

Christ in Our Home

October, November, December
2021

LARGE PRINT EDITION



Prayers

Morning

Morning by morning we come to you,
O Lord, little knowing what the day will
bring. Walk with us through the hours of
our waking, that with full and free hearts we
may live without fear, trusting always in your
unfailing presence. Amen.

Evening

Enfold us in the warmth of your embrace,
loving God, that we may rest in peace.
Wake us when morning comes, refreshed
and alive with hope for the dawning of your
eternal day. Amen.

Mealtime

Blessed are you, O Christ, for your kingdom
comes at every table of sharing. Feed us
now with the bread of life that, radiant in
your unfailing generosity, we may reveal the
kingdom of your compassion at this and
every table. Amen.

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Heidi Hyland Mann, Laurie J. Hanson, and Julie O'Brien, editors

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Festivals and commemorations

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

- Oct. 4 Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church, 1226; Theodor Fliedner, renewer of society, 1864
- Oct. 6 William Tyndale, translator, martyr, 1536
- Oct. 7 Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, pastor in North America, 1787
- Oct. 15 Teresa of Avila, teacher, renewer of the church, 1582
- Oct. 17 Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, martyr, c. 115
- Oct. 18 Luke, Evangelist**
- Oct. 23 James of Jerusalem, martyr, c. 62
- Oct. 26 Philipp Nicolai, 1608; Johann Heermann, 1647; Paul Gerhardt, 1676; hymnwriters
- Oct. 28 Simon and Jude, Apostles**
- Oct. 31 Reformation Day**
- Nov. 1 All Saints Day**
- Nov. 3 Martín de Porres, renewer of society, 1639
- Nov. 7 John Christian Frederick Heyer, 1873; Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, 1719; Ludwig Nommensen, 1918; missionaries
- Nov. 11 Martin, Bishop of Tours, 397; Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, teacher, 1855
- Nov. 17 Elizabeth of Hungary, renewer of society, 1231
- Nov. 23 Clement, Bishop of Rome, c. 100; Miguel Agustín Pro, martyr, 1927
- Nov. 24 Justus Falckner, 1723; Jehu Jones, 1852; William Passavant, 1894; pastors in North America
- Nov. 25 Isaac Watts, hymnwriter, 1748
- Nov. 30 Andrew, Apostle**
- Dec. 3 Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, 1552
- Dec. 4 John of Damascus, theologian and hymnwriter, c. 749
- Dec. 6 Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342
- Dec. 7 Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397
- Dec. 13 Lucy, martyr, 304
- Dec. 14 John of the Cross, renewer of the church, 1591
- Dec. 20 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church, 1552
- Dec. 26 Stephen, Deacon and Martyr**
- Dec. 27 John, Apostle and Evangelist**
- Dec. 28 The Holy Innocents, Martyrs**

Writers

Prayer Page (inside front cover) David L. Miller is pastor of faith formation at St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Naperville, Illinois. He and his wife, Dixie, live in Downers Grove, Illinois.

October 1–15 Kimberly Knowle-Zeller is an ordained ELCA pastor, mother of two, and spouse of an ELCA pastor. She lives with her family in Cole Camp, Missouri. You can read her writing at kimberlyknowlezeller.com.

October 16–31 Mark D. Williamson is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, Dodgeville, Wisconsin. He and his wife, Jennifer, a fundraiser, are parents to two young girls. Together they relish being planted in the beautiful Driftless region with all the natural recreation, arts, and culture it offers.

November 1–15 Lisa A. Smith is a pastor serving as ELCA churchwide deployed staff in Anchorage, Alaska, and worships at Amazing Grace Lutheran Church there. With her spouse and children, she loves exploring the wilderness of Alaska by foot, bike, and ski. Lisa blogs at www.pastorlisawrites.com.

November 16–30 Jeff Wallager is from Anoka, Minnesota, and attends Zion Lutheran Church. He serves as chaplain supervisor for a regional health system.

December 1–15 Sonia C. Solomonson, of Streamwood, Illinois, is retired and belongs to First Congregational United Church of Christ in Elgin, Illinois. She previously served as managing editor of *The Lutheran* magazine and executive editor of *The Little Lutheran*. She is now a life coach at Way2Grow Coaching and a freelance writer and editor.

December 16–31 Tara Ulrich is a rostered deacon in the ELCA. She currently serves Tri-County Ministry, a parish that includes one Presbyterian and six ELCA congregations in eastern North Dakota. She loves writing, reading, and spending time with her fur babies, Luna and Neville. She is the author of *Living as a Daughter: 31 Days of Mental Illness* (self-published, 2016).

Where the Spirit sings

**For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus
has set you free. (v. 2)**

One of my favorite spots to sit is right outside our home. We have two yellow Adirondack chairs under three towering oak trees. From the chair I watch the seasons unfold. I take deep breaths. I write. I read. I listen. I feel the wind on my face. I hear birds chirping. I watch leaves change colors and fall from the trees. All of this listening and watching points me to the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit calls to us when we're listening and when we're distracted. The Spirit welcomes us to know presence and love. In each moment of listening, we're invited to hear God's words of grace and love: "You are mine, you are mine, you are mine."

Wherever you find yourself this day, sit and listen. Whether you're inside or outside, the Spirit can find you. Open your eyes and your ears. The Spirit is mighty and active, blowing toward you in love.

**Spirit God, keep blowing across this world. Teach us
to be a force of good for others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who protect and preserve
our land

A deep cleaning

But God knows your hearts. (v. 15)

Some days I wonder if I really need to talk to God, given that God knows my heart. I believe that God can feel the worry, sadness, anger, and joy I hold. I believe that God knows the gifts I'm celebrating and the people I'm holding close to my heart. But I also know the grace and peace I feel when I offer my thoughts and heart to God. God does know what's on my heart. Yet, with any relationship there's much fruit to be shared when we open ourselves to one another, and it's the same with God.

God delights in us when we meet God with our hearts. God holds our feelings close. God offers forgiveness and unending love. God knows the contours of our hearts and rejoices when we rid ourselves of envy, bitterness, and comparison by giving them over to God.

What's on your heart today? Who are you holding close in prayer? Speak those words. Write your gratitude. Trust that God knows you and is with you.

**Draw near to me, God, as I rest in you
and find comfort in your word. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People feeling disconnected from God



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 27

And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (v. 16)

Jesus is known for his never-ending welcome. He welcomes children, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes. Jesus embraces anyone who desires a connection with him and anyone in need of healing. Jesus' posture is one of openness.

As someone with little children, I envision the scene with Jesus welcoming children to him as one of noise and chaos. It's crying and whining. It's joy and smiles. It's fighting to get closer to Jesus. And most importantly, it's an overwhelming welcome by Jesus, who extends his arms ever wider so no one is left out.

Where have you felt Jesus' embrace for you? Jesus is always reaching for you. Have you ever felt like Jesus wouldn't want to welcome you with open arms? On the contrary, Jesus is there to invite you into his life full of good things. Feel Jesus' welcome and blessing. This invitation is never going away.

**Welcoming God, thank you for your open arms.
Help me to show that same welcome
to others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those feeling misunderstood

A generous God

**It is well with those who deal generously
and lend. (v. 5)**

Does God love me more when I offer my time and gifts in service to other people? Am I more righteous and just when I use my voice to speak for those in need? I don't think God's love depends on how well I advocate for justice, but I do believe that God calls us all to interact with, call attention to, serve, and love those in need. When I do these things, I feel God's presence more palpably.

God comes to us in the form of our neighbors—the ones we agree with and the ones who make our skin crawl. God comes to us in strangers—the ones who look like us and the ones who don't. God comes to us in the cries for justice—across our streets and across the world. When we act generously, extending a welcome hand, offering food, clothing the homeless, advocating for justice, our lives are filled with God's justice and presence. Each time we acknowledge God in our neighbors, we serve as God's means to bring a more just kingdom to this earth.

**Bountiful God, open our hearts to see your presence
in all whom we meet. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The work of Lutheran World Relief

Milk or juice?

I will not be angry forever.

Only acknowledge your guilt. (vv. 12-13)

Every morning at school my kindergartener eats breakfast and has a choice of milk or juice. Before she goes to school I remind her to only drink milk because juice is high in sugar. After school I ask what she had for breakfast. "Did you have juice?" Some days she immediately covers her face and laughs. On the days she hides her eyes from me, even without words I know this means she drank juice and doesn't want to admit it.

I know it's just juice, but this interaction is the beginning of a lifelong learning that rules and guidance are in place to keep us and others safe and healthy, and that it's important to tell the truth and acknowledge when we have strayed from what we should do. In response to my daughter's downturned eyes, I remind her over and over that I only want to know the truth and that I am not mad. I offer her my love and hopefully am modeling the grand love and forgiveness God offers us. God's commands are for our well-being, God loves us even when we stray, and God's forgiveness is vaster than anything we can imagine.

Loving God, thank you for the unending ways you offer us life and forgiveness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those seeking forgiveness

Listening for God's voice

You have heard that it was said . . . (v. 27)

So many biblical texts are hard to read and understand. They were written for a particular time and place. They bear witness to a people wrestling with who God was in their lives. We do the same wrestling and discernment when we read scripture. God's word is meant to inspire, convict, and encourage. But God's word also brings questions and contradictions. Reading scripture calls for an open mind and a willingness to listen and learn.

Today's texts about divorce might seem especially challenging. However, if we keep in mind the overarching theme of scripture—God's unfailing commitment to all people—we can read the text through the lens of love. In biblical times, divorce privileged the husband over the wife and could leave her destitute. Jesus here reflects a God of love, understanding, and justice for those who are disempowered.

Keep reading God's word. Keep learning and listening. Keep digging for the truths that reveal the God of love, grace, and forgiveness.

**God, keep us turning to you for guidance
and understanding. May your word enliven
our spirits. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People struggling in their relationships

Joined with God

The LORD our God made a covenant with us. (v. 2)

One of the things I love about walking is how it makes me feel connected to the land and to the people I pass. With every step I am supported by the ground under my feet. With every person I pass with a wave and a hello, I am connected to a neighbor who is part of God's family. During the pandemic, walking took on even greater significance because it was one of the few ways I could interact with people and the earth. With every step, I renewed my relationships to land and people.

When I reflect on God's covenant with people, I liken it to walking. God continually renews promises with us. God never fails to remind us that we are God's people and that there are no other gods. And with every prayer, confession, and worship we offer to God, our relationship deepens. God made a promise to us to be our God and to take us out of the depths of despair. With every step you take, remember that God walks with you.

**As you walk with us, Lord, open our eyes to
your presence. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Sunday school teachers and
faith formation leaders

Counting the summers

**So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart. (v. 12)**

When my daughter was born I read an article acknowledging that parents only have eighteen summers with their children before they graduate. I can still feel my anxiety rising as I think about that number and the fleetingness of my days. My children are currently six and three. With small children underfoot, the days can seem long, but the reality of how fast they grow is with me every day.

