us
when we despair. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those whose grief is new today

Isaiah 57:1-13; Galatians 3:15-22

No one out

All of you are one in Christ Jesus. (v. 28)

NO1OUT. That's the name of the middle-school ministry in our congregation. No one out. There isn't a door closed to kids whose families are strangers, or whose heads haven't bent over a baptismal font, or who bear ugly scars, or who can't figure out Jesus, or who are uneasy about their sexuality, or whose skin has more melanin than others', or who know what it's like to live in a car, or . . . NO1OUT.

There are doors in Jesus' ministry, but what if they're not about placing some people in and others out? Maybe the most well-known door in scripture is the one that will open to us if we just knock (Luke 11:9). There is another door, a closed and locked door. On Easter evening, the terrified disciples hid behind it. Did the risen Christ knock? No need. He simply "came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you'" (John 20:19). Any doors that would place some people in and some out disappeared when the stone "door" was rolled away from Jesus' tomb. The apostle Paul got that, and he makes it clear to the Galatians: No one is out.

**Christ Jesus, help us tear down the doors
that divide us. In your name we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Immigrants and refugees

Psalms 22:19-28; Isaiah 59:1-8; Matthew 9:27-34



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 12

**They found the man from whom the demons
had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus,
clothed and in his right mind. (v. 35)**

When I was eighteen, I volunteered to visit patients at the state hospital. I was introduced to Hattie in the locked wards. Hattie had a hard time looking me in the eye or talking with me. But she would lead me with her hunched-over shuffle to the room where we would fold towels. The others there welcomed me cheerfully. One wore a crown, explaining to me her close relationship with many of the queens in Europe. After months of folding I learned that Hattie was telling others that I was her daughter. I was worried that I was a victim of false identity. “No,” a nurse assured me. “Her daughter hasn’t been here for forever. Hattie misses her.”

Jesus healed a seriously disturbed man, filled with demons, by being willing to be in relationship with the man. I certainly didn’t “heal” Hattie, but our two-year relationship was important for us. We became friends. On my last day Hattie had a present waiting for me. Love, in the form of chocolate.

**Jesus, Son of the Most High God, you choose
to be in loving relationship with all of us.
Thank you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are searching for healing

Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29

Keep your enemies closer

**Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;
preserve my life from the dread enemy. (v. 1)**

Has this happened to you? You're enjoying a cup of coffee with a friend, when the conversation turns to a controversial political topic. Your companion wants you to know what they have just learned about it on cable TV or social media, implying that if only you knew this too, you'd agree with them. They are wasting their time. I'm not a good target for conversion. And neither are they.

"Preserve my life from the dread enemy" is the second line of today's psalm. What follows is a vivid description of plots, bitterness, and evil purposes. My encounters over coffee with "the dread enemy" aren't like that. But they can breed enmity.

I listen until it seems that my friend has shared what it is that I need to know. Then I ask, "Can we agree to disagree?" A brief silence almost always follows. I fill it by gently saying, "I love you." I do. We live together as God's children and are called to love each other, even when it's tempting to be enemies.

**Christ Jesus, your command to us to love and pray
for our enemies is life-giving. We thank you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Social media purveyors and
television commentators

Job 18:1-21; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Christ, our peace

[Christ] is our peace . . . [and] has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (v. 14)

Years ago, Jessica began to worship in the congregation I served. We got to know each other in conversations about being Lutheran and following Jesus. Jess became one of us, and I loved her inquisitiveness and faithfulness. But because I didn't realize she was a transgender woman, I failed to be present for her in ways that could have been helpful in her early days among us.

Might some of the divisions among us today be akin to the divide between Jewish Christians and Gentiles in Paul's Ephesus? When we have strong contrary positions about issues, we may feel as if we are strangers and aliens to each other. Thankfully, the light of the risen Christ reveals that we are all one holy temple, God's dwelling place.

**Holy God, thank you for creating us
in your image and bringing us the gift of peace,
through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For the healing of divisions
in the church

Psalms 64; Job 19:1-22

I alone am left

The LORD said to [Elijah], “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.” (v. 15)

The verses for our devotion today might seem, well, not exactly fodder for our spiritual lives. Go to the desert, anoint kings, expect slaughter, name a successor, and feast. The word of the Lord.

