

Christ in Our Home

April, May, June
2021

LARGE PRINT EDITION



Prayers

Morning

Your boundless love rises fresh with each new dawn, O Lord. Speak peace to our hearts as you spoke to the disciples. Enfold us in your love and fill us with your joy, that we may share your healing grace with every soul we meet. Amen.

Evening

Thank you for this day, O God, for every grace we have seen and shared, every kind word and smile of friendship, every moment of laughter, and even for the struggles that humble us and move us to you. Grant us gentle rest until morning dawns. Amen.

Mealtime

You shared the fullness of your heart as you blessed bread and gave it to your friends, Lord Jesus. Fill our hearts with the grace of loving gratitude as we bless each other and share these gifts of your providing. Amen.

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Festivals and commemorations

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

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

Writers

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April 1–15 Derrick Fallon is an ELCA pastor currently serving St. Michael's Lutheran Church in New Canaan, Connecticut, where he lives with his wife, Pam. He enjoys writing, reading, running, and visiting with his adult children.

April 16–30 Mary Simonson Clark began her professional career as an occupational therapist and later received dual graduate degrees in theology and social work community practice, which she uses as a social work adjunct professor and field instructor with Augsburg University, Minneapolis. She and her husband attend Immanuel Lutheran Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

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May 16–31 Susie Gamelin is a wife, mom, and grandma, as well as a retired pastor who is part of Abiding Hope Church in Littleton, Colorado. She understands that she is called to wash the weary feet of people who are suffering.

June 1–15 Rebecca Ninke serves Brooklyn Lutheran and Luther Memorial Churches in the Madison, Wisconsin, area, where she lives with her family. A freelance writer and editor, Rebecca co-wrote the children's book *There's No Wrong Way to Pray* with her daughter.

June 16–30 Sue Edison-Swift is a semi-retired faith-based communicator. A member of First Lutheran Church, she lives in Decorah, Iowa, with her husband, Paul Edison-Swift, and Sam-the-Dog.

Maundy Thursday

**Having loved his own who were in the world,
he loved them to the end. (v. 1)**

His name was Gabriel, and he arrived in the morning.

A few years ago, my son Colin was in a bad car accident. It was a dark day for us, and an even darker night. Weeping and worrying spent the evening in that hospital room. Like guests unwilling to leave, they lingered as my wife, Pam, and I kept watch over and prayed for our broken boy. But through the long night, God was with us too, near to us in our suffering—keeping watch with us as we wept, worried, and prayed.

Gabriel arrived in the morning. He was an angel of a nurse who loved our son. To this day, Gabriel still helps me understand what the footwashing in today's reading is all about. He loved a complete stranger completely. He served with compassion. As the dark nights passed, I experienced the healing presence of Christ morning after morning in the love given to Colin by surgeons, therapists, and angel-nurses. Gabriel helped me see and experience what God's complete love is like, and what it means to love to the end.

**Jesus our healer, thank you for loving us who are
in the world, and for loving us completely. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Nurses

**Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;
1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

Good Friday

**Now there was a garden in the place
where he was crucified. (19:41)**

Even in the shadow of death there is life. Among the rubble of despair, something grows where we least expect it. Holy Week began with acclamation, joy, and affirmation. Shouts of “Hosanna!” accompanied raised palm branches. Then suddenly everything changed. Hope for the future turned to bewilderment. Joy yielded to fear, anger, and hatred. There was betrayal, denial, abandonment. By Friday, what once was so promising all seemed to be over. The palm branches once raised heavenward were now discarded, forgotten, left to wither away, while *Jesus’* palms were outstretched, open to the world, on a cross.

As people of faith, we know it’s not all over on Good Friday. Death is not how *Jesus’* story ends. Easter is coming, with resurrection and new life. On this Good Friday, pause and reflect on how you see signs of life in death’s shadows and find hope amid despair. There is a garden. And something is growing where you least expect it.

**Faithful God, thank you for sights and sounds of life
reminding me of your life-giving presence. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Farmers, gardeners, and landscapers

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

Vigil of Easter

**. . . so that, just as Christ was raised
from the dead . . . we too might walk
in newness of life. (v. 4)**

Today is an in-between day. Something unthinkable has happened; something beautiful will happen. And in this time in between, we wait, watch, witness. The pain of loss lingers. Yet in our grief are signs of healing and newness of life as we walk together in faith.

As I walk today, the morning sun has broken through dark clouds. It is a resurrection dawn. The flowers that have come back to life share their perfumed fragrance. The birds testify and share their morning songs. Newness of life is all around me.

What will *your* signs be today? As you walk, what do you notice that reminds you of the promise of Easter? How does that give you hope, and how will you share it with others? For on this in-between day, somewhere down the road a stone is about to be rolled away, a tomb is about to be emptied. Flowers are pressing up through concrete where they have no business growing. New steps wait to be taken, and new stories are in store—ready to be told.

**God of new life, walk with me and remind me
of your promises today, through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Storytellers

Daniel 3:1-29; John 20:1-18



Easter Day

**Do not be alarmed. . . .
He has been raised. (v. 6)**

As I write, the world is in the throes of COVID-19. There is much uncertainty, anxiety, and fear locally and globally. Yet no matter what has happened or is happening, Christ has been raised!

There is an empty tomb—death could not hold him. There are words of hope, a promise of resurrection, certain new life. The story continues, and *you* have a part in the new beginning. God is still writing this wonderful story, and a message of hope that was first shared so long ago continues with *you* today as you worship our risen Lord, tell the story in your own words, share love with those around you, and speak words of Easter hope. No matter what has happened or is happening within the grasp of illness, isolation, loss, death, and grief, Jesus has risen! Do not be alarmed. There is joy amid fear and life from death. The promise of this day is that Jesus' resurrection is *our* resurrection, as he walks with us in God's ongoing story.

**God of new beginnings, thank you
for writing me into your story of love and life,
through our risen Lord. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those grieving the loss of loved ones

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

Easter Monday

**Tell my brothers to go to Galilee;
there they will see me. (v. 10)**

Amid all the surprise and fear, joy and wonderment, words of encouragement, hope, and life are spoken. God is not finished. This story is still moving us forward.

Galilee is where it all began—the genesis of Jesus' ministry and mission. And Galilee is where it will all begin again. Jesus will meet his followers there, bless them, and commission them to carry on with his work. God's work of healing, restoration, and renewal will continue—through them.

Jesus also meets *us* and blesses *us* to continue his work. So we also go, trusting in God's faithfulness and believing we are part of this new beginning. And we tell the good news, speaking words of love, of life, and of hope, because God is still breathing new life. There is more to do, for the story continues and God has invited us into it—into ministry and mission to share God's love with our neighbors and with the world, as Jesus did. There, we will see him.

**God of blessing, thank you for including me
in your work of loving and blessing the world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Confirmation teachers, mentors,
and students

Psalm 16:8-11; Daniel 12:1-3; Acts 2:14, 22b-32

What will be

**You do not sow the body that is to be,
but a bare seed. (v. 37)**

As autumn comes, preparations are made for the long winter months. On a brown hill, unsightly daffodil bulbs are planted with expectant hope. Winter approaches, with reminders of life's frailty and brevity. For a season the buried bulbs lie dormant. Then spring arrives with a sunny transformation: On a green hill, what once seemed unremarkable now blooms in glory. The Easter flowers become signs of hope, joy, and new life to passersby.

Paul speaks of resurrection as transformation, using contrasting images of death and life. What once was perishable, dishonorable, and weak becomes imperishable, glorious, and powerful by God's grace. In attempting to explain a divine mystery, words often fail. But at the heart of Paul's faith—and ours—are the faithfulness and promises of God. Though we don't know what it will look like or how it will be, our rising will be glorious too, as you and I are renewed in the image of Christ.

**God of wonder, help me to see signs of resurrection
and new life around me today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Florists

Genesis 1:20–2:4a; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Mourning into dancing

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

A caravan of volunteers embarks on a journey to the homes of Special Church members. Special Church is a community of God's beloved children with special needs. They have not been able to gather recently because of restrictions due to COVID-19. So Special Church goes on the road: caregivers bring the word, prayers, and songs to God's children where they live. There are face coverings and physical distancing. But there is also singing, laughing, and spirited dancing among the mentors and those whom they love alike.

I imagine the writer of today's psalm rejoicing in a similar way, with gratitude and love for what God has done. The Lord has delivered the psalmist from a calamity, bringing life from death.

For times when we are helped and delivered from critical situations, may our rejoicing be as thankful, loving, and spirited as that of the psalmist, and as that of Special Church.

**Beautiful Savior, thank you for helping me smile,
sing, and dance in response to all
you have done. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Caregivers and those they serve

Song of Solomon 3:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

Step by step

**All who believed were together
and had all things in common. (v. 44)**

Early followers of the risen Jesus were known as People of the Way. "The Way" refers to a daily life choice to live in community, with Christ as the center. Each day was a new chance for these disciples to turn together to God through the spiritual practices of worship, learning, praying, sharing meals, and caring for those in need. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, People of the Way chose life, day by day.

Each day can be a new rising for us too—a gift and opportunity to make life-giving choices. By God's grace, each day can be Easter as we set our hearts and minds on Christ. Through worship and learning, prayer, hospitality, and generosity, we too walk together as People of the Way into life overflowing with grace, compassion, and love.

May today be an Easter day of new beginnings and abundant life for you. And may the sights and sounds of resurrection and new life you encounter remind you of God's abundant love. Step by step and day by day.

**Loving God, thank you for today's rising
and your promise to make all things new,
through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: New believers

Psalm 133; Daniel 1:1-21

Emboldened

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (v. 31)

After being arrested for speaking about Jesus, resurrection, and new life, Peter and John are released with a warning: "Cease and desist." They return to their fellow believers and share the news of their censorship. The People of the Way respond to this obstacle by asking God for strength and courage to keep sharing the story of Jesus with the world. God answers their prayer by empowering them with the Holy Spirit. Emboldened, the People of the Way continue to speak about Jesus, changing the world as they do.

Public speaking is one of the *big* fears for many people. But on a memorable Stewardship Sunday, Grace rises from her pew, stands before the congregation, and shares her story of Jesus with her fellow believers. She speaks from her heart about God's generosity. She sings from her soul about Jesus' love and how he makes a difference in her life. The Holy Spirit still emboldens. And the People of the Way, in this particular time and place, respond as one: "Amen!"