Yet there is hope. Each time I watch my children play with their toys, sit next to them reading a book, make cookies, or take a walk with them, it almost feels as if time stands still. In those moments I'm able to see the gifts in front of me and say, "Thank you, God." God is with us in the day-to-day moments of our lives. God sees us in our waking and sleeping, working and playing, resting and praying. In recognizing the fleetingness of the days, I can reflect on the God who counts the days with us and, more importantly, counts us as beloved children.

**God of tiny moments and grand adventures, help us
see all our days as your precious gifts. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Children in the foster-care system

New traditions

And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? (v. 3)

Life during a global pandemic meant many traditions needed to be altered or canceled altogether. Throughout this time there was a great deal of grief and loss. Very quickly, the way much of life operated had to pivot.

I give thanks for worship leaders and church communities who found creative new ways to be the church, to continue some traditions while letting others go, so we could remain connected to God. My children and I found a new rhythm, worshiping from home on our couch. Yes, there were many distractions. Yes, we missed the community. But yes, God was present.

Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites when their words don't match their actions. Jesus reminds his followers that a call to discipleship is not rooted in specific actions, but in the posture of our hearts. Jesus' words remind us that God is bigger than any human tradition.

Where have you let tradition get in the way of your relationship with God? Ask God to lead you to what is truly important.

All-knowing God, search our hearts and fill us with desire to live justly and mercifully. Amen.

Prayer concern: Teachers, students, school workers,
and administrators



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 28

**But many who are first will be last,
and the last will be first. (v. 31)**

I have this tendency to think in extremes when it comes to my worth. In school, if I didn't have the best grades, I felt like I had the worst. Too often in parenting, if I lose my patience, I feel like the worst parent. There is no in-between in my thinking. Fortunately, God's kingdom doesn't rely on our traditional ways of measuring. God flips everything we think we know about who is first and who is last and turns it on its head.

I'm reminded that in God's kingdom my worth comes, first and foremost, as God's gift: I am God's beloved child. There's no being first in my discipleship, and there's definitely no being last either. God desires hearts and lives turned toward God, but God is a God of grace who sees the challenges we face and meets us with understanding and help. God doesn't measure how much we know about the Bible; rather, God marvels at the sheer beauty and energy of someone wanting to know God. God doesn't measure how much I get out of a worship service; rather, God marvels at me as a beloved, precious gift—the work of God's own hands.

**God of wisdom, remind me that your ways are
not my ways. Your way is always full of grace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Caregivers

All God's people

There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation. (v. 9)

I spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Gambia, West Africa, where I learned the local Wolof dialect. The Wolof word for community translates as "the people of the children of Adam." I love this concrete definition for community, but more importantly, I love how the Gambian people lived out this reality.

When they said "community," they were saying they believed everyone deserves respect and dignity. The word itself brings forward a reality that God intends for us all. I saw this reality of community when strangers were welcomed into people's homes with food and a place to sleep. I saw this reality when Gambians couldn't understand how it was possible for people to be homeless. I lived this reality when my Gambian family cared for and loved me as their own.

This is the picture of the community God intends: a community rooted in love for all God's people, a community where there is no more hunger, thirst, or scorching heat. Today when you think of community, think about the people of the children of Adam, and how that image changes how you see others.

God of all, create in us a willingness to see your people as beloved children in Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Mission coworkers

Singing God's song

**. . . singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
and telling all your wondrous deeds. (v. 7)**

Sometimes I overhear my three-year-old son singing to himself as he plays with his trucks. Between narrating the trucks' movements, he sings quietly. His voice lifting into the air stops me, and all I can do is sit, listen, and watch him. He sings songs from shows, the radio, church, and the songs we make up together. In the moment, I want to shout a thank-you to God—for this boy, his voice, and the gift of this moment. But I also wonder if God, too, is singing a song of thanksgiving.

I imagine that God sings for joy when people turn to God and seek forgiveness. I imagine that God sings for joy when neighbors help one another. I imagine that God sings for joy when communities seek justice. We too get to join in God's song every time we lift our voices in praise and thanks, share our gratitude, and offer each other words of grace. Look around you and see what words rise to your voice in a song of gratitude for this day.

**God, you sing to us a song of love. Open our lips
to proclaim the greatness of that gift. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Worship leaders

Caring for our neighbors

And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores. (v. 20)

As we were driving one day, from the backseat, my daughter Charlotte drew me in with her question: "Where this way leads, Mama?" To my left I saw a road curving around farm fields.

"I don't know where that road goes."

In the rearview mirror I saw Charlotte's fingers pressed into the window glass. We passed another road, and she asked again, "Where that road leads?"

We make many choices every day that affect our neighbors near and far, that affect our daily lives and the years to come. We can choose to reach out to those in need, or to keep to ourselves. We can choose to offer our gifts, or we can hoard them. We can choose to see God in everyone, or not. We can choose to see the Lazaruses lying before us, or we can turn our eyes.

Will we turn toward one another with compassion and a posture of listening? Will we travel together, committed to the good of all? Will we take time to slow down and see the beauty in our midst? The next time I'm in the car and hear my daughter's question, I'll tell her: "Let's go and find out where this way leads."

**Gracious God, we don't know where life
will take us. Teach us to reach out to others
along the way. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Social workers

Make a wish

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy
and peace in believing, so that you may
abound in hope. (v. 13)**

On a family walk, the kids picked up two dandelions gone to seed. "Make a wish," I said.

"I wish to ride a unicorn." Charlotte blew the seeds into the air. "I wish to ride a horse," Isaac declared. What do I wish? To feel at ease in our world. For healing. For peace.

I imagine Paul, writing his letters to the various churches including the one in Rome. I imagine him wishing—and more, praying—for the people to know how much God loved them, and that they would know and love God in return.

As we made our wishes, the seeds flew away, carrying our words. I lifted my face to the sky, offered my prayers, and watched as the seeds were scattered back to the earth to eventually take root and bloom. This is the gift of our faith: the small seeds we plant when we love one another and love God, and the fruits that are born through the Holy Spirit.

Make a wish today, and offer a prayer of thanks for the seeds of faith that are planted.

**God, our beginning and end: May we
find ourselves rooted in your love,
and open to sharing our faith. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are eager to hear
a word of hope

Stay here

**When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble. (v. 15)**

I haven't reached the door of my daughter's bedroom before her voice calls me back: "Stay here." Standing next to the light switch, I reassure her, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Stay here, Mama." I flick the switch, bringing darkness into the room. "I love you. I'm not going anywhere." We do this every night. I wonder if she's picking up on my worries about the world, or perhaps it's due to her being away all day at kindergarten. Every night, back and forth, she wants me to stay, and I assure her I will.

Later, when I'm ready for bed, sitting in my chair with my Bible, I offer my own prayers to God, and they're not much different from my daughter's. "Stay here, God. Be with me. Be with our world."

I listen to the chorus of insects outside my window, I see the moon's light, and in the stillness, I hear God's response: "I love you. I'm not going anywhere."

**God, thank you for being with us when we call,
and when we don't know what words to offer. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Parents of young children

Divine service

But I am among you as one who serves. (v. 27)

In the Lutheran tradition in which I was raised, the official worship settings in our hymnals appeared under the heading "Divine Service." This is a literal translation of the German word *Gottesdienst* (God service), and is still used in some English-speaking Lutheran denominations around the world. It etched into my mind early on that this is exactly what God is doing in Christian worship: coming down to serve sinful human beings the forgiveness and salvation we need.

The next time you are in worship, consider that Christ himself really is among you serving those gathered in his name and at his table. This is our Lord in action, giving us his own definition of greatness. The more we fix our eyes on his divine service, the less room we have in our minds for the world's portraits of power and glory. When we let God feed us, God strengthens us to become a new mode for divine service out in the world.

Gracious God, how amazing that you stoop to serve me! Make me too a sacrament of your love. Amen.

Prayer concern: Ministers of word and sacrament



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 29

**Whoever wishes to be first among you
must be slave of all. (v. 44)**

Last year at Christmastime I received a happy report from one of the officers of the local Kiwanis Club. The Kiwanians had edged out the Lions Club in raising the most money on our respective days of bell-ringing for the Salvation Army: \$946.51 to \$788.87. I felt a little burst of pride, as I am a Kiwanian and I had personally worked one of those shifts, ringing on a blustery day outside the Piggly Wiggly grocery store. I also smiled when our officer noted, "The Lions' total is pretty good too, and we tip our caps to them!"

Notice how Jesus does not demand from his disciples that they forfeit their competitive instinct. Rather, he rechannels it toward service. When we compete to gain privilege of place over others, like James and John tried to do, it leads to dissension. When we compete to lift others up through works of love, however, it leads to celebration and a multiplication of blessing. Want to finish first? Do it the Jesus way, then go for the gold!

**Lord Jesus, you are the champion of humble service.
Help me to be great in love, like you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Civic and service clubs

Luke, Evangelist

**I too decided . . . to write an orderly account
for you, most excellent Theophilus. (1:3)**

I have long been drawn to the theory that Luke, the author of the books we call Luke and Acts, addressed his two-volume work to the whole community of believers using a code name, "Theophilus." It adds a level of intrigue to imagine the authorities checking Luke's "mail" and being fooled into believing this was harmless correspondence to a Roman nobleman. Meanwhile, ordinary Christian folk, as they received the messages, knew that each and every one of them was Theophilus—"friend of God."

Whether or not the theory is historical, it is certainly true that today, by the Holy Spirit, you really are the addressee of the sacred story, the friend of God to whom the word is delivered. What if every time you opened your Bible to one of these inspired testimonies to Jesus, you began by envisioning these words on the envelope: "Dear friend of God"? How beautiful to realize that God is reaching out to you through Christ with the hand of friendship!

**God, I am in awe that in Jesus you call me your
friend. How can I ever thank you enough! Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who don't know God as friend

When we hide

And the LORD said, “See, he has hidden himself among the baggage.” (v. 22)

Here’s a funny sight: the tall man, Saul, chosen by God to serve as Israel’s first king, hiding among the Benjaminite luggage, trying to avoid the call. Have you ever tried to do something similar?

When COVID-19 prevented my congregation from gathering in person for worship, suddenly I only had four other human beings in the sanctuary with me on Sundays. One of them was at the keyboard, another was busy with the tech work. That left a soprano song leader and an alto assisting minister to sing the hymns—plus me. “Pastor, you should leave your mic on. We could really use the lower voice,” they said. Now, I’ve come a long way from my childhood miseducation at the school of Real Men Mumble, but singing as part of a trio over the air on a country radio broadcast shot all over southwest Wisconsin? It made me want to hide in the acolytes’ closet!

Nope, not an option. God will find you every time. And anoint you to do what needs to be done.