But when we read the verses before these, we learn more about following Jesus. In the preface to today's verses Elijah is complaining to God that he is the only Israelite left to serve the God of hosts. God's reply? Not “Poor dear, how hard that must be.” Instead, “Go, return to the wilderness,” where seven thousand faithful people remain, including Elijah's successor, Elisha.

Is our challenge like Elijah's? Do we at times complain that everything is up to us? “I alone am left” with a youth event or litter pickup or caring for people in distress. Notice that Jesus traveled with disciples, not alone. He sent people out two by two, not alone. Deacons and disciples served the early church together, not alone. Nor are we alone. Jesus' body, the church, is always with us.

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who feel all alone

Psalm 64; Ezekiel 32:1-10; Luke 9:37-43a

26 million

**Protect me, O God,
for in you I take refuge. (v. 1)**

Refugees stream through the story of my life: people fleeing Idi Amin's *panga* (machete) in Uganda, destruction in Vietnam, warfare in Bosnia and Serbia, horrific violence in Sudan and South Sudan. Today 26 million people are refugees fleeing life-threatening persecution. Half are children.

Over the years I've waited anxiously for strangers to make their weary way from planes to a group of excited people in the baggage area. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service brought them to us. Their fearful faces turned to smiles when, weeks later, they believed that we were for real. We would protect them. We would provide food and shelter. We would help the kids get to school. We would help them find jobs. We would love these children of God, whether they were Christian, Buddhist, or Muslim. We wouldn't abandon them.

Our community would become a home for them—a refuge—just as God's grace was a home and refuge for the psalmist and is so for us.

**Lord Jesus, you who were a refugee,
our hearts are glad that we can help those
who are fleeing death. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People fleeing persecution

Leviticus 9:22–10:11; 2 Corinthians 13:5-10

John the Baptist

**But his mother said,
“No; he is to be called John.” (v. 60)**

When I was in ninth grade I wanted to change my name to Carmen. That was my friend's name, and she was amazing: faithful at church, got straight As in high school, and was our band's drum majorette, wearing a one-piece, gold lamé outfit that made boys faint. I was sure that if I had been named Carmen, my life would have been different.

What's the big deal about the name John in the story of the baptizer? His ministry would have been the same had he been named Zechariah Jr. The angel Gabriel had announced that “John” was to be the name for the boy tumbling in Elizabeth's womb. She insisted on it after he was born, and Zechariah's tongue was loosed when he agreed. You see, the Hebrew name Yohanan, the predecessor to the English name John, means “graced by God.” My name may not have been key to how my life turned out, but John's name is important. It makes clear the significance of God's grace accompanying this child through conception, birth, and life in the wilderness.

**Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who
has looked favorably on us and redeemed us
through Christ Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For all to know their most important
name is “child of God”

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 141; Acts 13:13-26

Freedom to love

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. (v. 25)

God's children are free, Paul insists in these verses from Galatians, free to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is not a freedom that we must try to make happen. "For freedom Christ has set us free," Paul trumpets (v. 1).

Paul tells us clearly what love is: it's a fruit as rich as a Georgia peach, a Rainier cherry, and a Honeycrisp apple. But like sewage spilling out through a burst pipe come Paul's descriptions of what happens when we don't love our neighbor or ourselves (vv. 19-21). Love's opposite is ugly and smelly and violent and abusive. We recognize it when we see it.

"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (vv. 22-23) change our neighbors as well as us. This fruit, woven into our genetic makeup, is made up of apology, forgiveness, gratitude, amendment of life, giving the benefit of the doubt, compassion, empathy, and the willingness to be present again and again to the beloved. "There is no law against such things" (v. 23).

How grateful we are, O God, that you call us through Christ to the freedom of loving each other. Alleluia!

Prayer concern: Counselors, mediators, arbitrators

Psalms 16; Deuteronomy 32:15-27, 39-43;

Luke 9:21-27



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 13

**As for you, go and proclaim
the kingdom of God. (v. 60)**

When we listen to Jesus' voice today, we hear both lament and urgency. Urgency turns his face to Jerusalem, where he will be "taken up" by violence. My dad too knew urgency when he left his protected job and volunteered for the Navy in World War II, determined to stop enemies from destroying the freedom of people worldwide. Two thousand years ago, Jesus knew the freedom of God's grace was vital for all, even if he would die because people hated this good news.