**Empowering God, help me share your love today
by what I say and do. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Speech therapists

Psalm 133; Daniel 2:1-23

Precious love

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

The psalm writer links unity among the people of God with abundance, blessing, and life. Sadly, unity is not always present among people of faith. Fear, anxiety, and uncertainty can lead to discord and division, impeding life as God intends it. Uniting around trust in God's presence and promises of provision and protection, and living out that faith, can lead to life overflowing with blessing.

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens such unity. Yet amid fear and uncertainty, believers in my community, and likely in yours too—beloved and blessed children of God—link together around the common goal of feeding hungry neighbors. Food is collected and given to local food banks, and tables overflow. Monetary donations are given to community relief organizations, and a great need is generously met. People's lives are made better, especially for the most vulnerable. There is blessing and life among God's people.

**Precious Lord, thank you for blessing me
so that I may bless others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Food bank volunteers
and those whom they serve

Daniel 2:24-49; John 12:44-50



Second Sunday of Easter

**Jesus came and stood among them and said,
“Peace be with you.” (v. 26)**

Even after Mary shared the good news that she had seen the Lord, the disciples sequestered themselves behind a locked door in fear. But the hope of the world entered that room. Peace entered the room. Abundant life entered, unlocking their door and giving them what they needed to move forward into a new beginning.

What about you and me? We too are freed from the power and places of death as the hope of the world enters the room of our life. Peace enters the room. Abundant life enters the room. Christ himself comes and stands with us, giving himself as life for the world.

Moving forward, we experience for ourselves the risen Jesus in the love we give each other, in forgiving and being forgiven, in the kindness and compassion of listening and supporting, and in the prayers and support that help a community of faith move from mourning to rejoicing, from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

**Comforting God, thank you for Christ, our peace,
who empowers us to move forward
into your new beginning. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those struggling with fear and anxiety

Psalm 133; Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1–2:2

Compassion

**I am writing you a new commandment
that is true in him and in you. (v. 8)**

On one hand, the writer of this letter says, "Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment" (v. 7). But in the next verse we read, "I am writing you a new commandment." God's love and God's command to love were not new with Jesus. So what *is* new?

The newness is the Incarnation. While God had long worked through people, in Jesus God came *in person* to show compassion and set an example of self-giving love. Compassion is sympathy or empathy for someone struggling; it's also *suffering with* someone. I've seen both forms lived out during the pandemic.

A community shelters in place for the well-being of neighbors; school, work, and even worship go digital and remote. Volunteers deliver groceries and prescriptions to homebound elders. Medical professionals put themselves at risk, selflessly and tirelessly caring for the sick. And each day we find new ways to obey God's age-old commandment by loving others as Jesus did.

**Compassionate Lord, thank you for your grace
that helps me love as you love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Medical professionals, first responders,
and essential workers

Psalm 135; Daniel 3:1-30

Song and dance

Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good. (v. 3)

"God is good!" "All the time!" "All the time!" "God is good!" This call-and-response greeting, perhaps especially familiar to Bible campers, affirms the truth of God's goodness. In its own way it is a psalm of praise, and when spoken or sung, it can kindle recollections of what God has done for the people God deeply loves. For instance: In the gift and blessing of each new day—God is good! For the beauty of creation and God's creativity—all the time!

For guiding us safely through our wilderness places—all the time!

In providing for and protecting us—God is good!

In calling us beloved children—God is good!

For forgiving us and setting us free—all the time!

For healing and restoring us—all the time!

In loving us and calling us home—God is good!

With thanks for what God has done and is doing, and with trust in what God will do, let us join with the psalmist in the song of praise and the dance of life.

**Faithful God, we praise you for your goodness
and thank you for your gracious love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Camp counselors

Daniel 6:1-28; 1 John 2:12-17

Shelter and protection

**Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD
you have an everlasting rock. (v. 4)**

Some years ago, I learned to scuba dive. It opened up a whole new world for me. The first thing I learned in my certification training was not to panic—remain calm—because problems can occur under the water that are made worse by panicking. The second thing I learned was to never dive alone. Diving alone can be dangerous. Dive buddies keep each other safe and help each other stay calm. They can keep each other alive by trusting each other.

The words sung in Isaiah are encouragement to trust God for protection. In times of trouble, danger, conflict, and challenge, God is a safe refuge. In times of troubled waters, God is a secure rock to which we can cling. In times of raging storms, the Just One is a peaceful shelter we can call home. At the heart of this life-giving promise is God's power in which we can trust for protection—power that extends from God's deep love for you and for all in need of shelter, today and every day.

**Sheltering God, thank you for loving me,
protecting me, and providing for me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People working or playing
in water today

Psalm 135; Mark 12:18-27

Help me, O God

Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer. (v. 1)

What are you lamenting today? And who do you turn to for help? Sometimes grief, illness, or discouragement leaves us feeling helpless and alone. Sometimes adverse situations we can't control shake our sense of safety and security; our footing, once so sure, is no longer so. Psalm 4 reminds us that in times of trouble there is One who walks beside us, listening, abiding, rescuing, gladdening, and securing us. In a season of suffering, the psalmist turns to God, trusting that God will answer prayers and provide deliverance. And even in the most distressing hour there is hope, wholeness, and peace.

As you continue on your journey, whatever that road is and wherever it takes you, embrace the promise that One walks with you who hears you, sees you, and loves you deeply. And as you walk, maybe you will be a companion for someone else today, reminding them of God's love. Maybe you will be the one who gives someone who is feeling separated and alone some peace, love, and hope to hold onto, just by being there for them.

**Good and gracious God, thank you for hearing me
when I call to you. In your loving name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those grieving the loss of employment

Daniel 9:1-19; 1 John 2:18-25

Abide in Christ

And now, little children, abide in him. (v. 28)

I am writing these devotions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the appeals to stay home to save lives. Unlike many people, I have a safe, comfortable home in which to abide. Yet threats of the virus permeate my home's walls. It is difficult to know which messages are true and which are meant to mislead or deceive us. Economic stress grows. People's fears are understandable and real.

Even as we encounter enormous problems that are far beyond our personal control, abiding in Christ brings us comfort. As the early Christians confronted deceptive messages, we can claim confidence in the truth. Christ came, lived as a human, died for all people, and will return. The Holy Spirit abides in us now. We are God's beloved little children. Abiding in Christ, we have a security that no home's walls can provide. As we abide in Christ, God's grace abides in us. Whatever the stresses of daily life, we are not alone. God will never forsake us.

Gracious God, whatever problems we face, help us abide in you as you abide in us. In Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: People without a safe place to live

Psalm 4; Daniel 10:2-19

Serve with one another

**The greatest among you must become . . .
like one who serves. (v. 26)**

My father had a heart attack in his nineties. After *another* follow-up healthcare appointment on *another* snowy day, in *another* snow-packed parking lot, I helped Dad into the car and then worked to load his wheelchair into the trunk. A stranger walking by approached me and said, "I know you can do it, but let me help you this one time." With his added lift on the wheelchair, it slid into the trunk. He did not wait for thanks or praise, but walked on.

I have remembered this stranger's service for over a dozen years largely because he did not take over and load the wheelchair *for* me. Instead, he served *with* me. He maintained my dignity and affirmed my ability. Often we serve by doing *for* someone as if they were incompetent. At times, we act like benefactors who deserve gratitude. However, when we work *with* people, we learn together and affirm each other. We share the joy of mutually answering God's call to serve one another.

**God, we know you created everyone
with abilities. Help us serve together
as Christ commanded. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA Global Mission
accompaniment work

Psalm 4; Acts 3:1-10



Third Sunday of Easter

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering . . . (v. 41)

"If it seems too good to be true, it probably is." Often this is a wise warning. Perhaps it was what the disciples thought. They may have *wanted* to believe Jesus had risen and was with them, but after the ghastly crucifixion, it probably seemed too good to be true. Jesus responded to their disbelief by welcoming their touch. Echoing the disciples' disbelief, seventeenth-century English clergyman Thomas Fuller said, "Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth."

Like the disciples, I sometimes stray into disbelieving and wondering. I *do* have joy in knowing Jesus died for me and rose again. However, sometimes I begin to wonder: Can forgiveness and grace really be so simple? What about those verses that say to give up everything and everyone? What if I do not fully love my neighbors *and my enemies*? Such thoughts can fuel my disbelief. At these times, I plead like the father of an ill boy did: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). And Jesus responds to my disbelief as well.

**Gracious God, I believe. Please help my disbelief!
Through your Son's death and resurrection,
I pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who are disbelieving and wondering

Psalm 4; Acts 3:12-19; 1 John 3:1-7

Forgive to live and love

Whoever does not love abides in death. (v. 14)

Sometimes I dwell on my anger with a neighbor near or far. Soon, I lack concentration and cannot complete tasks well. I lose sleep and become exhausted. Annoyed with my ongoing complaints, my friends and family retreat from me. As my anger approaches hatred, it can hinder my communication with God. Surely this is a form of death!

Today is National Oklahoma City Bombing Commemoration Day, the remembrance of a deadly US event. A father who lost his daughter in the disaster came to forgive one of the bombers. He said, "It was a release for me." The Forgiveness Project, which focuses on rebuilding lives after trauma, shares many such restorative narratives. Likewise, eleven years after her husband's assassination and thirty-two years ago this month, Coretta Scott King said, "Hate is too great a burden to bear. It injures the hater more than it injures the hated." If we lose ourselves in hate, we are dead. We must forgive in order to live and to love our neighbors.

Loving God, as you forgive me in Jesus, help me to forgive so I can live to love my neighbors. Amen.

Prayer concern: Trauma victims who endeavor to forgive

Psalm 150; Jeremiah 30:1-11a

Love allows choice

Love one another. . . . This is the commandment . . . you must walk in it. (vv. 5-6)

My mother, a former third-grade teacher, told this story about playground problems. She asked a little girl who seemed always to be at the problems' epicenter to explain what she thought was happening during recess. The girl replied, "If everyone would do things *my* way, there wouldn't be any problems." We chuckle at the unlikely success of the little girl's plan. However, do we ever critique other people's behaviors and think, "If they would just do it *my* way . . ."?