God, forgive me when I hide from you. Give me courage to answer your call, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are afraid to serve

The real test

**Wait for the LORD, and keep to his way,
and he will exalt you. (v. 34)**

When I was in eighth grade, my first-period religion class was rife with cheating. We had a lot of fill-in-the-blank memory quizzes, and since the pastor trusted us to grade one another's work, many of my peers would leave those blanks empty until a coconspirator could write in the correct answers as they were given. Though I often neglected my memory homework, I always took a stab at filling in my own blanks and had at least one other honest soul nearby to grade fairly. I will never forget the day the pastor read our semester grades aloud in front of the class. There were a lot of As, but when it was my turn, all could hear that Goody Two-Shoes got a dreadful D. In religion!

Psalm 37 says that although the wicked often prosper in the short term, God will vindicate the righteous in the end. In life, the real test is not just the score at the top of the page. It's sticking to God's way and waiting patiently on God's justice to come.

**Faithful God, keep me true to your commandments,
even when others around me ignore them. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Youth resisting peer pressure

Waiting for the rain

**Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb. (v. 4)**

The Negeb Desert is a large arid region in the south of the Holy Land. People who live there might spend ten or eleven months of the year without ever seeing a drop of rain. The watercourses, or wadis, etched into the terrain are evidence that water has indeed once flowed, but it would take a strong mix of memory and hope to trust that it would flow again.

Sometimes long periods of our walk with God are like that desert waiting. Interestingly, the waiting in Psalm 126 is of an active sort. Ancient farmers in the Negeb knew that they couldn't simply sit around until the winter rains came before beginning their labor. If they didn't prepare the soil and sow their seed while it was dry, they wouldn't be able to capture that water when it did arrive. The psalmist paints a picture of the faithful laboring even through their tears, in expectation that God will come in due time and cause their efforts to flourish.

**God, help me to press on with my work, trusting that
you will fill my watercourses again. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Desert ecosystems

Speaking up

**This man does not deserve . . . death,
for he has spoken to us in the name
of the LORD. (v. 16)**

The temple authorities in Jerusalem sought the death sentence against prophet Jeremiah. His crime, they said, was prophesying against the city. These “leaders” were possessed by a “my country, right or wrong” spirit, and they could no longer tolerate a critical word, even one given by God through a commissioned messenger of God.

Jeremiah was not spared from their wrath by a heavenly miracle; he survived because of the advocacy of “all the people” (v. 16), including some of the elders of the land. While some today may shake their heads at faith-based advocacy for being too political, this passage shows that speaking up for others who are threatened with injustice is an act of faith and wise discernment.

Who do you see in the place where you live being judged unfairly or without discernment? How could an act of advocacy on your part be an extension of your prayer time today?

**Holy One, empower me to speak up for the innocent
and the wrongly accused. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The work of ELCA Advocacy

The ministry of intercession

**Some people brought a blind man to [Jesus]
and begged him to touch him. (v. 22)**

In my congregation we have had five medical emergencies during worship in as many years. In each case, I have a feeling the morning's most palpable experience of grace for the majority in attendance was seeing the nurses and EMTs in the congregation respond to a sibling in need and getting them quick transport to the hospital.

In the gospels, there are many examples of individuals who cry out to Jesus for their own healing. I am especially appreciative of the stories, like this one, where someone or a group intercedes on behalf of another. People who care, bringing others to Jesus for help—how's that for a simple definition of the missional church?

As long as we can spot Jesus at work wherever healing happens, we should have no trouble recalling times when others brought us to the Lord for help. Try to name one now. Then ask yourself how the Spirit might be calling you to participate in the ministry of intercession today.

**Lord of life, show me how to be an instrument
in your mission of healing. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Ambulance drivers



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 30

But he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (v. 48)

In the Eastern Orthodox Church there is a centuries-old spiritual practice of praying the “Jesus Prayer.” Most likely derived from this roadside cry of the beggar Bartimaeus, the Jesus Prayer offers a way to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). There are several variations on the wording, but the version I use is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me.”

A simple, repetitive prayer like this is a wonderful way to practice Christ’s presence throughout the day. I pray the Jesus Prayer when out for a walk, while driving, or if I am having trouble falling asleep. It is a particular blessing when I am anxious, my mind is distracted, or I am at a loss for my own prayer words.

How typical that “many sternly ordered” Bartimaeus to stop calling out to Jesus (v. 48)! The world is like that toward all who pray. Nevertheless, our persistence can result in both wellness and discipleship (v. 52).

**Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,
have mercy on me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are busy or distracted

Signs of truthfulness

Then Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me.” (v. 1)

A staff that turns into a snake, a leprosy-inducing (and curing) cloak, the power to turn river water to blood! Those would be handy tricks to have at your disposal to prove to others you aren't lying about God. The fact that God provides these signs for Moses' arsenal shows us that God is not opposed to signs as a vehicle toward trust. Indeed, Jesus himself once urged those who did not believe his words to at least “believe the works” (John 10:38) as a kind of entry-level faith.

The question for you might be: What sort of signs best fit the message you've been given to bear? Moses' shiver-inducing signs were a good fit for a “Let my people go . . . or else”—style message. But they wouldn't work for the gospel. Your message is one of liberation through the cross of Christ, the “proof” of God's love for sinners (Romans 5:8). What signs of undeserved compassion might you perform that could pave the way for listening ears and believing hearts?

Dear Jesus, give me courage and insight to bear witness to you through my words and deeds. Amen.

Prayer concern: Social workers

The grace of work

Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!” (v. 34)

One day a woman named Shannon reached me on my pastor’s-office phone, asking for \$200 to help fix her car. “But you can’t just give it to me,” she said. “I’m a resident at Opportunity House, and I have to ask if there’s any job I can do to earn it.”

I contacted the director of this sober-living program in our town and confirmed that, true enough, handouts were frowned upon. These women had already been gifted a drug-free community, peer support, and professional counseling. Attaining independence through work was an important part of the process. I called Shannon back: “How about you volunteer at the lefse sale Saturday to raise money for the Homeless Coalition?” Shannon loved the idea, if someone could teach her how to make lefse!

Peter’s order to the newly graced Aeneas—“Make your bed!”—reminds us that meaningful work is part of restoration too. How can the charitable efforts of your church incorporate this vital truth?

God of healing, use me to guide those in need toward wholeness of life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those in recovery from addiction

Bless me so that . . .

**Deal bountifully with your servant, so that
I may live and observe your word. (v. 17)**

Everyone prays that God would bless them with some form of prosperity, be it monetary or in terms of success in specific endeavors. The psalmist bears witness, however, that a soul truly captive to God longs for God's bounty with a more ultimate end in mind: that there be more opportunity to bring God glory.

Sometimes, like little children, we simply ask God for what we need, period. Jesus himself commends such childlike faith and prayer.

At the same time, grown-up disciples have also learned to pray in a way that puts God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will first (see the Lord's Prayer). As you ask for God to deal bountifully with you today, try linking those petitions with others like "so I can have strength to follow your commandments" or "so I can more freely be an instrument of your generosity." In the Psalms, even a prayer for longer life is really a prayer for more chances to sing God's praise on earth (see Psalm 30).

**God of abundance, bless me so that I can multiply
my offerings to you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hymnwriters and church musicians

Simon and Jude, Apostles

**Those who love me will keep my word . . .
and we will come to them and make our home
with them. (v. 23)**

When the woman I now call my wife first brought me home to Iowa, her parents pulled out all the stops. At each meal there seemed to be two meals: every veggie, starch, meat, or dessert with its backup option in case there was something I didn't like. A schedule of Cubs games was carefully laid out, her dad in charge of cuing up each broadcast. The best reading nook was offered to me, and the family beagle was practically ordered to go sit on my lap. Everything they could do to make me feel at home, they did.

What makes God feel at home? Jesus' answer is love. When Jude, whom the church honors today along with Simon, asks how the Lord will reveal himself "to us, and not to the world" (v. 22), the answer has to do with keeping Jesus' word. The heart of that word is love for one another. While the world may look for God to appear with great spectacle, rest assured that the whole Trinity is present—and at home—through simple acts of self-giving.

**God, may my home be a hospitable place
for you—one where you are made known.**

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA missionaries serving abroad

Grace is a gift

**They are now justified by [God's] grace . . .
through the redemption that is
in Christ Jesus. (v. 24)**

There is a memorable moment in the 1982 film *Annie* when the title character, an orphan of age ten, first sets foot inside the billionaire Oliver Warbucks's mansion. The aptly named Grace Farrell, secretary to Mr. Warbucks, has just picked Annie out from the St. Hudson's Home for Girls, where all the orphans are worked to the bone by the cruel Miss Hannigan. "So what do you want to do first?" Grace asks. Annie puts her hand to her chin, looks around, and says, "I think I'll do the windows first, then the floors." When Grace laughs and says, "Oh no, you don't need to do any cleaning," Annie exclaims, "But how'm I gonna earn my keep?"

In our work-oriented society, it can be hard to get used to the fact that God's grace in Jesus Christ really is a free gift. Because Jesus has done it all for your redemption, you don't have to lift a finger to win or to keep God's favor. So, what are you going to do, now that you don't have to do anything?

**Lord, by grace alone you have brought me into
your kingdom. Let all I do be a sign of thanks. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who work in theater

He changed the question

Which of these . . . was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? (v. 36)

Jesus' propensity for answering a question with another question is on full display in this interchange with a lawyer. The lawyer wanted to know, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded by telling a story and then asking back, "Which of these was a neighbor?"

The lawyer was looking for Jesus to tell him the types of people he was to love, the boundaries for his obligation to love. He was confident he had already cleared the bar and just wanted to hear the teacher say aloud what it was. Jesus would not comply. His story prevents the lawyer, and prevents us, from looking down our noses while we do good deeds or from prejudging anyone as out of bounds. Jesus makes the reviled Samaritan the hero. And he makes *neighbor* into a verb, not a category of person.

Are there questions you ask Jesus mainly to justify yourself? If so, what question do you suppose he would put back to you? Whose story would he tell to flip your script?

God, show me the pictures of mercy I'm not yet seeing. Then help me to do likewise. Amen.

Prayer concern: Attorneys and paralegals



Reformation Day

**You will know the truth, and the truth
will make you free. (v. 32)**

Truth is a contentious subject these days. Turn on any cable news channel and you will find no shortage of talking heads angrily insisting that the other side can't admit to the plain truth. Flip to another channel and you'll find equally strong advocates for a different truth. Pontius Pilate's old question "What is truth?" (John 18:38) seems to hover in the air amid all that self-righteous shouting.

The really good news comes when we remember that for Christians truth is not merely a "what," but a "who": Jesus himself. "I am . . . the truth," Jesus said (John 14:6). In listening to his voice, each of us "belongs to the truth" (John 18:37). In trusting his word, we experience freedom. To say that you know the truth is simply to say that you know Jesus. Rest today in the confidence that the Truth knows you too, and that for all the battles that may rage around you, this one relationship always holds true.

Lord, keep us steadfast in your word.

In your word alone is our peace. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who work in the news media

The alternative to lashing back

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. (v. 17)

“He started it!” yells my older child. “No, it’s your fault!” the younger retorts. One hits, the other bites, and soon they are both in tears over a remote-control car.