Did Jesus lament over his disciples' lust for violence while they were on the road? He didn't hesitate to censure them. And his words to a would-be follower are heavy with lament. Unlike foxes and birds, "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (v. 58). People who have experienced homelessness know the sorrow in Jesus' words. But urgency to set the world right overcomes lament about how it is. "Don't stop for anything," Jesus says. "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

**We share your sadness, Lord Jesus. May it
make us determined to follow your lead
and work to heal the world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People experiencing homelessness

**1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16;
Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

Supplications

**Give ear, O LORD, to the voice of my
supplications. (v. 6)**

Does God save us from enemies only if we are worthy and beg earnestly? In his 1520 *Freedom of a Christian* Martin Luther wrote, "Without any merit [e.g., begging] on my part . . . my God has given me in Christ all the riches of justification and salvation, although I am an unworthy condemned sinner." Amazing! Yet, years later, as he lay dying, he wrote, "We are all beggars [before God]." This stark statement echoes the psalmist's words. God has promised us wholeness without condition, yet we cry, "Please do!" It seems that the terrain between those two powerful realities is the field on which theological discourse is played.

I've struggled on that field. It was life-changing for me when I was introduced to God's free and undeserved grace. Nothing I do can make God love me more or less. What about that "I beg you"? I believe I am called to recognize God's grace every day, then respond in discipleship. I beg you, O Lord, help me remember this.

**I'm on my knees before you, thankful
for your gift of grace, O God. Raise me up
to follow your Son, Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who believe that God is out
to hurt them

Genesis 24:34-41, 50-67; 1 John 2:7-11

Challenge and danger

To [God] be the glory forever and ever. (v. 18)

The author of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus was most likely not Paul, despite the appearance of his name at the head of each letter. In ancient times this was a common way of remembering, honoring, and passing on a predecessor's teachings. The statements in today's passage, instructions for the early church, tell us about the challenging and often dangerous life of the apostles.

Using what this author believes would have been Paul's voice, he writes about his own tribulation and his satisfaction about the good fight he has fought for the sake of the gospel. He raises before us the cup of suffering that had been poured out on all of Christ Jesus' messengers. Then he raises something else, an important question: What upheld them? It was the "crown of righteousness" (v. 8) that will be placed on the heads of all who have suffered in this fight. This letter concludes with an important reminder: the glory won in these battles is always God's.

Christ Jesus, your gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. To you be the glory. Amen.

Prayer concern: Missionaries in war-torn
parts of the world

Psalm 140; Jeremiah 3:15-18; Ephesians 5:6-20

Peter and Paul, Apostles

“Follow me.” (v. 19)

In Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe* (Vintage, reprint ed., 1996), a young man believes he is responsible for a devastating tragedy. He retreats from the charmed life that he has been leading and sinks into hopelessness and despair. One night a neon-bright sign startles him, announcing the Church of the Second Chance. There he learns that there is, indeed, a congregation—and a God—wide open to everyone who needs a second chance.

Both Peter and Paul needed second chances. Peter, oh, Peter, how could you have said that you were not a disciple of Jesus on that night before his death? And you, Saul (whom we've come to know better as Paul), how could you have “[breathed] threats and murder against the disciples” of Jesus? (Acts 9:1). If there were ever people who needed a second chance, these two men did. They got it.

A second chance awaits us all.

**Thank you, Jesus the Christ, for giving us
second, third, and indeed infinite chances
to follow you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People fleeing congregations
that have hurt them

**Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 87:1-3, 5-7; 2
Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18**

Balm for anxiety

**As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you. (v. 13)**

Are you anxious? Restless, weary, unfocused, cranky, shoulders hunched up to your ears, nights filled with dysfunctional thoughts? Does your brain fail to make sense of politics, COVID, climate change, and the hatred of whoever is different? If your answer is yes, then my guess is that you experience at least some anxiety. I wish that congregations would form 3:00 a.m. clubs, where we anxious ones could gather in jammies and bathrobes over warm milk, loving conversation, and prayer.

When my anxiety threatens to overwhelm me, I imagine myself to be in God's womb. I'm floating there. The womb's warm tissues surround and comfort me. The light is gentle, as if I've thrown a red silk scarf over my bedside lamp. As I float I am nurtured by God's abundance. Gone are my fears and my worries. Present is the knowledge that I am God's beloved child. In this time of anxiety God comforts me and all of us just as a mother comforts her child.

**We're hanging by our fingernails
until we let go and fall into your lap, O God,
divine Parent of us all. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Caregivers in nurseries
and nursing homes

Psalm 66:1-9; 2 Kings 21:1-15; Romans 7:14-25

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