Being able to choose how we do things in life affirms and dignifies us. Choice allows me to meet my needs as I think is best in my particular situations. It is a way I love myself. Since God calls us to love one another as we love ourselves, I must allow my neighbors choices in how they live *their* lives. I need to remember that walking in the commandment of loving one another means I cannot impose my ways such that I deprive my neighbors of choices. Love allows choice.

**Gracious God, thank you for allowing us choice.
Help us allow our neighbors choice as
we love them. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran World Relief's partnerships

Psalm 150; Hosea 5:15–6:6

Listen and believe

[Jesus] upbraided them . . . because they had not believed those who saw him. (v. 14)

I wonder how Mary Magdalene felt when the other followers didn't believe she had seen the risen Lord. Was she frustrated, angry, hurt? Perhaps she was used to being discounted and disregarded.

How did the two who walked in the country with Jesus feel about being disbelieved? Were they "outsiders" partially marginalized from the inner group?

I have been discounted. I expect you have been too. Remarks such as "Maybe you misunderstood" or "That *cannot* be" indicate the hearer disbelieves our reports about our experiences. Regrettably, I have also made such remarks. Society frequently disregards experiences of individuals and groups it considers outsiders, incapable, or inferior. Jesus scolded the eleven for not believing the experiences told them. We also must listen to people whose life experiences differ from ours. Then we must believe them! This is the path to truth and justice for all.

God, as St. Francis of Assisi prayed, help us seek to understand more than to be understood. Amen.

Prayer concern: People who are unheard or disbelieved

Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 150

Come to the table

**You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies. (v. 5)**

This psalm's first verses are ideal for Earth Day, beautifully describing the creation we share. Its words have also comforted many, including my farmer father, during their final days and, later, their mourning families. Yet its words can encourage us for daily life too.

The psalm doesn't say our lives will be without trials and enemies. Indeed, society has become polarized. In our divisiveness, we've lost sight that people we once welcomed as good neighbors we now exclude as enemies. Yet I suspect that whatever our views, we are comforted and encouraged by the *same* words of this psalm, including the promise of the bountiful table prepared by our Lord for all.

When I get to that heavenly feast, I imagine I'll be surprised at who else is there! But why wait? Through God's love and grace let's gather around the table now. While rejoicing in our diversity, let's listen genuinely to each other as we break bread together.

**Lord, lead me to your table now. Let me not wait
for eternity to dine with all your children. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Dialogue groups seeking understanding

Genesis 30:25-43; Acts 3:17-26

Speak up!

**[The leaders] came to them,
much annoyed because they were
teaching the people. (vv. 1-2)**

I fret when people are annoyed with me. I want to get back in their favor. (Yes, I also fret when I am annoyed with people; I want them to repent and get back in *my* favor!) I think twice before saying something that might lower people's opinions of me. For instance, I might choose to ignore someone's comments about "those" people and how "they" live. I can manage not to annoy people if I never dispute their denials of the devastation of racial and ethnic inequities. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called this "the appalling silence and indifference of the good people" (1963).

But I am writing this during the global outcries after George Floyd's 2020 death in police custody. When it comes to social injustices, I have learned I cannot be silent. I must denounce systemic racism and intolerance that affect all aspects of many people's lives. I need to stop fretting that I might annoy people. Along with Christ and all my siblings who face injustices, I must boldly speak up.

**God, help me join your Son to speak up with
all of your children who suffer from injustices. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA e-Advocacy

Genesis 46:28–47:6; Psalm 23

What would Jesus do?

**He said, “. . . rest a while.” . . . [But then]
he saw a great crowd; and he had
compassion for them. (vv. 31, 34)**

I like to make to-do lists. It helps me focus. Crossing items off as I finish them gives me a sense of accomplishment. Often my list is overly ambitious and the day ends with unfinished items.

Sometimes items on my list remain unfinished because, like Jesus and his disciples, I encounter interruptions. Many people refer to this as the “ministry of interruptions.” Martin Luther said we are part of the “priesthood of all believers,” meaning that God calls *all* of us to ministry—including this ministry of interruptions. We may be interrupted by a family member who wants help or a friend who needs to talk about a problem. Perhaps an advocacy issue requires immediate phone calls to legislators. Whatever the interruption, we can ask ourselves the popular 1990s question “What would Jesus do?” (WWJD). If the interruption is an actual need and we can help, maybe we should respond. Perhaps God has something important to add to our to-do list.

**Compassionate God, show me how
to respond like Jesus to the things you place
on my to-do list. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Crisis hotline callers and responders

Genesis 48:8-19; Psalm 23



Fourth Sunday of Easter

I must bring [other sheep] also. . . . So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (v. 16)

Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. The gospel focuses on Jesus' role as the good shepherd—not on our actions as sheep. Sheep are not bright animals who can fend for themselves. Their limited view is of the grass on which they are currently grazing, their shepherd, and their flock. Close your eyes and picture the other people in your flock. Are they mostly sheep who resemble you?

Our Good Shepherd has a broader view than we sheep do. Beyond our small pasture he has and cares for a variety of other sheep grazing near and far. The text does not expressly identify these other sheep. Even so, close your eyes again and imagine the other sheep our Good Shepherd calls into the one flock. Is the flock the same as you first pictured or different? What other sheep may recognize the Shepherd's voice? Perhaps it would be exciting to start now to join and graze with sheep who may be our future flockmates!

**Good Shepherd, help me start, even now,
to recognize and join with other sheep
who listen to your voice. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Ecumenical and interfaith initiatives

Psalm 23; Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24

Mark, Evangelist

**The one who is more powerful than I
is coming after me. (v. 7)**

John the Baptist was Jesus' "advance man." He knew he was not the "star." He was comfortable in his supporting role. Today we also remember Mark, the evangelist. He wasn't the star either. He was an "eyewitness reporter" through the gospel that bears his name. It can be hard to have a supporting role without public recognition. Yet Luther taught that we can serve God in *all* our life's roles.

For example, a couple who were both solo pastors adopted a newborn. Soon the pandemic hit. Their calendars overflowed with virtual meetings, services, phone calls, and other needs. One day their neighbor, a retiree, stopped them. He said he knew their schedules were hectic with ministry demands. He explained that he and his grandson wanted to mow the pastors' lawn so they would have more time to fulfill their ministries. The neighbor and his grandson's lawn-mowing was a supporting role, not in the "spotlight." Yet was it valuable service? Indeed!

**God, strengthen me to serve you willingly, faithfully,
and humbly in all of my life's roles. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who serve without recognition

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

Open our hands

**God will wipe away every tear
from their eyes. (v. 17)**

No hunger, thirst, or tears sounds good! However, because my needs are well met, this promise seems less urgent to me than it might to many people. A future without needs may be somewhat comforting to my neighbors facing ordeals. But what about their needs and tears *now*? I worked with a group whose goal was to end long-term poverty. It was criticized as anti-biblical because Christ said, "You [will] always have the poor with you" (Matthew 26:11). To be clear, Christ was quoting Deuteronomy 15:11, which continues, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor" to end their poverty.

We await plenty in the kingdom to come. Yet we also believe the kingdom is here now. Christ declared that in him "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). Thus, what is our call in the kingdom *now*? Is it enough to tell our neighbors they will have plenty in the kingdom *to come*? Instead, how can we open our hands to meet their needs and wipe away their tears *now*?

**Loving God, thank you for your promise
of the kingdom to come and for empowering
our work in the kingdom now. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Services in America

1 Chronicles 11:1-9; Psalm 95

Delight in showing clemency

He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. (v. 18)

My first social work internship was at a Jewish social service agency. I took a request from a person who was Black. Based on the stereotypes I held then, I replied that the person surely was not part of the agency's community. I was terribly wrong! Later in the internship, a faculty member urged me to apologize for Martin Luther's anti-Semitism. As an individual and as a Lutheran church member, I grievously needed and generously received clemency—unmerited mercy.

Whether we admit it or not, we all have sinned (Romans 3:23). We need forgiveness. Just as God is merciful with us, we all need to show everyone mercy and leniency (Ephesians 4:32). Moreover, research has found that forgiveness does not only benefit the person forgiven; it helps the forgiver by improving their mental and physical health (Mayo Clinic, 2017). As God delights in showing us clemency, we can delight in showing our neighbors clemency *and* in sharing improved health!

Compassionate God, as you mercifully and leniently forgive us, help us forgive our neighbors. Amen.

Prayer concern: Courts that balance justice
with clemency

Psalm 95; Mark 14:26-31

Amid peril, proclaim hope

The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip. (v. 6)

During the pandemic, it seems the public most appreciates leaders who are transparent about the danger, yet who conclude their messages with proclamations of hope. They, along with celebrities and organizations, constantly assure us, “We will get through this” and “We can do this together.” In dire times, people need to hear and proclaim words of hope that sustain them and stave off despair.

In today’s text, the early church was under persecution, and the believers were scattered. Yet they faithfully clung to and proclaimed the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection that conquered sin. People in Samaria were eager to hear Philip. His words and the accompanying healing signs brought them joy. Amid their peril, the gospel message of hope sustained both the proclaimers and the hearers. During difficult times, we too can proclaim God’s love and mercy to bring our neighbors much-needed hope. This is the hope that sustains us all.

Gracious God, help me share the good news of your Son’s resurrection that brings us all hope. Amen.

Prayer concern: Hospital chaplains

Psalm 22:25-31; Amos 8:1-7

God's free gift

You thought you could obtain God's gift with money! (v. 20)

I recall a reciprocity custom. When you received a gift of food in a serving dish, you returned that dish refilled with food you had prepared for the initial giver. It was not a *free* gift! This custom seems to have stuck with me; I still do not like to feel beholden to anyone. Often I offer to pay people for items or assistance they sincerely want to give me free of charge.

In this Acts text, Simon wanted to buy God's gift. (Simon's sinful intent was to use the gift to boost his popularity and power.) Peter sternly told Simon that God's gift could not be obtained with money. Peter's response reminds me of the song "The Best Things in Life Are Free." Its lyrics proclaim that creation is free to everyone and romantic love can come to anyone (DeSylva & Brown, 1927). Ironically, this song is from the musical *Good News*. Of course, the *real* good news is that the best thing in life—God's gracious love—is a gift for everyone. It *is* free!