We know that when we are hurt, hitting back, literally or metaphorically, doesn’t help. More anger and violence make it worse. We still do it. I still do it. A friend makes a rude comment, and I snap back. A driver honks at me, and my hand flies to my horn.

The congregation in Rome struggled with this too. Paul admonishes them: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (13:9). This doesn’t mean accepting bad behaviors; there are times to walk away. Yet loving my neighbor can be an invitation to greater understanding. In my children’s spat, I learned one child was jealous of his brother’s new car. How many unkind acts come from unexpressed and unnamed hurt? Loving my neighbor begins with understanding them—God’s alternative to lashing back.

God, empower us to work for peace by choosing understanding instead of retribution. Amen.

Prayer concern: Nations in conflict

Unlikely heroes

Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. (v. 21)

She's an unlikely heroine. We don't get her name. Yet God's promise is fulfilled through this outsider's act: Pharaoh's daughter adopts a baby found floating down the Nile.

The baby is Moses, who will lead God's people out of Egypt. Pharaoh's daughter knows the baby is a Hebrew, not one of her people, but she picks him up and loves him as her own. What courage! What a surprise! The story of God's people enslaved in Egypt doesn't show much sympathy for ancient Egyptians. If this were an old-time play, we'd hiss when they came on the scene. Yet Pharaoh's daughter surprises us with love.

This section of Acts is a retelling of how God fulfills promises. Those promises are often fulfilled through unlikely heroes and outsiders who prove faithful. God can use anyone to do God's work. An Egyptian woman without a name. A man who thought his speech wasn't good enough. A person like me. A person like you.

**God, we praise you for keeping your promises.
Surprise us by the ways you still do so. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Adoptive parents and children

Walking with God

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (v. 8)

I was determined to make it to the peak. We were running out of daylight, so I pushed my children to hike faster. They dawdled by snacking and tree-climbing. I sped up. Exasperated, my youngest son said, "Mom, I need you to walk *with* me." I thought of the African proverb that says if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together.

This verse from Micah answers the rhetorical question "What does the LORD require?" The instructions are simple, yet easy to sidestep. Do justice, be kind, walk *with* God. Though I'm tempted to walk alone at my frenetic pace, the passage invites me into side-by-side relationships with God and with others.

I slowed down that day to my children's pace. We noticed a striped caterpillar. We picked fat, ripe blueberries. We laughed at my older son's jokes. God takes our pace, walking with us, helping us see beauty and opportunities for kindness along the way.

**God who walks with us, help us to do justice
and to be kind, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those working for racial justice

Skipping over death

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (v. 8)

I tried to skip over the crucifixion story in the children's Bible. It was late. We'd read several stories. My son begged for one more. The death of Jesus did not seem like the best story for a four-year-old right before going to sleep. He begged. I yielded.

Then my son had questions: "Why did Jesus have to die?" "Does he still have the holes in his hands?" "How did the blood get back in so he could be alive again?" Tough questions, important questions. We're still exploring them together. I'm glad we didn't skip over the death of Jesus.

Western culture often skips over death or minimizes it. Youth is prized. Death is handled by professionals. We use euphemisms like "passed away" or "they're with God." But death is real. It is universal. It happened to Jesus, an act of selfless love that served to reconcile, or reconnect, us with God. Jesus died for everyone. Jesus loves everyone. These are truths not to be skipped over!

**Saving God, thank you for the gift of Jesus,
in whose life and death you show love for all. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those near death and their caretakers

Joyful giving

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so. (v. 10)

I was asked to give \$10,000 to a fundraising campaign. I was shocked. I have a mortgage, student loan debt, and young children; no one had ever asked me to be so generous. I imagined what it would feel like to give that much to a cause I loved. It felt good to imagine myself as a wildly generous giver.

Plot twist: I was in a simulation exercise at a stewardship and fundraising workshop where we were practicing making a big “ask.” I said yes when asked; it was just a simulation, after all.

But the exercise gave me new perspectives. First, I could feel good about being generous at any level, whether with time, talents, or treasure. Second, I started to dream and plan for more substantial financial gifts. It brings joy to imagine!

God is wildly generous. We are created to give because God has first given to us. It feels good to give because our brains are wired that way. How are you called to be generous? How will your generosity lead to joy?

**Generous God, thank you for your abundant love.
Show us the joy in giving. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People experiencing homelessness

Receiving grace

**Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe . . .
and it will be yours. (v. 24)**

I have prayed for things I did not receive. I never got a date with the cute boy in high school algebra class. I did not get the dream internship for which I applied. A friend with cancer did not live to see another Christmas. How do we reconcile Jesus' words here in Mark when prayers seem unanswered?

We might pray more generally. I've heard it said that the best prayer is "Thy will be done." Maybe we can receive that. We could also pray for peace, love, and community and be open to how those are fulfilled.

Yet there's more clarity in the context of this passage. In the portion of Mark our appointed reading skips, Jesus "cleanses" the temple, rebuking the religious requirements for worship and the people who profited from them. Fulfilling religious laws isn't the way to God's heart. God invites us into a relationship of prayer and faith. God does hear all our heart's desires. We can listen for the surprising ways God is at work and is with us. Prayer changes us. We will receive the grace and love we need.

**Loving God, teach us to pray and teach us to listen.
Through Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel they lack faith



All Saints Sunday

**Did I not tell you that if you believed,
you would see the glory of God? (v. 40)**

I approached the open casket, holding hands with my children, then ages two and four. We looked at the body of my beloved aunt and godmother. A retired schoolteacher and small-town museum founder, she had lived a long life and died after a debilitating illness. To see her body and touch her hand made it final, more certain. I believed because I had seen.

My children did not seem afraid; we had prepared for this. I wanted them to see and believe that death is a part of life. Some fear is normal, but we believe in a God who promises life eternal. We have not seen that, yet we can believe.

John's gospel talks a lot about believing and seeing. Those who see end up believing. But those who believe are the ones who can truly see. To embrace the gift of faith is to see things in a new light. We know death is real because we have seen it. We believe death isn't the final answer because of God's great power and love. We see anew.

**Eternal God, we believe; help our unbelief! Give us
the gift of faith to see you in our lives. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are grieving

Welcoming others

**There was a famine . . . , and a certain man
of Bethlehem . . . went to live in . . . Moab,
he and his wife and two sons. (v. 1)**

I visited my brother in Kazakhstan when he served in the Peace Corps there. We stayed with his host family, who spoke only Russian and Kazakh. I spoke neither, relying on my brother's limited Russian and many hand signals.

An outsider, I understood little about their lives or what I was eating. But the family welcomed me, asked about my life, and invited me along on outings. When we left, our host mother gave me a hand-embroidered white scarf "to wear at your wedding someday"—a generous act of hospitality.

I had just a glimpse of being an outsider in a new place, dependent on the welcome of others. Ruth's father-in-law and his family were refugees, like so many others in history who have fled their homes due to war or famine. Numerous scriptures invite us to care for those who seek refuge, as God has first given us refuge. God's hospitality is vast. There is room for us. We are invited to make space for others.

**God, thank you for caring for us wherever
we go. Help us welcome those who are
newly among us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service

Discipline and teaching

**Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD,
and whom you teach out of your law. (v. 12)**

You can read an infinite number of books on child discipline; ask me how I know! As I've read, I have struggled with the word *discipline*. Should I punish my child? How can I balance that with creating a loving home? Am I doing it right?

One parenting book gave a new insight: Discipline doesn't necessarily mean punishment. Parents need to find the style that works best for them and their child, but the word *discipline* itself is from the Latin word for teaching or instruction. Suddenly, discipline took on a whole new dimension.

The psalmist writes that those who are disciplined by the Lord are happy. The Hebrew word here also means "instruction." I need instruction on my walk with Jesus. I'm glad I'm not left alone to figure out how to live as God intends. Children need our instruction and teaching; those boundaries create safety and refuge from chaos. God's word, instructions, and even law give us safety in the chaos too.

**God, thank you for your instructions and teachings.
Give us courage to follow, through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Parents, teachers,
and daycare providers

Holy rage

**When they heard this, all in the synagogue
were filled with rage. (v. 28)**

What makes you rage? What makes you so mad you feel like your head will burst into flames like the character Anger in Pixar's movie *Inside Out*? I recently had a bit of rage over the unfair distribution of household chores. I tried to swallow it. Many of us were raised to view anger as bad—particularly those of us raised female.

Anger is a normal human emotion, and not necessarily bad. Anger can hurt others or mask deeper feelings like sadness or shame, but it can also give insight and propel us to action. It's all in how we use it.

The people in the Nazareth synagogue that day may have been surprised by their rage against hometown boy Jesus. Jesus spoke of God's love for outsiders and foreigners, which made them mad. Their rage was misdirected, but ours need not be. We can feel anger about racism, inequality, injustice, oppressive governments, or cycles that keep people in poverty. This is righteous anger. We can use it to change the world!

**God, thank you for loving us in all our emotions.
Show us how to use them for your glory. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People living with violence

Treasures for life

**. . . storing up for themselves the treasure . . .
[to] take hold of the life that really is life. (v. 19)**

A friend in rural Alaska stores up treasure for the future—not in a bank account, but in her freezer. There are gallons of greens picked from the tundra and soaked in seal oil. She puts away dried salmon, seal meat, and whale fat. These treasures connect her to the land, to her community, and to her ancestors. The food is shared with elders and those unable to gather and hunt. These treasures help her “take hold of the life that really is life.”

A while back, I joined a local “Buy Nothing” Facebook group, where everything is free. I’m amazed at treasures given (bikes, sofas, new clothes) that could have been sold elsewhere. Strangers have lifted others through hard times and made friendships. It’s life that really is life.

God’s economy is based on acts of kindness, generosity, and sharing. This is the way to life that really is life. We can keep practicing, trusting that God is a generous giver and that we will have enough.

**God, teach us to trust you and each other,
that all may have enough, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Indigenous communities

Rooted deep

**. . . rooted and built up in him
and established in the faith . . . (v. 7)**

I had a recent peony crisis. These beautiful plants bloom in my yard each summer, evoking memories of my childhood. But this year we decided to expand the driveway. The peonies had to be moved. How? What if I messed up? What if I killed them?

I spent hours researching how to transplant peonies. Gently lift the root ball, I read. I started to dig. Nothing budged. I was hitting, and harming, roots the size of zucchini and they held fast. In tears, I called a neighbor, who came with a pitchfork, a wheelbarrow, and her husband. As we extracted the peony, I was shocked at the root size and quantity. "Oh," my neighbor said, "the first owners of your home planted those peonies thirty years ago!"

We grow best rooted in Christ, though it takes time for roots to become established. Prayer, scripture study, worship, acts of giving and service—these practices help our roots go deep down in Christ. We grow strongest alongside others who can nurture and teach us. We grow deep together.

God, thank you for creating a world for us to tend.

Help us root deeply in the gift of faith. Amen.

Prayer concern: Landscapers, gardeners, and farmers

Taking a hard look

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. (v. 10)

There is nothing like being called out on your shortcomings by your children. “Mom, that light was red!” “Mom, you’re driving 50 but the sign says 40.” “Mom, you were late picking me up, and I got worried.” It causes you to take a hard look in the mirror.

Jesus’ parables explore the complexities of life, which may mean taking a hard look. Parables lack easy answers; rather, we can wrestle with them and “try on” different characters. In the parable of the wicked tenants, sometimes we’re the landowner who suffers injustice. Other times we get hurt when we try to do the right thing, like the people the landowner sends. At times we are like the tenants and we harm others.

Parables may help us take a hard look in the mirror, but the point isn’t to make us feel bad. The parables are not about us—they’re about God. God is the giver. God is the one who comes to us. God is the cornerstone. God is with us, no matter where we look!

God, we confess we sometimes fall short.

**Thank you for your forgiving love,
in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are incarcerated



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 33

**There will be earthquakes in various places;
there will be famines. (v. 8)**

I was alone at home with my two young children when the shaking began. You should stay put in an earthquake, but I panicked. Glass shattered all around as I grabbed my toddler and tried to run to my older child. I could barely move through the shaking, and I stopped when I saw the folly in going upstairs under a swaying chandelier while carrying a two-year-old. I screamed to my child over the rumble, praying he was safe and that it would end soon. The 7.1 quake lasted less than a minute and none of us were hurt, but it took time for the fear to subside.

You don't have to live through a natural disaster to know fear and suffering. We all experience hard times. This style of writing in Mark is called "apocalyptic." The biblical intent isn't to frighten. Apocalyptic writings are for those living in scary times, for people suffering. The message is that God is still in control. God is with us when difficult things happen. We are never left alone.

**God, you are a refuge during hard times. Comfort us
with your embrace. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People affected by natural disasters

How long?

**How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long? (v. 2)**

I remember exhausting, sleepless nights trying to get a fussy newborn to sleep. How long, O Lord? A friend's five-year-old is going through cancer treatment. How long, O Lord? A clergy friend lives with debilitating depression. How long, O Lord? "How long?" is a universal plea.

In Psalm 13, the resolution seems to come fast, as the psalmist goes from "How long?" to "He has dealt bountifully with me" (v. 6) in just a few verses. In life, that journey may be more complex, but both can still be true.

This devotional was written during the peak of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Many cried, "How long, O Lord?" and yet also noted God's bounty and providence, even in the face of death. Medical professionals were heroes. Strangers helped strangers. Aid poured in from unexpected places. God was at work. We can cry, "How long?" while simultaneously being assured of God's presence and love. The sorrow is real, but God is really there.

**God, thank you for those who show us your
loving and healing presence, through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Medical workers

Seeing through a new lens

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. (v. 24)

The number of filters available to transform photos is truly amazing. A clear picture of a cat can be changed to appear blurry with just a couple of clicks. An image of vibrant fall colors can be transformed into black and white. Red apples can easily be altered to look blue.

God has given us a filter to understand the world around us in a new way—through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead of sowing distrust and hatred between ourselves and our neighbors, we are urged by the author of Hebrews to inspire one another to loving service and good deeds. This involves a changed way of seeing: rather than looking at life through the filter of how to get ahead of everyone else, we see each person we encounter as a child of God, loved and redeemed.

God, help us to see and then serve one another through the filter of your love, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA New Congregations and innovative mission models

Speaking through the Spirit

Say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (v. 11)

When I was young, I wanted to be a ventriloquist. Then, I thought, I could say whatever I wanted and blame anything that didn't go well on the puppet. Alas, my plans didn't work out: it was always obvious I was the one speaking the whole time.

But what if we are the ones whose words are directed by another—not as inanimate puppets but as listeners to the Spirit of God? Instead of worrying about what words to come up with on our own, what if we let ourselves serve as the vessels of God's word?

Jesus urges his disciples to preach the good news of his grace and forgiveness—even amid persecution, even when the world refuses to hear. Not everyone will be open to this message, but we are to proclaim it boldly anyway because the words are not ours—they are God's. And if we listen—through prayer, scripture reading, worship, and conversation with faithful others—the Spirit will direct us in how to speak, not as puppets but as apostles, or “sent ones,” in Jesus' name.

**May the Holy Spirit speak life through me today,
and may the world echo its peace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Puppeteers and
children's-theater artists

Even in uncertainty, God is with us

**He has established the world;
it shall never be moved. (v. 1)**

The jolt of sudden loss can drastically change our view of the world. What begins as a normal day is forever altered by the news of a loved one's death. Shortly after a routine medical test, the unthinkable: a cancer diagnosis. The employer downsizing takes on a personal edge when you are asked to clean out your desk. Everything that once seemed predictable can be turned upside down, the gentle rhythm of certainty suddenly a throbbing goo of ambiguity.

It seems humans have an age-old preference for certainty. But the words of the psalmist remind us of what *is* certain, even amid the raging floodwaters and the thunderous waves of life. For no literal or figurative storms have the power to change the relationship between God and God's creation. God sits certain and steadfast amid the swirling chaos, holds us in love, calms us with divine peace, and assures us that healing will come for a world of sudden losses.

**God, your love endures through the storms of life.
Grant us your peace, through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People receiving troubling news today

Death destroyed

**The last enemy to be destroyed
is death. (v. 26)**

I've heard many stories of people experiencing what some call "the gray zone," a blurred boundary between life and death. One woman in her nineties described people coming in and out of her nursing-home room as she was swinging on her mother's lap. It was difficult for her to tell which visitors were alive and which had died. Another woman had a visitor she called her "angel" who entered her room every night and sat silently on a chair in the corner. The presence of this angel comforted the woman as death drew closer. The precise line between life and death—where God's new life awaits us—may not always be easy to recognize.

Perhaps this is the reason Paul describes death as the last enemy to be destroyed on the road to the certainty of the resurrection. We are strengthened through faith and the constant presence of Jesus as we move past all the gray zones of life to the light of Christ's resurrection, which is ours as well.

**Lord Jesus, keep me strengthened through faith
in you for whatever comes my way today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hospice caregivers

A bright vision

**Look! He is coming with the clouds.
Every eye will see him. (v. 7)**

As farmers, my grandparents were shaped by the land around them. Plans for each day revolved around tasks on a schedule, like milking the cows or feeding the horses. My grandfather had a mysterious sense of the location of any weed trying to invade his fields. My grandmother could forecast the weather by how bad the arthritis felt in her knees.

It's not surprising that people in the ancient Mediterranean world, many of whom worked the land, were also guided and shaped by nature and the weather—so much so that visions of the second coming of Christ were informed by the weather. John of Patmos here describes Jesus as “coming with the clouds.”

But we need not assume storm clouds, terror, and violence. I envision bright clouds in a fair-weather sky ushering in the peace of Christ. The end of time as we know it will be marked by the coming of One who loves us and has freed us from the power of our sins. We can trust that all will be well.

**Comforting God, teach us your ways of love,
that we may love you, our neighbor,
and ourselves through Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The safety and well-being of farmers



Christ the King

My kingdom is not from this world. (v. 36)

Christian places of worship have been built in various locations and styles throughout the ages. From wooden huts to stone cathedrals, the buildings bring worshipers a sense of the mystery of faith. Architectural details like stained glass and décor such as candles instill awe and transport us, at least to some degree, from the physical world to the spiritual realm.

As Christians, we live with this sense of two worlds—one foot in this life and one in the promised kingdom. Jesus names this distinction of the two kingdoms as he is interrogated by Pilate. We live in the earthly kingdom while awaiting the full arrival of Jesus' kingdom that "is not from this world." It can be complicated to be in both at once. But as we struggle through the chaos of earthly life, we are reassured that Jesus lived in this kingdom too—and even died at its hands—so we are never alone. Jesus still walks with us in this world, and we can bask in his promise of new life in the kingdom to come.

Whatever space you worship in, may it remind you of Christ's love for you, now and forever.

**Christ, as we wait for the fullness of your kingdom,
keep us mindful of ways to care for one another
and the earth. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Refugees

Known by many names

**In Judah God is known,
his name is great in Israel. (v. 1)**

I can tell you that my name is Jeff, but that is only part of how I am known. I am also a husband, father, son, and brother. Remembering who I am in connection with other people helps me remember the importance of relationship. It is especially important for me in my relationship with God to remember I am also named child of God, redeemed, lost and found sheep (Luke 15:3-7), lost and found coin (Luke 15:8-10). We are named both according to who we are and based on our connection to others. Relationships are central to the life of faith.

The people of Israel celebrated their relationship with God with divine names such as defender, judge, and peacemaker. In addition to names for who we are, God celebrates relationship with us by naming us based on what we do: We can be known as helpers as we tend to the needs of our neighbors. We can be known as visitors, checking in on those who are imprisoned or sick or homebound. Finally, we can be known as thankful for the abundant life made possible only by God's love and grace.

**Savior, you are known by many names.
Help us serve you and others so your name
may be praised. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in the process of name-selection
for self or another

Even God can be angry

Your wrath has come. (v. 18)

It can be unsettling to imagine God angry. We readily know God as forgiving when we have done something wrong; patient when we just don't understand God's message; rejoicing when we gather in praise, prayer, and thanksgiving. But the image of an angry God can be a quagmire. Where does an angry God fit into the pastoral image of a gentle shepherd leading sheep through a tranquil meadow? Yet surely the shepherd gets angry if a wild beast threatens the flock. Such anger—and the fierce, protective actions it prompts—would, in that case, be good.

Anger is often minimized or hidden. But as with all feelings, burying anger can make things worse. Perhaps this image of an angry God can help us know that anger has its purpose. In particular, anger at injustice can prompt us to advocate for those who are vulnerable. And when we get angry without cause or act out our anger inappropriately, we are grateful that we do also know God as forgiving, as patient, and as one who rejoices in showing us love.

Merciful God, show us how to use all our emotions appropriately to further your message of love. Amen.

Prayer concern: People who struggle with addiction,
and their loved ones

The prison of isolation

**You will be scattered, each one to his home,
and you will leave me alone. (v. 32)**

Being alone is not always bad. For example, solitude brings us the opportunity to hear things normally muffled by noise, like the beat of our heart or the gentle sound of birds or fluttering leaves. But for all the good it can bring, being alone can also make us feel lonely.

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, we quickly discovered the pain of isolation. People who were separated from one another yearned for a simple touch—a hug or handshake—or just the physical presence of someone they missed. Separation from loved ones was foretold by Jesus as his crucifixion drew near: The community of believers would soon be scattered from one another. Even Jesus would be alone.

But Jesus knew he would never be completely alone: “Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me,” he told his disciples (v. 32). God would be with them too, and is always with us. And of course, the story would not end at crucifixion but would lead to resurrection. Jesus would soon walk among his followers again in new and surprising ways.

**God, when we feel lonely, help us trust in
your constant presence, like Jesus did. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Prison ministries

Thanksgiving (USA)

Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. (v. 33)

Are you a list-maker? One way I used to try to manage worry was by making a list. I'd jot down things I needed to get done and then prioritize them by rearranging the items into a whole new list.