**Generous God, thank you for your saving love that
you freely give via your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Church musicians sharing
the good news

Psalm 22:25-31; Amos 8:11-13

Philip and James, Apostles

**[Jesus said,] “The one who believes in me
will also do the works that I do.” (v. 12)**

Jesus calls those who believe to carry on his work. That includes Philip and James, apostles remembered today. And it includes you and me, and lots of other folk!

When Jesus walked this earth, he helped people one day at a time, one person at a time. We can do that. We don't have to miraculously cure ailments or feed more than five thousand people at once. A kind word, a helping hand, a few dollars may not seem like much. But consider a whole community of believers, and a community of communities, all doing the works Jesus did. One by one, they add up!

Risky? For sure. When I was first entrusted with the family car, it didn't go well. I hit our mailbox. But my parents kept trusting me. Likewise, even when we don't handle things perfectly, Jesus trusts us with the responsibility of making life better for everyone we can by living out his love in the world.

How remarkable to follow in the footsteps of Philip and James in doing the work of Jesus.

**Trusting God, give me courage and faith
to do the work of Jesus. In his name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Pastors who equip and encourage

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



Fifth Sunday of Easter

**Every branch that bears fruit [my Father]
prunes to make it bear more fruit. (v. 2)**

In my first call as a pastor, I developed a friendship with a guy who took part in Alcoholics Anonymous. So when people came to me on occasion because they were struggling with alcoholism, I would ask if they wanted to talk with my friend.

My friend in AA had been there. In his words, he “had been a drunk,” so he knew about the addiction, the helplessness, the regret, the struggle. But he also knew about hope and freedom and helping others. The old dead branches of his struggle had been cut away, thrown into the fire. “With God’s help,” my friend would say, “with God’s help.”

When I was a kid, I watched my father prune trees. He was like a wild man. I would think to myself, “That tree will never come back.” But it did, more beautiful than before.

If my father and those trees are any example, being pruned is not such a pleasant experience. My friend in AA would agree. But when I knew him, he was beautiful, simply beautiful.

**God, thank you for pruning away what is harmful
in me so I can grow beautiful in your love.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who struggle with addiction

Psalm 22:25-31; Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21

Living fruitfully

**By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,
peace, patience, kindness . . . (v. 22)**

In this reading, the words themselves are powerful: Say “jealousy” or “anger.” Then say “kindness” or “gentleness.” Right away, you know which you want to exhibit and experience. The first two make me feel uncomfortable; the other two make me feel safe.

Sorcery isn’t something very common in our day. But in the same sentence Paul names quarrels and envy, anger and factions. Those hit closer to home.

The stakes are high here because, as redeemed disciples of Jesus, we do not live in isolation. Life and faith are not just about God and me. The words and traits in this passage aren’t primarily about making *me* feel comfortable; they’re about how I bless my neighbor.

The writer here is like a loving parent who knows what is best for the child, but also what sort of person the parent wants the child to become. The writer urges the Galatians, and us, to “be guided by the Spirit” (v. 25) so our fruitful lives can bless the lives of others.

**Lord God, help me as your child to choose well
how to live, that my life may bless others.**

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: All who are homeless

Psalm 80; Isaiah 5:1-7

A peaceful habitation

The effect of righteousness will be peace. (v. 17)

Often the last words we hear spoken in worship are: "The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace," then "Go in peace; serve the Lord." Among many other aspects of worship, we have been led by the Spirit to confess our sin and have been declared forgiven. There is no condemnation. Nothing separates us from God.

Righteousness means being in a right relationship with others and with God. We are righteous *because God* says so. The result of such righteousness, such deliverance from condemnation, is peace. Unless . . .

Unless our newfound peace doesn't carry forward into our daily life. Counted righteous by God, we are now empowered to set our other relationships right: relationships with family, friends, neighbors, maybe even self. To have the tough conversation, to make the apology, to regain trust, to forgive ourselves. Usually the first step (receiving God's gift of righteousness) is easier than the second (setting right our relationships with others). But the second is necessary if we want to know the peace spoken over us at the close of worship.

Lord God, help me find peace in you, with my neighbor, and in myself. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Peacemakers around the world

Psalm 80; James 3:17-18

The gift of hope

**For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth. (v. 17)**

Hope. Hope that our children will be okay. Hope that the crops will be good this year. Hope that conflict can be resolved. Perhaps you've said things like this: "Today was hard. I hope tomorrow is better." "I hope my health improves." "I hope and pray God will bring an end to hatred and violence."

God speaks a word of hope through Isaiah to people who have known much suffering. "No more shall the sound of weeping be heard" (v. 19). The hope and promise of a new beginning—of peace and well-being—make all the difference.

The promises of God give hope. Hope can keep us working on relationships, encourage the farmer to plant once again, give leaders the resolve to settle a conflict. Does it mean tomorrow will be better for certain, that there will be no problems in the future? We know the answer. But hope is the gift that helps us begin. So we hang onto it, celebrate it, and give thanks to God.

**Lord of all hopefulness, thank you for the
marvelous gift of hope in your good promises.**

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Farmers, who feed the world

Psalm 80; John 14:18-31

Praise for God's marvelous gifts

**O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things. (v. 1)**

Picture some images of joy: A child opening a birthday present. An employee coming home after being promoted. A couple discovering they're going to have a baby or learning their adoption has been finalized. Grandparents answering the door to grandchildren who have come to visit. Joy is often seen in laughter and cheering and hugging.

Now picture images of worship: People gathered—in person, or over digital platforms—praying, hearing the word proclaimed, and singing praise to God. Praise to this God who forgives and loves and is present each day in faithfulness.

Not every day will be joy-filled. Even a new job or parenting routine is tedious at times. After a week, grandparents are ready for time alone. And face it, no one feels like singing praise every day.

We live in a real world with struggles and pain. But today we raise our voices in praise, for even amid suffering, God does marvelous things—not least of which is being with us.

**Lord, thank you for every marvelous gift
that comes to surprise me. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Church musicians and choir directors

Isaiah 49:5-6; Acts 10:1-34

Anointed to do good

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; [and] he went about doing good. (v. 38)

Among the many words about Jesus, I love these: “He went about doing good.” We will never be hailed Savior—nor should we be—but wouldn’t we all like our obituary to say we “went about doing good”?

A man found his friend reading the Bible and weeping. He asked what was wrong. The friend said, “I’ve been reading about how Jesus went about doing good. I realize I just go about.” Maybe we should all weep, but that wouldn’t help. I suggest another way.

When I was overweight, I joined like-minded people to share struggles, failures, and successes and to encourage one another in our mission to lose weight. As the church, we join like-minded people—not that we are all the same, but that we worship the same God—to share struggles, fears, life, faith, and worship. We encourage one another on our mission of going about doing good in Jesus’ name. And because, like Jesus, we are anointed with the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to do just that.

Gracious God, help me to be on the lookout for opportunities to do good. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA World Hunger

Psalm 98; Isaiah 42:5-9

Upside down

But whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant. (v. 43)

A world turned upside down: leaders serving, no one hungry, no one considered less-than. This is what God intends and what Jesus shows us. See how he treats women as equal to men, invites those of low status to be his friends, tells a rich man he will find joy in sharing his wealth.

So those who confess Jesus as Lord, who exist *in* the world but are not *of* the world, are called to live and act not as the world does but as God intends, and as Jesus demonstrates: as servants.

As I write during a time of civil unrest and COVID-19, many followers of Jesus are advocating for racial justice and are wearing masks to protect others. Many churches are keeping their buildings closed to avoid spreading disease, though we'd love to gather in person. Conversely, though being in crowds puts one at risk of the virus, some churches are feeding or marching with protesters. In countless ways Jesus empowers us to serve—to turn the world upside down.

Lord, bless your servant congregations and disciples with faith and courage. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Congregational servant leaders

Deuteronomy 32:44-47; Psalm 98



Sixth Sunday of Easter

**This is my commandment, that you love
one another as I have loved you. (v. 12)**

I majored in literature. When possible, I stayed away from math. Then my son met fifth grade and Mrs. Johnson, the math teacher. Almost every day, math problems came home to be solved. My son struggled. I struggled. I began to not like Mrs. Johnson.

Which, you will tell me, is silly. And you are right. But perhaps such is true of many of our bad feelings about others. We get ourselves caught up in silly disagreements. Silly arguments. Silly fights.

Jesus does not ask us how we feel about this or that person. We are to “do” love. I am not sure it is possible to change our feelings at will. It *is* possible to change our actions. Perhaps our feelings will even follow, but if they don’t, we still will have honored Jesus’ command.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another,” says Jesus. He doesn’t ask how we feel about it.

**God, help me to be kind to all I meet
on this journey called life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Schoolteachers

Psalm 98; Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6

Eternal life now

**Take hold of the eternal life,
to which you were called. (v. 12)**

We commonly think of eternal life as something after our time on earth has ended, a place where “death will be no more” (Revelation 21:4). But eternal life is also about how we live now.

If you have been baptized, and if you were a baby or young child at the time, you probably weren’t paying much attention to what the pastor said. But when we are brought for baptism (even adults are “brought” by the Holy Spirit) and water is splashed on our heads or we are eased under the water, a pastor may say, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). That’s eternal life. Living in Christ so his light shines through us. Now.

We were created to love and praise God and to love and serve our neighbor. Who is our neighbor? If someone is in need and we have the means to help, that person is our neighbor. When we help our neighbor, we “take hold of the eternal life” God gives freely and follow Jesus’ call to live in love.

**Eternal God, thank you for life
now and forever. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hospice care workers

Deuteronomy 7:1-11; Psalm 93

This unlikely king

**. . . he who is the blessed and only Sovereign,
the King of kings and Lord of lords. (v. 15)**

What a remarkable thing to say about anyone, including Jesus! Born in a barn, carpenter's son, itinerant rabbi with a small group of followers: some fishermen, a tax collector. He helped a few people of low status, taught some new understandings of God, preached a few sermons. Finally, he was put to death as a criminal. Most thought that was the end of it. Until . . .

Until some women find his grave empty. Until his friends bump into him while taking a walk.

Standing before Pilate, Jesus had said, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Pilate asked, "What is truth?" (John 18:37-38). He was looking truth in the eye but failed to recognize it. Jesus is the truth about who God is, who we are, and who God intends us to be.