We are confronted with a list of worries in our scripture reading today: food, water, clothing, life. Jesus tells us not to worry about these because "your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (v. 32). Instead, Jesus gives us a new list of priorities. First on this list is the kingdom of God, and then, says Jesus, the other needs will be met along with it.

We give the kingdom priority by loving and serving our neighbors while proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. This combination of service, love, and proclamation draws our focus to the well-being of others, ensuring that their needs are met for food, water, clothing, and all else required for abundant life.

**God, may we be bold proclaimers of your kingdom
through loving care for our neighbors. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People going hungry,
even as many feast today

Enveloped in peace

Be at peace among yourselves. (v. 13)

We once noticed that one of our kids was missing from the group while we were taking a family walk. A quick check of the shoreline revealed our son sitting on a large boulder near the water. His arms were outstretched in the lotus position—at age four, no less!—and he was repeating, “Inner peace, inner peace.” We guessed he had picked up the move from one of his favorite movies. Whatever the source, our son reminded us of the importance of times of inner peace—that sense of contentment and serenity.

Judging by Paul's letters, the early church was not all contentment and calm. It turns out church conflict isn't unique to the twenty-first (or even the twentieth) century. Paul effectively tells his listeners to stop what they are doing, take a deep breath, assume a restful posture, and concentrate on inner peace—not just for their own sake but for the benefit of other believers. Peace in ourselves flows outward, prompting us to remember the community and mission we share in Jesus.

**Compassionate God, through your wisdom
plant in us your peace, which passes
all understanding. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Pastoral counselors
and spiritual companions

Waiting for God

**You are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. (v. 5)**

Sarah didn't feel well upon getting up in the morning. Her son took her to the emergency room, where they waited two hours to be seen and another three hours for a room to open up so Sarah could be admitted. When the nurse told her the doctor would stop by about an hour later, Sarah replied with a smile, "What's another hour, when I've been waiting all day?"

Our reading reflects the reality of waiting as people of faith. We wait for God in a variety of circumstances: upon receiving a scary medical diagnosis, searching for renewed hope amid a divorce, navigating a spiritual dry spell, wondering how best to support a troubled teen or a grieving friend. We yearn for God to be present in tangible ways. As we wait, we keep busy through prayer, lament, and thanksgiving. We find in this psalm words to ask God for patience so we too may respond like Sarah: "What's another hour?" And like the psalmist: "You are the God of my salvation."

**Lord, we ask you for the spirit of patience
as we discern your presence in our lives
and your will for us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ER staff serving people
who are sick or injured



First Sunday of Advent

Be alert at all times. (v. 36)

It seems our two dogs have teamed up to make sure we know when anything—real or imagined—is happening in our backyard. One whines at the back door to be let in when something is not right outside. The other scratches on the door to let us know about the one who is whining. Our dogs are always on alert.

With eyes searching and ears attuned, Christians “team up” during Advent to keep watch for the coming Christ. We encourage one another to look past the sale ads and listen beyond the Santa-themed music on the radio to catch glimpses of the kingdom breaking into the world. Yet, gazing far out toward the horizon can cause us to stumble over the Christ trying to make himself known right under our noses and before our eyes. As the church, together we redirect our vision to see Jesus, Emmanuel, in those who are in need. We serve, we proclaim, and we love as Christ taught us—and the kingdom comes.

**Jesus, make us alert to your coming among
our neighbors in need, that we may respond
in service and love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA campus ministries

Building community

**Beware that you are not carried away
with the error of the lawless and lose
your own stability. (v. 17)**

I don't take stability for granted after falling and tearing my rotator cuff. Our driveway was icy, and I had other things on my mind—a combination that proved immensely painful in the end. Instability caught me by surprise. I was caught off guard, and I lost my footing.

Our reading today is like a big sign with blinking lights and loud music warning us of instability. Such a shift can be caused by our leaving behind the rules or guidance we've been taught—becoming “lawless,” as Peter writes—and choosing, rather, to go our own way. We can easily slip into the pattern of looking out only for ourselves and then fall on our own good intentions.

Instead, may we look to what builds up community, strengthens relationships, and fosters our faith in God. May we look outward to balance our own ego. An important part of the equation is being open to receiving help from others. This stability benefits the whole people of God.

**Lord, as we seek to serve one another, may we
treat friends, family, neighbors, and strangers alike
with caring compassion. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA World Hunger ministry

Andrew, Apostle

What are you looking for? (v. 38)

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks Andrew as they meet through their mutual friend John the Baptist. In response, Andrew and an unidentified individual accept Jesus’ invitation to “come and see” (v. 39)—to see where he is staying, and so much more.

“What are you looking for?” is a good question to ponder amid the anticipation of Advent. When I head out to buy the perfect gift for someone, I sometimes arrive at the store without a clear idea of what to buy. What am I looking for? I will know it when I see it.

We may not know exactly what we are looking for in the Messiah. Take a moment to imagine what it was like for the shepherds or the wise men, for Simeon or Anna, as they learned of the coming of Christ. They couldn’t know ahead of time exactly what to look for, but they trusted God’s word and that they’d know the gift of salvation when they saw it. As did Andrew. As do we.

And in the end, it’s not actually about us figuring out what we’re looking for—or finding it. The Messiah, Jesus Christ, has found *us*. The search is over.

**God, as we journey to Bethlehem, may our hearts
trust your word and be open to being found
by Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Travelers

Our true home

**Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations. (v. 1)**

Have you ever wondered where home is? When I first moved to Chicago from Minneapolis and my job required me to return to Minneapolis for meetings, I felt as though I were going home when I landed in Minnesota. On the return from one such trip, however, I landed at Chicago's O'Hare airport and thought, "I'm home now." A shift had occurred. I felt at home in my new surroundings.

In Egypt, God's people were strangers in a land not their own. Then they spent years wandering in the desert. They wondered when they would ever see the promised land. But *God* was a home for them, always watching over them and providing. God was indeed their dwelling place.

So it is for us. God is there when we wander off, there for us no matter what happens, always providing for us. God is our one true home, no matter where we are.

**Thank you, God, for being our dwelling place
in all generations. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People experiencing homelessness

Bringing light

**. . . to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death . . . (v. 79)**

Zechariah prophesied that by God's tender mercy, a savior would be sent—a savior who would bring light to the darkness. The many months of the COVID-19 pandemic have been a time of living in darkness and the shadow of death for the entire world. I confess there were many days when I let fear and anxiety rule. Then someone or something would bring me up short so I could remember God's tender mercy, God's promises to be with me no matter what. I would ask myself whether I was bringing more darkness or more light into the world with my words and actions.

This entire reading reminds us that not only did God send us a savior “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” but that we too have a part to play. The last part of verse 79 says that this savior will “guide our feet into the way of peace.” We too can bear God's light and peace to others.

**Jesus, help us to be light-bearers and
peace-bringers wherever you
give us opportunity. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People struggling with fear

We can't lose

**For to me, living is Christ
and dying is gain. (v. 21)**

Paul is talking “win-win” here. Life in Christ is so rich. We’re God’s beloved, and we live in the promise of the resurrection. Yet Paul says that dying is even better.

This reminds me of Mom’s final days. Our Lutheran country church was a central part of our life, and Mom and Dad taught my two siblings and me by word and deed about the importance of life in Christ. Mom found joy and peace in her faith, including daily Bible readings and prayer—even when her eyesight made that difficult.

Mom’s last days in a care center’s hospice program were powerful; she kept describing her visions of Jesus as “brilliant” and “beautiful.” With her feet in both this world and the next, she knew the truth of Paul’s words: “Dying is gain.” On her last day on earth, with a radiant look on her face, she told us that she wanted to go live with Jesus and glorify God. Win-win indeed!

**Loving God, help us know and live the truth
of Paul’s words—that, living or dying,
we are with Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who fear death

Travel light

**He said to them, “Take nothing
for your journey.” (v. 3)**

When my husband and I served as missionaries in Papua New Guinea, we thought we were traveling light and living simply. However, we had a lot of “stuff” compared to those in whose land we were guests. Our house was well outfitted and our closets and cupboards were full. That “stuff” had the potential to create barriers and make those with whom we worked in the villages and areas near us feel less-than.

In addition, we brought mental and emotional baggage about the cultural differences. We had to check our attitudes and beliefs regularly and shed what was unhelpful. We needed to be open and humble. We learned that we were receiving as much as we were giving.

In our interactions with others it’s always important to keep open minds and open hearts—to approach in humility and with as little baggage as possible. Who knows what opportunities God will place before us to learn and grow? May we travel light!

**O God, you use diverse people and situations to
help us grow. Help us stay open and humble. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA Global Mission



Second Sunday of Advent

Prepare the way of the Lord . . . and the crooked shall be made straight. (vv. 4-5)

Things will have to change as we prepare for God's arrival. No more business as usual. Valleys will be filled. Mountains will be made low. We're talking major transformation here.

One of my coaching clients knew that to prepare for life alone after leaving an abusive marriage, she needed to accept that God really did love her and wanted her to experience peace and well-being. She knew that many changes were ahead—both inner and outer changes. But first she had to believe it was okay to make these changes. With God's help, she let go of old messages of unworthiness and accepted the love that was always there for her.

As you prepare once again for the coming of our Savior, what changes need to occur for you? What is waiting to be born in you? Are there broken places in your life that need God's healing touch? Places where pride needs to be transformed? Are you ready to live in God's promises and prepare the way?

Help us prepare our hearts and lives for your coming, dear God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who doubt that God loves them

Longing for tenderness

**He will gather the lambs in his arms . . .
and gently lead the mother sheep. (v. 11)**

Have you ever wanted, as an adult, to have God scoop you up, hold you tenderly, and assure you that everything will be all right? I've longed for that several times—once, when I was going through my divorce, and another time, when I lost my job after twenty-two years. Perhaps you've lost a beloved family member, faced serious illness, lost your job and wondered how you would manage your next meal or rent payment, dealt with chronic pain, or experienced other fears or losses. Just the idea of being gathered in loving, caring arms is so comforting.

That's why these wonderful images of God as a good shepherd in Isaiah 40 (and throughout the Bible) are so inviting. Imagine being so loved, so desired, so cared for! Believe it. You are!

Does this assurance comfort you? Does it spur you to comfort all the broken hearts you see in those who inhabit your world? May it be so.

**Good Shepherd, thank you
for your tender care. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those with broken hearts today

A silver lining

**May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy. (v. 5)**

The global pandemic that began in late 2019 produced an abundance of tears, fears, and panic. It exacerbated the divisiveness already at epic proportions in the United States, where I live. And we, along with people around the world, grieved the loss of countless lives and the fact that so many died without their families nearby to comfort them. Our hearts broke as well for overwhelmed health-care workers.

In addition to the generalized grief for others across the globe, I felt such a sense of loss at not being able to be with my three sons, daughters-in-law, and nine grandchildren. For months I was unable to visit my brother in the memory-care unit of a nursing home in another state. Each one of you has unique stories to tell about what that time meant for you.

However, in some cases, friendships deepened as we sought companionship and meaning. We learned that worship could happen anywhere. God's care was shown through a wide variety of helpers around the globe. The silver lining.

**Thank you for turning our tears into joy
and for always being with us, O God. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who remain steeped in grief

Who is Jesus to you?

**Are you the one who is to come,
or are we to wait for another? (v. 19)**

Have you ever felt like John in this reading? Have you wondered what Jesus is up to? Why isn't Jesus doing more about the injustice in the world? Sometimes I think about people experiencing homelessness, those who need to flee their countries and have nowhere to turn, victims of human trafficking, those who are unemployed or underemployed, children abused or neglected, people arrested or imprisoned unjustly, and all the other pain around the globe, and I wonder: Where is God? What is Jesus doing?

Sometimes I have expectations that God should rush in and rescue us miraculously. I am not always willing to accept that God sends us—sends *me*—to reach out in God's name with justice and food and protection for the vulnerable. Advent is a good time to reflect on who Jesus is to us and what our expectations are of this God-come-to-earth. We might prayerfully ponder: What is *my* role in bringing justice and peace? And what am I waiting for?

**Dear Jesus, you are the one. Help us to be your
heart, hands, and feet in this broken world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who suffer injustice

Do not be afraid

I will trust, and will not be afraid. (v. 2)

When I faced divorce I didn't have a career outside the home. I was caught up in the grip of fear. I pictured myself becoming a "bag lady," an admittedly not-nice term commonly used at the time for a woman experiencing homelessness. I wanted to trust God, but I found it so hard to do. How would I manage? What would happen to my sons?

Never could I imagine then that three-plus years later I would move to Chicago to use my journalism degree at *The Lutheran* magazine in my faith tradition's newly formed denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Twenty-two years later, when I lost that job due to budget cuts, I knew I could trust and not be afraid. I knew at a deep level that I'd be okay no matter what. I could "give thanks to the LORD" (v. 4).

The angels brought that message too: "Do not be afraid." In this Advent season, despite turmoil in the world and in our lives, we're reminded that we too can shout and sing, "Great in [our] midst is the Holy One of Israel" (v. 6). We can trust our God.

**O Holy One, help us to trust you and not be afraid.
May we sing your praises and share our joy. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those experiencing work transitions

Live in gratitude

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (v. 15)

It was to be the first home I bought on my own, and I wasn't sure how I would come up with the down payment. I wasn't fully on my feet again, and though a careful spender, I still didn't have a huge amount of money set aside. But my parents were excited to offer their help by giving me an early portion of what they had planned to be my inheritance. I was overjoyed and yet knew this gift wasn't something I could repay (an expectation we often have as humans). It was at the time an "indescribable gift."

As we journey through Advent, we are hyperaware of the indescribable gift God gives us in Jesus Christ. God loves us and desires our reconciliation so much that God's Son is our gift. Grace is our gift—one we can never repay. Oh, the wonder of it all!

Living in gratitude to God and generosity toward others, sharing the good news of this indescribable gift—those are ways we can give thanks.

**Thank you, O God, for love beyond measure
in the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel unworthy
of God's gift of a Savior

Life-giving water

**With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation. (v. 3)**

We need water to live. Have you ever experienced a time when you were desperate for water? Perhaps you were hiking longer than you had planned to be on the trail and your water supply ran out. This happened while I was on one of my global reporting trips for *The Lutheran* magazine. We went further than we'd planned and also got caught in a heavy storm that came up unexpectedly. Finally, we got back to our vehicles. We were all okay, but it had been scary.

Throughout the Old Testament we find many passages that show how God provided water for the Israelites. God does provide. In this passage we're also aware that the "wells of salvation" mean more than drinking water. God's presence and gift of salvation are deep wells we can count on. We are all thirsty for those life-giving waters, and the wells of salvation are bottomless. There's enough for us all.

**Gracious and generous God, thank you for the
bottomless wells of salvation you provide. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Organizations that build wells
so people can have clean water



Third Sunday of Advent

**One . . . is coming . . . [who] will baptize you
with the Holy Spirit. (v. 16)**

Missionary terms were five years when my husband and I served in Papua New Guinea. We really missed our families that first Advent and Christmas abroad. Even God seemed far away for a time, and I felt the loneliness of separation. As we walked through Advent and prepared for the Christmas celebration with the Duna people with whom we lived and served, the promises of these Advent texts began to come alive inside of me. Yes, we are baptized with the Holy Spirit—the One whose coming John the Baptist announces in our reading. That reminder of my baptism and my connection to the whole body of Christ was what I needed.

I remembered that this was also true for our beloved families back home—a salve for my lonely heart. God came near through Jesus, who, being both divine and human, knows full well our pain and struggles.

No matter your struggles, God is with you. Let your baptism come alive in you. Jesus, the one who comes in power, will bring you courage and strength for whatever he calls you to do.

**Such wondrous love is this, O God, that you sent
your Son to baptize us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those missing loved ones far away

A peaceful creation

**The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid. (v. 6)**

In the United States, where I live, we have experienced deep divisions in the last many years. It seemed to reach new depths in 2020, when we lived through a global pandemic as well as a presidential election. Sometimes I found it difficult to hang on to hope—hope that we could mitigate and survive the pandemic and hope that we would ever find any sense of peace and unity. Sadly, many did not survive COVID-19. Our grief made hope that much more elusive.

And yet, I kept looking for “the helpers” (as Mr. Rogers said to do in times of calamity), and guess what? There were so many helpers out there! People making meals to give away. Others driving people to appointments. Folks checking in on one another. Essential workers showing up.

God’s promise of a peaceable kingdom where harmony exists isn’t yet a perfect reality. But we can choose now to move toward that vision. We can care for one another, for those in need, and for all creation. We can be part of God’s promise.

**Faithful God, thank you for your promises,
in which we may play a part. Through Christ
our Savior. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who are serving as helpers

Be not afraid

**... teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ
with all boldness and without hindrance. (v. 31)**

Advent reminds us all to act boldly. Mary is told to not be afraid, and she finds her voice to speak the hopeful words of the Magnificat. The shepherds are told to not be afraid, and they make haste to go find the Savior of the world. No hindrances. No excuses.

Have you ever felt unable to share the good news of Jesus? Perhaps you thought you needed to have all the answers. You expected resistance. You worried about what people would think.

When I was a young adult, I had some of those fears and feelings. What did I know? How could I be a good witness to share with others God's gift of salvation? But then my husband and I were called to Papua New Guinea. I wondered what role I could play. I saw needs to be met—teaching the Duna women to read, sew, cook nourishing meals for their children. In the process, we talked about Jesus, and I realized that teaching also happens through relationships and in conversation. Nothing to fear! I could act boldly. And so can you.

**O God, grant us a spirit of boldness to share
the good news. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are silenced by fear

Live in hope

**But with righteousness he shall
judge the poor. (v. 4)**

It's clear from this Isaiah text that God promises completely different standards under new rule when the "shoot" comes "from the stem of Jesse" (v. 1). A new order. Stability. Peace. "The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (v. 2).

This is the same message we hear from Mary in her Magnificat: the powerful brought down and the lowly lifted up.

When I hear promises from politicians, no matter what side they're on or what office they seek, I turn a deaf ear. I think, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've heard this all before." I have come to expect, rightly or not, that most say what they think we want to hear, so I don't hold out much hope for real change. Sadly, I've become suspicious and distrustful.

God's promises are different. God is always faithful. God delivers on promises. We can live in the hope that new rules apply. And we can do our part to help bring this about.

**Faithful God, may we be part of bringing your
promises to life. Through your Son, Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Modern-day prophets

Restoration of hope

**Let your face shine,
that we may be saved. (v. 3)**

Our world is deeply divided. One does not need to look far to see that. In fact, my country, the United States, seems more divided these last few years than any other time in recent memory. There is so much hatred, evil, and racial injustice. In addition, as I write at the end of 2020, we have just experienced one of the most contentious political election cycles ever. Some are grieving while others are celebrating. And even though the results are in, many are still questioning their validity.

In a world that often feels hopeless, this psalm gives me hope. God, “enthroned upon the cherubim” (v. 1), is far greater than our political systems, our complaints and disagreements with one another, and the mutual scorn of enemies (v. 6). God calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, which often seems impossible. But when we fail, God’s face shines forgiveness upon us. With words the psalmist repeats three times total, like a refrain, we trust that God will, finally, “restore us”—this entire divided world—“that we may be saved” (vv. 3, 7, 19).

**God of peace, in our divided world,
by your saving power and grace help us
love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Elected officials

At the top of our lungs

**Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth! (v. 10)**

I worked at a Bible camp for seven summers. It was a joy to see and hear the children sing at the top of their lungs. They were definitely not afraid to worship God! When they sang as loudly and exuberantly as they could, it reminded me of one of my favorite Christmas movies, *Elf*, and of the character Buddy's line: "The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear!" The campers' actions taught me what it means to spread the news of God's love to all the world.

God is at work all around us and has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). God opens our eyes and our ears (v. 18), as well as our hearts, to the many ways divine love is active in the world. May we follow the examples of Buddy and the children at camp and spread the love of God loudly and exuberantly.

**Thank you, God, for continually working for good
in the world. Teach us to sing new songs
amid the world's brokenness. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Outdoor Ministries

Like a mother hen

**Jerusalem, . . . how often have I desired
to gather your children together as a hen
gathers her brood under her wings. (v. 34)**

Have you ever watched a mother hen care for her offspring? Some of the volunteers at the camp where I worked told me I looked like a mother hen with her chicks when I was leading my young campers from one activity to another. The image has stayed with me. A mother hen wraps her chicks under her wings and protects them from danger. She does everything in her power to keep her little ones safe.

Just as a mother hen protects her chicks, Jesus longed to shelter Jerusalem and longs to protect us. Indeed, in his death and resurrection Jesus gathered the whole world under the wings of divine love. God wraps us in continual care, not preventing evil from ever befalling us, but promising to hold us close amid any trouble and to comfort us with peace that passes all human understanding.

**Protecting God, help us cling to you when we are
fearful and when evil lurks nearby. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Childcare providers



Fourth Sunday of Advent

**When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting,
the child leaped in her womb. (v. 41)**

Ever since I was a little girl I have yearned to be a mother. However, at forty-two, that has not yet happened for me. I am always in awe when I observe the movement of a baby in a pregnant friend's abdomen. There is something so incredibly holy about life developing inside a womb.

If you have carried a child, do you remember what it felt like the first time your baby moved inside you? Was it your voice or your spouse's voice that prompted the movement? What joy Elizabeth must have felt when she sensed her son move upon Mary's arrival! Little did they know what an impact Mary's precious boy would have, not only on Elizabeth's son but on the whole world. He would bring hope amid despair, joy to counter sorrow, and comfort during times when tears flow down our faces. Above all, Mary's son, who would be announced by Elizabeth's son, would bring life out of death.