And above all, this: Jesus conquered death. Though he died, he lives. And he offers that gift to the whole world. So, yes, we proclaim this Jesus, who is one with God, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

**God, thank you for sending Jesus,
our Lord and King. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who tell the truth
no matter the cost

Deuteronomy 11:1-17; Psalm 93

Reminders of who we are

**You shall put these words of mine
in your heart and soul. (v. 18)**

The passage continues: “Bind them as a sign on your hand. . . . Teach them to your children. . . . Write them on the doorposts of your house” (vv. 18-20).

Come into our home and you will see pictures. Grandparents, parents, our younger selves, children, grandchildren. My wife shows them to our grandsons: “This is your family; this is who you are.”

Come into my office and you will see a plaque with a cross and the words “In the cross of Christ I glory”—a gift from the widow of a pastor who kept it in his office. I go for days without noticing it, but then I see it again, remember my friend, and am reminded that I’m a child of God, called to be a pastor, blessed beyond measure.

As those photos testify to a family’s love, so that plaque gives witness to a friendship and to God’s love. And as my wife tells the story of family, we pray that our lives tell the story of God’s love, in the hope that our children and grandsons will know the comfort of both family and faith.

**God, may my life in matters great and small
bear witness to you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Parents who pass on the faith

Psalm 93; Mark 16:19-20

Ascension of Our Lord

They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (v. 11)

The disciples had just heard Jesus say, “You will receive power . . . and you will be my witnesses” (v. 8). Now they stand “looking up toward heaven,” until two men ask why.

Sometimes I find it easier to focus on heaven than on the messy, broken world. I love worship and Bible study but spend less energy on making life better for my neighbors in practical ways. Does that mean I’m not giving witness to Jesus?

Maybe there are different ways to bear witness. You may be more comfortable shopping for elderly neighbors than bringing them communion. Maybe you feel called to fight for justice, but studying the threads of God’s justice in scripture isn’t your “thing.”

Sent by Christ into the world, we bear witness in countless ways: serving and giving, studying and worshiping. Maybe the disciples, staring up into heaven, were pondering what their unique form of witness would be. Soon enough, the Holy Spirit would show them—and us.

God, give me courage to live my faith.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Family and friends
who encourage us each day

Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

Matthias, Apostle

The lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (v. 26)

If you were asked to name a disciple of Jesus, Matthias might not be the first to come to mind. This passage in Acts is the first we hear of him, and the last as well.

To determine who should replace Judas among the disciples, the church prayed and cast lots. Today when the church chooses someone for a leadership role, we pray and vote. Either way sounds risky. But it's really not. Both Barsabbas and Matthias were qualified and faithful.

No magic. No audible voice from heaven. Rather, a very human church, guided by the Holy Spirit, doing the work necessary to continue the ministry of Jesus.

Matthias reminds me of myself. Maybe he reminds you of yourself. Ordinary people, chosen by God and claimed in baptism to let our light shine, doing the best we can. Like Matthias, you go about quietly doing good, making a difference. You may think nobody notices. But God notices. And the people you help do too.

When you think about it, that's *not* so ordinary!

God, thank you for choosing me through baptism to be your disciple. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Bishops in the ELCA

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

Right and wrong

**He will prove the world wrong about sin
and righteousness and judgment. (v. 8)**

I have forgotten a bunch of stuff I was taught at seminary, but pieces have stuck with me. One such word of wisdom is about the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. The Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us and brings us to faith. So if we have faith in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit has accomplished it.

Today in John's gospel, we listen to what Jesus has to say about three things the world is wrong about: The world is wrong about sin. Sin does not define you. Your identity is not sinner. Your identity is child of God.

The world is wrong about righteousness. Righteousness is not something we achieve. It is a gift from God to you. You are right with God because God makes it so.

And the world is wrong about judgment. Death, the ruler of this world, does not have the final word. Good Friday does not have the final word. God's promise is Easter. God's promise is life.

**Holy Spirit, thank you for opening our minds
and hearts to hear and receive Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Seminary teachers and staff

Deuteronomy 34:1-7; Psalm 47



Seventh Sunday of Easter

**... so that they may have my joy
made complete in themselves. (v. 13)**

Today we encounter Jesus' prayer for his disciples, which proclaims that they, God, and Jesus himself are inseparable. This is a powerful truth. Yet when I read this prayer, I feel as if I am setting off on a merry-go-round. The words begin their journey, swirl around in my brain, and then show up again, repeating much of what was already said. Jesus' prayer seems to reflect an old maxim for preachers: tell your listeners what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.

But there is a phrase, so *that*, that tells us we're changing position while we swirl around, just as a spiral does. Jesus asks God to protect his disciples "so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 11), and "so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves." He's telling us that we, the spiral's passengers, move around and upward, growing in unity and joy with God and each other. These are indeed powerful truths.

**Thank you, Lord Jesus, for making us one with you
and the ever-creating God. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Preachers

Psalm 1; Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13

Sharing grace

**You hold me in your heart, for all of you
share in God's grace with me. (v. 7)**

When COVID-19 struck, isolation was traumatic for many. Many jobs disappeared; loved ones were banished from our presence; video chats, phone calls, and even online worship replaced in-person connection.

Imprisonment is another form of isolation. The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison. Friends of mine who have been in prison say being isolated from the world and emotionally distanced from others is awful. How could Paul, as a prisoner, remain thankful, joyful, and hopeful? He knew God was his witness and Jesus' compassion his companion. What's more, the Philippians shared God's grace with him, held him in their hearts, and partnered with him in the gospel during his time of isolation.

So too in our time do we share God's grace in a million ways. May we encourage those who live in loneliness, distress, and fear. And when we feel isolated and in need, may we sense our partners in the gospel holding us in their hearts.

**Help us realize, Jesus, that we can be there
for the hurting no matter what. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in any kind of isolation

Exodus 28:29-38; Psalm 115

At three a.m.

**The LORD has been mindful of us;
he will bless us. (v. 12)**

Some nights at three a.m. I lie awake and try to find answers for pandemics, dementia, and other forms of human suffering. Who do I think I am—someone who can take on these horrific situations and fix them myself? I must think I am God. I shout “Stop!” (in my mind, because my husband is sleeping). Then I let the Holy Spirit turn me back to God, who is so mindful of us that God chooses to be with us even amid life’s deepest struggles.

Perhaps part of God’s answer to pandemics, grave illnesses, injustice, and other problems that feel insurmountable is for us to be mindful of others, and to use God’s blessings to be a blessing to others. At three a.m. what I *can* do is think of some ways to do that: wear a mask in public, love and care for my husband who has dementia, educate myself about how to be anti-racist, and so much more. I pray that God will continue to show me such responses—at all hours—and that as I do what I *can* do, others will sense that God is mindful of and blesses them.

Gracious God, thank you for your patience when we get full of ourselves. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those focused only on self

Numbers 8:5-22; Titus 1:1-9

What can we ask for?

**If you ask anything of the Father in my name,
he will give it to you. (v. 23)**

For years I picked up kids for church in our well-worn church van. All of these kids lived below the poverty line. The phrase “I sure want” often rang out as we bounced along: “I sure want that car.” “I sure want those shoes.” “I sure want to live there.” What they wanted was a car so mom and dad could get to work, shoes that fit and weren’t hand-me-downs, and a safe neighborhood.

Jesus tells us to ask and we’ll receive. Like the kids, we adults have our list of things that we sure want to have: “I sure want the tests to be negative.” “I sure want to keep my job.” “I sure want to stay in my home.” God understands that all of us want shelter, clothing, economic stability, and a life without fear.

How does God respond when we cry out? God, like a midwife, helps us move through the pain of our heartfelt yearnings and gifts us with the Spirit’s power to work for well-being and wholeness for everyone. Just so is our joy complete.

**In your name, Lord Jesus, we ask that you would
strengthen us to work for justice and peace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who live in poverty and fear

Ezra 9:5-15; Psalm 115

The power of unfailing love

**Let your steadfast love, O LORD,
be upon us. (v. 22)**

I listened as my friend spoke of the difficulties her adult child and grandchild faced as part of living with autism. While the abilities and experiences of people on the autism spectrum vary widely, some are viewed and treated negatively by others and experience social anxiety and emotional suffering. My friend's heart was heavy with the challenges her loved ones dealt with personally and in society.

What could she do? My friend sighed and said, "All I can do is love them." And she does so, unfailingly. We know that God, too, loves them steadfastly—as God loves us all. In Hebrew that kind of love is called *hesed*. It's a concept difficult to translate into English, but we use words like *steadfast love*, *mercy*, *grace*, and *lovingkindness*. It's the kind of love my friend has for all her family members, including those with special needs. In witnessing such powerful love among people, we glimpse the steadfast love of God hailed in Psalm 33.

**Thank you, God, for your *hesed*,
accepting us in our uniquenesses
and supporting us in our needs. Amen.**

Prayer concern: For greater acceptance in society
for people with special needs

Genesis 2:4b-7; 1 Corinthians 15:42b-49

The gift of salvation

**But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ. (v. 57)**

Has someone ever asked you, "Am I saved?" I was asked that a number of times when I served a community of men who were homeless, were addicted to drugs, and had criminal records. I understood their anxiety because others were telling them that they were going straight to hell. When they asked me, I would answer, "Salvation is God's business, not mine. What I can tell you is that God loves you like crazy, right now and always."

The Roman followers of Jesus wondered what would happen to them when they died. They had argued about whether or not they would be saved. The apostle Paul gave them beautiful assurance. The men I served weren't always satisfied with mine.

How hard it is to realize that God's grace saves us—and everyone else. None of us save ourselves. As hard as it is to believe sometimes, we are invited to trust in the victory God gives us through Jesus Christ, and to share the assurance of that gift with others.

**Lord Jesus, help us to live for others,
not for ourselves. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who live in fear of hell

Job 37:1-13; Psalm 33:12-22

Water and more water

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me. (v. 37)

I am a water guzzler. I toss down eight glasses of water or more every day. My doctor loves that I do that. I love it even more. There aren't many times when I am genuinely thirsty, with no relief in sight. I am a privileged person to have such access to clean drinking water.

Do you remember those weary Israelites following Moses in the desert? When they realized there was neither water nor food there, they let Moses have it. It wasn't a pretty picture. Then God stepped in. Food fell from the skies and water gushed out of a rock.

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me," Jesus invites the crowd on the last and greatest day of the Festival of Booths in Jerusalem, where they celebrated how God, through Moses, had met their ancestors' needs in the desert. Now Jesus invites them—and us—to receive more than nature's H₂O. He proclaims *living* water that will quench our thirst for the living God and flow from our hearts to others thirsting for God's love, joy, and peace. May we drink this living water deeply every day.

Jesus the Christ, move us to share your living water with everyone, every day, wherever we go. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those spiritually thirsty or lacking safe water to quench physical thirst

Exodus 15:6-11; Psalm 33:12-22



Day of Pentecost

You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. (15:27)

What a day of joy Pentecost is! Many congregations celebrate by wearing red, the color of fire and symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Worship may incorporate dancing and multiple languages. As Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit to all, I picture him with a huge smile.

In the Greek used by John, the evangelist, Jesus introduces the Spirit of truth with the word *parakletos*, meaning Advocate, counselor, guide, helper. The Spirit of truth, says Jesus, aware that his death is imminent, will “guide you into all truth” (16:13). Whatever would happen to the flesh-and-blood Jesus, the Holy Spirit would be his disciples’ constant companion—and ours.

We can’t keep this news to ourselves! Would you keep the news of a child’s birth to yourself? No! With the coming of the Spirit, the church is birthed as a new reality of love and peace. We are called to testify in all that we do to the joyful news that the Spirit of truth is among us—our Advocate, counselor, helper, and guide. Alleluia!

Spirit of truth, thank you for being our guide to God’s truths for this world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Professional counselors and helpers

Psalms 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27

Jesus and me?

**To each is given the manifestation
of the Spirit for the common good. (v. 7)**

The congregation where I had grown up asked me to preach for its one hundredth anniversary. I love this church. When I preached, I talked about how being a community in Christ had carried us through times of challenge and celebration. I said that we are bound together as Jesus' body to love, serve, and grow in grace. Then the choir sang a closing song. Though surely it was well-intentioned, the message proclaimed in the anthem was that, after all, it's just Jesus and me.

That's the temptation, isn't it—Jesus and me? “If I could reduce my life in Christ to the two of us,” we think, “things would be easier.” Then perhaps we slide to another thought: “I must be closer to Jesus than others.” Oops. Paul wrote to a gathering of Jesus' followers who were arguing about the gifts of the Spirit—who had them, who didn't, and which gifts were better than others. It was to them that he proclaimed that each of us is given the Spirit for the good of the entire community. It's *not* Jesus and me. It's Jesus and all of us!

**Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of your Spirit,
which binds us together for the benefit of all. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are lonely

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Joel 2:18-29

A body divided

**If one member suffers,
all suffer together with it. (v. 26)**

Paul proclaims that our baptism makes us part of one body—Christ's. The metaphor is elegant: The body of Christ can be understood like our physical bodies. All parts work together for the “common good” (v. 7) and are vital to each other. In fact, Paul says, parts we might not consider strong or presentable or impressive, we must honor and care for.

We often think of a “member” as someone in our congregation who is “in,” compared to those who are “unchurched” or have not joined our congregation. But the Greek word translated “member” also means “limb” or “part.” Paul writes about limbs and eyes and even weaker body parts as valuable and integral to one another.

Jesus says in Mark 3:25 that a house divided against itself cannot stand. True too of bodies, such as if the immune system misperceives part of the body as infectious and attacks it. When we create divisions in the body of Christ, we all suffer together.

Christ calls us instead to thrive together as his body, united for the sake of the world.

**Christ Jesus, help us honor and value everyone
as integral parts of your body. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are excluded

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

Locked in fear

**As the Father has sent me,
so I send you. (v. 21)**

As I write, I'm sheltering at home for fear of COVID-19. I'm scared I'll get it, scared I'll give it. I stand on my balcony and look out over a city where people are "locked" in their homes as I am. Fear is an awful companion when the doors are locked.

The disciples huddled together as Easter evening came. They had locked the doors of their hiding place because they were scared of being arrested and killed. But their fear and those locks didn't stop Jesus. The text says simply that he "came and stood among them" (v. 19). And he brought gifts. He breathed peace on them and announced a mission for them. Jesus sent them just as he had been sent. Both gifts freed them to unlock the doors and go.

"So I send you" was meant for us too. If it is not safe for us to go physically, we can love our neighbors through phone calls or email, letters written or groceries ordered for someone. Fear need not be our sheltering companion. Our true companions are peace and mission in Jesus' name.

**Jesus our Christ, invade our fears
with your peace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those living with anxiety

Psalms 104:24-34, 35b; Ezekiel 37:1-14

Condemnation?

**[We] walk not according to the flesh
but according to the Spirit. (v. 4)**

“There is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1). *What?* We’re not condemned? That’s not what I was taught growing up when the fourth-century concept of “original sin” was emphasized in my faith tradition.

What does “those who are in Christ Jesus” mean? Only people who meet certain criteria? No, it means *everyone*: “God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16), and “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set [us] free from the law of sin and of death” (v. 2). These first verses of our reading could inspire us for the rest of our lives. But there’s more!

Because of Christ, we are now called and reminded to “walk . . . according to the Spirit.” Life and peace are our guides. We strive to love our neighbors as ourselves without exception. We set aside social structures that condemn some and empower others. We follow Jesus’ way of the cross—of self-giving. For the Spirit is our reality. Amen.

**Almighty God, help us set and reset
our minds on the things of the Spirit,
through Christ Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel condemned by God

Psalms 29; Isaiah 1:1-4, 16-20

Living with the Spirit

**[God] will give life . . . through his Spirit
that dwells in you. (v. 11)**

My husband Tim is living with dementia. We talk about it, and name it to others. Some think we shouldn't. I recall how some in earlier generations called cancer "The Big C" and didn't like to name it to their sick loved ones: "We don't want them to know," they whispered. But often those who are sick do know, deep down inside. Tim, for instance, knows that his brain is changing. Naming this reality lets others accompany us as he slips and slides away.

And know this: Tim is *living* with dementia. The Spirit of the living God falls afresh on him every day. Tim's love and joy, kindness and generosity, silliness and thoughtfulness bless us. So too his faithfulness. Gathering for worship is bewildering for him, but his face glows when he receives the body and blood of Christ. He pauses to celebrate, and friends around him bask in his joy. We can see that the Spirit of God dwells in him, dementia and all, and we rejoice.

I rejoice too that the Spirit of God dwells in you.

**Holy God, who raised Christ from the dead, help us
celebrate your Spirit in all of your children. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Caregivers and care receivers

Psalm 29; Isaiah 2:1-5, 16-20

God's voice

**The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders. (v. 3)**

I am certain I heard the voice of God whispering to me one day. I was walking through the woods and complaining about the ineffectiveness—in my humble opinion—of a colleague's ministry. I just couldn't let it go, like a dog hungered over a bone. Then God's voice intervened. I wish it had said, "You're so right. You'd better do something about this." But it didn't. Instead it whispered, "Leave him alone." What? The whisper came again: "Leave him alone." Relief swept over me. I could unclench my teeth and let go.

Have you ever sensed God speaking to you? Was the message more along the lines of "Well done, good and trustworthy servant"? I hope so. But whatever the message, we do want God's voice to be part of our lives. While the people of Israel listened for God's voice in the tumult of a storm, we hear it invading the anxiety and injustice of our time. God's voice can whisper or thunder. Be still and listen. Know relief. God is here.

**Listening and speaking God, thank you
for hearing us and being the voice of peace
for our troubled minds. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Disaster relief workers

Isaiah 5:15-24; John 15:18-20, 26-27



The Holy Trinity

A Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews . . . came to Jesus by night. (vv. 1-2)

I'm jealous. I wish I could have shown up where Jesus was staying and had a discussion with him about God, the universe, and other things. I am certain I would have understood everything! Well, maybe not so much.

I do think Jesus wanted to enlighten Nicodemus, who had traveled through Jerusalem's streets by night to see him. Equally, I believe that Jesus wanted to be in relationship with this Pharisee, as he does with all of us. Had I been there, I imagine I too would have cried out in amazement, "How can these things be?" (v. 9). And with Nicodemus, I would emerge changed by this conversation with my rabbi and friend.

Our relationship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is at the center of our lives, though the mystery of the Trinity surely boggles our brains. What is key is that God loves Nicodemus and us. The God who created, redeemed, and sanctifies us invites us into relationship as Jesus did Nicodemus, shining light on our unknowing.

**Interwoven Trinity, thank you for drawing me
into your dance of love and light. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Teachers of theology

Psalm 29; Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17

Visit of Mary to Elizabeth

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

The newly pregnant Mary took a three- or four-day trip to be with Elizabeth, her relative. At Mary's arrival, Elizabeth's own pregnant belly wriggled with joy, for with Mary came the tiny bit of life who would be revealed as the Messiah. Elizabeth was filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. Two Spirit-led women, one suspiciously pregnant, another who had been shamed by barrenness, were being used by God to turn the world upside down: Elizabeth's son would prepare the way for the Son of God who was growing in Mary's womb.

It's easy to think that the only role of these two women was to be a place of nurture for two cells to grow into billions. But there is more. Elizabeth was a prophet. She recognized that the child Mary was carrying was her Lord. She was also a blessing-giver, who praised Mary's trust in Gabriel's message and who proclaimed eternal blessing for Mary and Jesus.

These two women waited together for the birth of hope that their sons would bring.

**Faithful God, may we too be Spirit-led
and carry the hope of Jesus wherever we go.**

In his name we pray. Amen.

Prayer concern: Families anticipating childbirth

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

God's wisdom

I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. (v. 1)

When I was little, a family friend was lovingly referred to as "Sam the Junkyard Man." On his property, vast quantities of machine parts filled a long, domed shed. When Dad needed an obscure part, I'd tag along to Sam's to search. Invariably I too came away with some treasure.

Often that treasure was a bit of wisdom learned, like when Sam taught me how to estimate (quite accurately, I would add) how much daylight remains. Sam showed me how to hold my flat hand out as far as I could, palm facing me, with my forefinger just under the edge of the sun. Each digit is a quarter hour of sunlight remaining. Since I had much smaller hands than Sam's thick mitts, I've always kept just a little space between the fingers. I've used this wisdom on countless occasions in my life, which is more than I've used some things I learned in school! It got me home safely before dark and kept me out of trouble. How Sam taught was probably how faith is best spread—simply and quietly.