**God of life, help us share, especially with those on
the margins of society, the love you have given us
through the birth of Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who yearn to be parents

The church: the people

In him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church. (vv. 17-18)

“Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people.” Perhaps you remember this little rhyme from childhood. Today’s reading from Colossians, though, reminds me that the church is much more than a building. The primary definition of *church* is God’s people sent out to share God’s love, grace, and forgiveness with all the world. Which is exactly what we have worked to do during the COVID-19 pandemic. With church buildings closed to the public, the *people* who are the church have served and worshiped all the more and in new ways.

The pandemic has also taught us, more than ever, that we can trust in Jesus as head of the church, the one “in [whom] all things hold together,” even when it feels like our world is falling apart. Jesus reconciled the world to God by coming into the world to teach us about God’s love, even to the point of being put to death on a cross. But God’s love overcomes death and the grave. As God raised Jesus, we too can trust in life, even amid disease and death.

God, help us to be the church, sharing your love, grace, and forgiveness in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Ministries that reach beyond church-building walls

Feeling grateful

**Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time on and forevermore. (v. 2)**

Today's psalm makes me think of a Bible camp song that goes like this: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Praise the Lord, give thanks to the Lord. Our God is good. His steadfast love endures forever, for God is good. We will tell of the mighty deeds of the Lord and show for all God's praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting."

We sang this song often at Camp of the Cross, near Garrison, North Dakota. It became for me a beautiful reminder to praise the Lord and give thanks for all that God has done. I am writing at the close of 2020, a year that has shown us how worthy God is to be praised. Through the tears and love of friends and strangers, God has wept with us in our losses. God's presence has been made known in the form of health-care workers, caring neighbors, community food pantries, and more. Through digital worship or drive-up communion, we have been reminded of God's goodness and steadfast love.

**Blessed be the name of the Lord who provides
all we need. Blessed be the One whose name
is worthy to be praised. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Food pantries

One climbs, one sees

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, . . . that we may walk in his paths. (v. 2)

A few summers ago I took on the adventure of climbing a 13,000-foot mountain in the Colorado Rockies. I was determined to reach the top, but halfway there I felt defeated. My friends encouraged me to put one foot in front of the other. Because of their support, I got within three hundred feet of the summit.

After we got back down, a friend shared a quote: "One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up" (René Daumal).

If I had not tried to reach the top I would have missed all the glorious views I saw along the way. I would not have experienced the holiness of that hike. God was with me the entire way—not least of all through my friends. In the ups and downs of our daily lives, too, God gives us strength—through friends, scripture, prayer, song, sacraments—to walk in God's truth and love. May we trust the One who calls us by name and invites us to "walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever" (v. 5).

God, provide us the strength for all of life's journeys, confident that you walk beside us. Amen.

Prayer concern: National parks and park staff

The continuing story

**His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation. (v. 50)**

My great-aunt Claudia died at age 101. For as long as I can remember, she made the best honey cookies and gave them as Christmas gifts to those she loved. In memory of her, one year I decided to bake honey cookies. After I posted a photo of the results on my Facebook page, my aunts told me our honey cookie recipe has been handed down from generation to generation.

Our reading today reminds us that the story of Christ begins generations before his birth: “[God] has helped his servant Israel,” sings Mary, “according to the promise he made to our ancestors.” And the story continues “to [Abraham’s] descendants forever” (vv. 54-55). We remember and share the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We know the story well, yet sometimes we forget that it is not just a story in the past; it continues now and will go on until Jesus comes again.

**Jesus, thank you for coming as the living story
of God’s love for the world. Help us to share this
precious story from generation to generation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those passing the faith
to the next generation

Christmas Eve

**For a child has been born for us, a son
given to us; . . . and he is named . . . (v. 6)**

Do you know what your name means? My name, Tara, is Gaelic for “rocky pinnacle.” There is power in knowing the meaning of our names. Jesus is born into the world with many important names: He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” He is the Messiah, “the anointed one.” He is God’s Son, sent into the world for all of us.

In today’s Isaiah reading, which Christians have long heard as testimony to the coming of Christ, we hear still more names describing Jesus’ all-important roles in this world. He is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (v. 6). He comes with God’s authority to bring about peace in a broken world. Jesus comes to flip the world upside down—or, indeed, right side up—through God’s love.

Tonight we celebrate Jesus’ birth in a stable to parents of low status, a reminder that God often uses the ordinary to do extraordinary things. The name *Jesus* was itself ordinary in those days, but it carries this extraordinary meaning: “God saves.”

**O God, help us trust in your Son, the Prince
of Peace. May we share his holy story, not just today,
but all year. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Newborns and their families

Christmas Day

**Do not be afraid; for see . . . to you
is born . . . a Savior, who is the Messiah,
the Lord. (vv. 10-11)**

It's been said that some form of "Fear not" appears 365 times in scripture: once for every day of the year. Whether that's literally so or not, Jesus came into the world to be Emmanuel—"God with us"—always.

I write at the end of a year that brought much fear, but also taught us to trust in God's promise of good news. Our Savior came as a tiny baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger—not amid the trappings of earthly kingship but in vulnerability so we need not fear divine condemnation, wrath, or abandonment.

"For God so loved the world," proclaims the Gospel of John, "that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:16-17). Merry Christmas!

**God of love, help us trust in the infant king you sent
not to condemn but to save the world. May we share
this good news with all. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Giving thanks for Jesus,
who swaddles us in God's love



First Sunday of Christmas

**The boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem,
but his parents did not know it. (v. 43)**

Have you ever lost a young child, or even an older one—say, around twelve years of age—while you were out at a crowded event? If so, can you remember the sense of panic you felt? What did you do to make sure the child was found quickly? As I read the scripture for today, I imagine the fear and worry racing through Mary and Joseph as they searched for their son.

When Jesus' parents finally found Jesus, he was sitting in the temple among the teachers, listening and asking questions. He couldn't understand why his parents were so worried about him. We know this because of the way he responded to them: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (v. 49). Of course Mary was worried—Jesus was her son! However, in this story Jesus reminds us that he is also the Son of God. From this time on, Jesus will continue in obedience to his earthly parents, but will also grow in divine wisdom, teaching and sharing God's good news with the world.

**God, when we get lost, you, our heavenly parent,
seek us out. Make us eager learners, like Jesus.
Help us grow in wisdom and share
your good news. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Teachers and students

John, Apostle and Evangelist

**This is the disciple who is testifying
to these things . . . , and we know that
his testimony is true. (v. 24)**

Assuming that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (v. 20) is John, there seems to be rivalry between him and Peter. We see it as they race each other to Jesus’ tomb, and now, when Peter sticks his nose into John’s business and Jesus says, “What is that to you? Follow me!” (v. 22).

Jesus calls all of us, with Peter, to follow him. At times we have a hard time trusting. I am the daughter of a woman who lives daily with a mental illness. Many times I have questioned my faith and asked, “Why our family?” I’m sure you, too, have questioned your faith. Yet one way God reassures us we can trust the Savior is through the testimony of John’s gospel. As the evangelist draws his account of the good news of Jesus toward its close, he declares: “There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (v. 25).

Peter and John each had a unique call to discipleship. So do you; so do I. May we strengthen, rather than compete with, one another as we follow the Savior.

**God, help us support one another
in following Jesus, especially when we have
a hard time trusting. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who live with mental illness

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

**A voice was heard in Ramah, . . .
Rachel weeping for her children. (v. 18)**

The pain of losing a child is excruciating. As I have walked alongside a number of friends and parishioners who have laid children to rest, I have seen how unbearable this loss is. When I read this passage from Matthew, so many emotions come over me: anger, frustration, sorrow. Why must Herod call for every child under two to be killed? But he is power-hungry and will do anything to try to ensure that Jesus does not reign.

Christmas is, of course, just the beginning of the story of Jesus' life on earth. Not long after we follow the holy family from the stable to Egypt and back, we will journey with Jesus through his ministry, to the cross, and eventually to the empty tomb. The power-hungry ways of the world will threaten the reign of Christ at every turn. But in the words of Clarence W. Hall, "Easter says you can put truth in the grave, but it won't stay there." For all who have lost loved ones to violence, disease, or any form of destruction, God comes alongside in Jesus, the Truth, with understanding, love, and the promise that life will finally reign.

**God, we don't understand why great loss happens,
yet we know you mourn with us. Help us reach out
to all who grieve. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who have lost a child

Stephen, Deacon and Martyr (transferred)

**[Stephen] knelt down and cried out
in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin
against them.” (v. 60)**

As an ELCA deacon—a minister of word and service—I appreciate this story from the book of Acts. Stephen is the first deacon recorded in scripture, as well as the first individual martyred for his faith in Jesus. Stephen is a faithful servant of God who serves the community willingly and shares God’s message of salvation, even in the face of danger. His model of commitment challenges and encourages us to be faithful servants of Christ too.

Like Stephen, ELCA deacons are called to serve all God’s people. But the truth is that every one of God’s children is called to serve—to wash the feet, literally or figuratively, of all people. We are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. May we follow Stephen’s example of faithfulness and servanthood to God and all those around us.

**God, help us to be your faithful servants. Teach us
to be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.**

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

The blessing of wisdom

That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, “Ask what I should give you.” (v. 7)

If you have ever watched a celebrity red-carpet event, you have heard the stories of how much money is spent to get ready for that event—the exorbitant price paid for dresses, suits, jewelry, limousines. I find it almost sickening. Our world is continually telling us we should have more possessions: buy a bigger house, a faster car, more toys.

The story of Solomon told here reminds us that life is not about how much power, wealth, or status we have in this world. God cares more about how we treat others. From the earliest teachings of the Torah, and echoed by Jesus, we are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Because Solomon asks for knowledge and wisdom, God blesses him. We too find that as we follow Christ the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) and bless our neighbors—whether with food or friendship, advocacy or random acts of kindness—we experience blessing in the process. So how will you bless someone else this holiday season?

Gracious God, help us bless others by our words and actions, in response to how you have blessed us with the gift of Jesus. Amen.

Prayer concern: People seeking wisdom
in a particular matter today

The promise of light and peace

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me . . . will have the light of life. (v. 12)

During the Christmas season, one of my favorite pastimes is to sit in the dark with only the lights of my Christmas tree glowing. This light reminds me that Jesus comes as the light of the world even, and most especially, when we are grieving.

My grandpa died December 23, 2018. That Christmas was so hard. How were we to celebrate the birth of Jesus after a death in our family? However, God showed up. On Christmas morning I woke to quiet at my aunt and uncle's house. Some people were still sleeping, others out feeding the cattle. As I gazed outside, I spotted, fastened in the window, a piece of art with one simple word: "Peace." It was a reminder that in time the grief would not be so heavy. God would bring peace.

Despite our sorrow, that Christmas we celebrated Jesus born as Emmanuel, "God with us." God promises to be with us always. I can—and do—lean into that promise every day of the year.

**Loving God, in times of grief, remind us that
you sent your Son as the light of the world
and that we are never alone. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in need of a reminder
of God's peace

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