Jesus, help me to spread the wisdom of faith in simple words and gentle deeds. Amen.

Prayer concern: Teachers and learners

Exodus 25:1-22; Psalm 20

Reflecting Christ's light

**Is a lamp brought in to be put under
the bushel basket . . . and not on
the lampstand? (v. 21)**

Have you ever wondered what Jesus would think of the taboo against discussing religion or politics in polite company? Based on this chapter of Mark's gospel, I would guess probably not much. Jesus' words of challenge here follow four rapid-fire parables he taught in what seems to have been a bit of an exasperated tone.

In the US, the separation of church and state enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution has often been misinterpreted to mean that our faith shouldn't affect our politics. (The "establishment clause" protects religions, especially minority ones, from government interference and favoritism.) If Christ shines within us, discipleship is the reflecting of that light into the world's many dark places. The faith we know, the God we love, the discipleship we practice—this light can and should shine brightly in all aspects of our lives and should inform all our decisions, including political ones. We have endless opportunity to practice faith!

**Jesus, let our belief become action to reflect
your light in all that we say and do. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who serve in elected office

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 20

Living as if the end is near

**The end of all things is near;
therefore . . . maintain constant love
for one another. (vv. 7-8)**

When friends have died unexpectedly, I've often wondered how knowing that day would be their last might have changed how they lived it. Most of us would probably do less crabbing at the people we love. Maybe we'd get our affairs in order or wear socks without holes if we knew we would be toes-up in an emergency room. Maybe, as legend has it that Martin Luther said, we'd plant a tree.

People of faith have always been called to live in the knowledge that life is precious, that each day should be lived as if it were our last. I appreciate the reminder from this text to "maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins" (v. 8). We are sure to err every day, including on our last. But love—specifically God's love—makes each day a fresh start. Let us live each day for the gift that it is.

**God, whatever each day brings, help us live it
with gratitude and in love. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those facing the end of their days

Psalm 130; Isaiah 28:9-13

In heights and depths

**Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice! (vv. 1-2)**

We can be traversing through life so happily when one unexpected event makes us feel like we stepped off a cliff. At a point in my life when prayer was hard, I kept coming back to this psalm because no words were coming to me. I had been blindsided by an event that made my soul ache. When I read the words of the psalmist, I thought, “Yup, there I am.” Reading it reminded me that the faithful have always cried out to heaven for assurance and hope during difficult times.

I love how the psalms—likely used originally for individual and corporate worship—don’t hold back. If you’ve experienced an emotion, there’s a psalm for that. Hatred, anger, joy, fear, anxiety—none of them are sugar-coated in the psalms. Can you tell what the writer of Psalm 130 was feeling? As in life, it wasn’t one straightforward emotion: despair, humility, and hope are in these words. What range of emotions will you feel today? How will you express them to God?

**God, in all things, help us look to you
for hope. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are struggling
with life’s challenges

Deuteronomy 1:34-40; 2 Corinthians 5:1-5

Just add manure

**Some [seed] fell into good soil,
and when it grew, it produced
a hundredfold. (v. 8)**

The parable of the sower reminds me of moving to Phoenix, Arizona, for my first pastoral call and trying—and failing—to start a garden in my desert yard. I've learned about good dirt since then. Later, when we moved to the wetter midwestern United States, we built a compost bin. I'm amazed at how you can throw rotting food, paper bits, coffee grounds, and even manure in, turn it over, and over time it becomes rich, black dirt.

It's easy to read this parable and try to categorize people as good soil or trampled, rocky, or thorny ground. But more likely, we are all a combination of all those things. At different moments, we are receptive to God's word and bear fruits of faith—reflecting God's love to others, feeding the sheep, seeking the lost, and so on. But God doesn't give up on us when we are rocky or thorny. I am convinced that the messiness and manure of our lives can actually, in time and with God's help, turn into the best soil.

**Jesus, turn my challenges into fertile soil so I may
receive your word and produce good fruit. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those whose work contributes
to the food supply

Genesis 2:4b-14; Psalm 130



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 10

**If a house is divided against itself,
that house will not be able to stand. (v. 25)**

Jesus often said abrasive things that we know were not universally appreciated. In the reading for today, he doesn't seem to hold back.

As a pastor and as a Christian, I try to follow Jesus' example of not being afraid to say things that may be difficult to hear. Too often people consider worship as only a time to be comforted, and pastors as only bearers of niceties. But our faith should also challenge us, perhaps sometimes even shock us. Preaching and discipleship should include saying—and doing—the hard things that align us with the breaking-in of the kingdom of God.

It's no small challenge; if people don't like what they hear, they sometimes leave the church and don't come back. But it is our worthwhile endeavor as people of faith to discern a path through a complicated world together.

**God, grant me courage and faithfulness when
called to say and do difficult things. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who have
experienced discrimination

Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

Holding on to hope

**Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the earth. (v. 12)**

I've noticed that when I listen to a song while walking or running, the music changes my cadence. As if part of a cosmic marching band, I fall into step. It's no wonder that something like Psalm 74, likely written for private or public worship, can similarly change the cadence of our thoughts. Though psalms that express frustration, lament, and anger aren't always easy to read, they certainly remain relevant. They invite an open assessment of our own feelings regarding the world and events around us.

This psalm is a collective cry for help amid difficult events. It asks God to remember the people after destruction, then recalls God's saving history, and finally lands firmly on hope for the future. In difficult times, this psalm can help change the cadence of our thoughts as we too remember God's saving promises and are filled with hope and courage for what lies ahead.

**God, even when the world seems fraught
with destruction, fill us with your hope. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who have lost hope

1 Samuel 16:14-23; Revelation 20:1-6

Holy trouble

**When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him,
“Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” (v. 17)**

With my parents' cautious blessing when I was fourteen, I began a search for my biological family. Though I learned in time that my birthmother had died of leukemia a few years after my birth, I found her parents when I was seventeen. What a gift they were for us to know. My grandfather was a Lutheran minister and, as someone recently remarked to me, was a legendary peacemaker. His life and work were a testament to the God of justice; he stood for the underdog and spoke on behalf of the good of humanity. But it often put him at odds with popular opinion and the powers-that-be. As Ahab called the prophet Elijah, he was a “troubler.” It was usually difficult to stand up against the tide, but neither Elijah nor my grandfather would be silenced.

Where would the world be without those voices that rise up against the crowd, challenging us to seek a better way?

**God, help us to speak the unpopular,
prophetic word, to be troublemakers
in the name of Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who speak difficult truths

Psalm 74; Revelation 20:7-15

A kingdom divided

Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. (v. 17)

Besides equipping people with the instant ability to win an argument with an obscure fact found online, an unintended consequence of the internet and social media is a documented increase in polarization among people. Like propaganda leaflets dropped in twentieth-century wars, an insidious dropping of false information does damage to us as a society. Why? A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

Of course, we will never be totally unified when it comes to political opinions (or any other opinion, for that matter), but if we are united in God's love, should the rest matter as much? If we fully focus on mutual love and concern for the common good, misinformation disseminated through cyberspace and otherwise will fall on deaf ears. No difference of opinion is more powerful than the strength of God's love. Let us seek to live as God's children and to see the rest of humanity through the eyes of the Creator of us all.

Gracious God, when we struggle to find common ground, unite us in your love. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those working to address climate change issues

Psalm 74; Isaiah 26:16–27:1

Mindful of mortals

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? (v. 6)

When I was a child, homes in my neighborhood were filled with older people. There were no kids my age, but I had many playmates. The gentleman next door took me on his walks that always ended at the ice cream shop. On his tar and chip driveway, he'd mention that he must have a hole in his pocket because he'd lost some change. I'd spend hours looking for pennies and dimes he'd dropped intentionally. A neighbor outfitted in an A-line dress, heels, and pearls played catch using bushel baskets and invited me in for cookies and checkers after school. Her husband tossed me in the air when I ran to him.

How their kindness shaped me! From them I learned that the way we treat those we could just as well ignore is a reflection of our faith. We are all just tiny specks of dust existing for a moment on the breeze of the universe, yet we are infinitely loved by our Creator. May we likewise value all the children and vulnerable among us.

Jesus, help us to see and value the young and vulnerable among us as you did. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who mentor children

Genesis 3:14-24; Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

Barnabas, Apostle

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (13:3)

The first verse of Acts 13 is a roll call of leaders of the new church in Antioch. It's easy to gloss over a list of names, but there's something worth noting here. Barnabas, who is celebrated on this day, was first encountered in Acts 5: he sold a field and used the proceeds to support the early church. Later he was sent from the church in Jerusalem to Antioch to investigate news that they were welcoming Greeks into what had previously been a Jewish-only band of believers. Indeed he found it to be so and encouraged this new practice.

The other names here reflect an impressive diversity of backgrounds—including skin color, as Simeon's nickname suggests. (*Niger* in Greek would be translated “dark in color” or “black.”)

The ministry of evangelism at its best involves working alongside people from a variety of places, backgrounds, experiences, socioeconomic strata, and languages. For Christ's mission, diversity is strength.

**Jesus, help us recognize all people
as children of God and rejoice in the diversity
of your church in mission. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Local evangelism committees

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

Give thanks always

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High. (v. 1)

When I visit people who are sick or dying and offer a prayer, I begin with words giving thanks for this day. Someone asked me once why I give thanks for a day that may very well be the last one for the person for whom I am praying. A fair question.

My answer is that I believe each day is a gift filled with promise—specifically, God’s promise. God is faithful through our struggles, our suffering, our life, and our death. Amazing moments of clarity and wonder often happen in the last days of life. For instance, with my father’s last breath, he sat bolt upright with his arms in the air like a toddler wishing to be picked up, despite a traumatic brain injury, paralysis, and a dislocated shoulder. I smile as I imagine who scooped him up on the other side of this life. Yes, it is good to give thanks to the Lord—this and every day.

**God, help us to appreciate each of our days,
beginning to end. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who struggle with pain

2 Kings 14:1-14; Mark 4:1-20



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 11

With what can we compare the kingdom of God . . . ? It is like a mustard seed. (vv. 30-31)

Fifteen years ago, I wanted to leave parish ministry. Two tough calls had left me so burned out, I felt like I couldn't even pray. After a half-year break, my bishop asked if I would do a part-time interim. The congregation was feeling burned out too. I agreed to six months.

The church was small. I noticed that people apologized for not being able to have all the programmatic things a big church might have. But I also noticed that what it did, it did well: worship, education, responding to the needs of the community, caring for each other, and caring for the world. When a grandma called me needing help on Christmas Eve day, by worship that night we had gifts, groceries, new bedding, and a plate of cookies for children we'd never met.

Churches don't need to be big to be faithful. Small churches are a little bit like the mustard seed, germinating faith quietly and helping me keep mine. Fifteen years later, I'm still doing ministry with this dear little church.

**Jesus, inspire us in faith to do small things
with great love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Small churches

**Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; Ezekiel 17:22-24;
2 Corinthians 5:6-17**

No distinctions

**For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision
is anything; but a new creation
is everything! (v. 15)**

When the early church was figuring out how things should work, the matter of circumcision was one of the big concerns. Since it was required for Jewish boys as infants and for male converts to Judaism, followers of Christ wondered if Gentile converts to Christianity should have to undergo this ritual. But Paul emphasized that righteousness before God comes through Christ, not through anything believers do or don't do. Circumcision would not be required.

What issues now are big concerns that mark some as in and others as out? The work of welcome and justice continues, breaking down the rules that have tiered and ranked God's children as well as false categories of righteousness and unrighteousness. Paul's words still resonate today, reminding us that we are all made equal before God by the cross of Christ.

**May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
be with all people today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who have felt excluded
from the church

Psalm 52; Ezekiel 31:1-12

God dwells with us

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. (21:22)

John's vision in Revelation imagines a new experience of God. He describes a city with no night, no gates, not even a temple—no need for a building for worship when living in God's very presence.

I recalled these verses as I shut for the last time the door of the home where I grew up. When my parents were gone, I faced the task of cleaning out the accumulations of two lives and selling the house. A few years after the final closing of that door, I still regularly dream I am back in the house I know like the back of my hand. These frequent dreams remind me that my parents are part of who I am even though they are physically gone. I am happy when my dreams take me home again, to wake feeling like none of it is so far away.

I suspect John's vision gave him a similar feeling and that he wanted to share his experience so all would know that God is near and is coming soon to make all things new. Indeed, God dwells with us now.

**God, help us know you are close,
and that your Spirit dwells with us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those caring for aging parents

Psalm 52; Jeremiah 21:11-14

Worthy of trust

**I trust in the steadfast love of God
forever and ever. (v. 8)**

“Liar!” I yelled at the TV during a live speech shown on multiple US channels. “No!” I moaned as I read about a beloved religious leader credibly accused of abusive sexual relationships.

Psalm 52 speaks truth to power. It calls out powerful liars, deceivers, and abusers. The psalmist models a better way, saying, “I am like a green olive tree in the house of God” (v. 8). The deceitful leader destroys. Like an olive tree, the psalmist produces good. The deceitful leader, rooted in riches, boasts. Like an olive tree with ancient, nurturing roots, the psalmist is sustained by faith, trusts in God, and gives God thanks and praise.

In our own circle of influence, we can use our power to expose what is wrong and do what is right. We can produce good, build up, and speak out. We can hold ourselves to a faithful standard, taking care with our words and deeds. Trusting in God’s steadfast love, we give God thanks and praise.

**Spirit of God, help me to do right and to right wrong.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Advocates for justice

Jeremiah 22:1-9; Luke 6:43-45

Farewell and Godspeed

**Paul sent for the disciples;
and after encouraging them
and saying farewell, he left. (v. 1)**

A layoff necessitated a new job and a move to a different state. After twenty-three years as members, we were leaving our beloved congregation. When the pastor asked to schedule the Sunday for a "Farewell and Godspeed" blessing, I hesitated. It was a painful time. I wanted to slip out, unnoticed.

"It's up to you, of course," she said. "I think, though, it would be good for you and good for the congregation if you did it." We did, and it was.

Led by the Spirit, Paul begins his final journey to Jerusalem with pastoral visits to encourage and comfort the beloved communities he will not see again.

For the precious and often painful times of saying goodbye, we are blessed with opportunities to encourage and comfort each other. We can help each other leave—and stay—in peace.

**O God, help me receive and offer comfort during
times of transition. In the name of Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People preparing to leave
a beloved community

Job 29:1-20; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

Giving thanks

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

Psalm 107 is a liturgy of thanksgiving. In worship, liturgy connects people—"the redeemed of the LORD" (v. 2)—to God and to one another. Liturgy is important. In the English NRSV translation of the Bible, "Give thanks" appears fifty-seven times and "steadfast love," 170 times. Giving God thanks for God's steadfast love is important.

Mindfulness *of* and thankfulness *for* God's steadfast love are spiritual muscles developed with practice. Spiritual exercise is like physical exercise: what seems difficult at first becomes easier, even second nature. It can help to exercise in a way you enjoy. Some ideas: engaging with *Christ in Our Home* or other devotions, participating in Bible study, keeping a gratitude journal, serving others, adding morning or evening prayer to your day, and paying attention to thankfulness and praise during Sunday worship. With praise and thanksgiving, it is important to connect to God and one another.

**O God, your faithful love is with me today and all
days. For this I offer thanks and praise. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Worship planners and planning

Job 29:21–30:15; Acts 21:1-16

Saving grace

They cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress. (v. 28)

Lightning pierced the sky around the airplane. Turbulence caused erratic dips and lurches. My colleague and I held hands, praying amid fear too deep for words.

Maybe you have experienced a time when you were sick, scared, or worried to death, when you cried out to God in desperation. And maybe, in that fearful time you had a deep experience of God's saving grace and were profoundly thankful.

Psalm 107 tells four versions of a four-part story: a perilous situation, cries or prayers for God's help, God saves, and a call to give God thanks and praise. I worry the formula is too tidy, for even with fervent and faithful prayer there can be tragic death.

Instead of a focus on our acts (prayer) and God's reaction (saving), it may help to focus on God's acts (saving) and our reaction (thanks and praise). In messy, difficult times, may we experience God's steadfast love and saving grace and be moved to give thanks and praise.

**O God, for your steadfast love and saving grace,
I give thanks and praise. In Christ's name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People living in fear

Job 37:1-13; Luke 21:25-28



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 12

**Who then is this, that even the wind
and the sea obey him? (v. 41)**

A life-threatening storm on the sea rightfully terrifies the disciples. Being human, they are powerless to save themselves. Unlike yesterday's passage from Psalm 107, in which people cried to God for help, in this episode the disciples complain to Jesus: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (v. 38). The disciples do not yet recognize Jesus' divine saving power.

Jesus asks, "Have you still no faith?" (v. 40). Is that annoyance we hear in his tone?

Yet fortunately for the disciples and us, Jesus does not require faith to save. Jesus goes ahead and does what only God can do: he talks to water, commanding, "Peace! Be still!" And "the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm" (v. 39). The disciples "were filled with great awe" (v. 41).

Frightening situations can help us recognize the saving power and presence of Jesus. Often it is during life's storms that we can best experience God's awe-inspiring power, peace, and calm.

**Awesome God, thank you for your saving power
and comforting peace. In Christ's name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Disaster Response

**Job 38:1-11; Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32;
2 Corinthians 6:1-13**

Eat something

**Therefore I urge you to take some food,
for it will help you survive. (v. 34)**

“Here, eat a little something.” Such words can be a holy invitation. Making food to nurture, comfort, and encourage can be a holy service. Some holy suppers are brought to a sickbed or to the home of new parents or are served at a funeral lunch.

A violent storm pounded the ship carrying Paul, a prisoner headed to Rome, and 275 others. For days, fear, seasickness, and despair kept them from eating. Without sun or stars to guide them, they saw no way out. As the tempest raged on, they gave up all hope of being saved.

Guided by God’s Spirit and following God’s plan, Paul knew that everyone sailing with him would live. Just before daybreak on the fourteenth day, Paul urged the others to eat something, saying, “It will help you survive.” He then took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to eat. “Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves” (v. 36).

Sometimes eating is an act of faith and hope.

**Sustaining God, in times of despair and fear,
fill me with your peace. For Christ’s sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Ministries of hospitality and service

Exodus 7:14-24; Psalm 65

All will be saved

**And so it was that all were brought
safely to land. (v. 44)**

As Acts 27 begins, Paul is a prisoner on a large ship headed to Italy. He warns against setting sail (vv. 9-10). Unsurprisingly, the centurion, a Roman army commander, doesn't listen to Paul, a prisoner (v. 11).

For days, a storm pummels the ship. All onboard give up hope of being saved (v. 20). After reminding them, "You should have listened to me" (v. 21), Paul tells them that his God will grant safety to all on the ship with him (v. 24), the ship will run aground and be lost (vv. 22, 26), and to be saved, everyone must stay together (v. 31).

As Paul has predicted, the ship runs aground. As it breaks into pieces, soldiers plan to kill the prisoners before they can escape (v. 42). "But the centurion, wishing to save Paul," stops them (v. 43).

The centurion listened. The centurion trusted Paul and Paul's powerful, saving God. The centurion understood that for some to be saved, all must be saved.

**O God, let my words and actions witness to your
saving grace and love. In Christ's name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Prisoners and prison ministries

Exodus 9:13-35; Psalm 65

There was calm

**Then [Jesus] got into the boat with
[the disciples] and the wind ceased. (v. 51)**

When our daughter was young, a sudden and terrifying diagnosis rocked us like a boat in a storm. We were emptied of any notion of control or power over the situation. Usually full of self-reliance, we came to realize that this “emptying” gave us the space to recognize the presence and power of God. We were filled with calm.

Perhaps the disciples were in a similar boat. According to Mark, they had not understood the miracle of Jesus feeding more than five thousand people. Maybe the disciples were a little full of themselves. After all, Jesus had told them, “*You* give [the multitude] something to eat” (v. 37). And they did find the starter meal of five loaves and two fish.

The disciples did not, however, miss the miracle of Jesus walking on water. Perhaps this terrifying and astonishing sight gave them the space to recognize Jesus as God. Jesus gets in the boat with them and the wind ceases. There is calm.

**Thank you, O God, for your comforting presence
and saving power. You are always with me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People living with serious illness

Joshua 10:1-14; Psalm 65

John the Baptist

**If you have any word of exhortation
for the people, give it. (v. 15)**

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas are in the synagogue. They are invited to offer a “word of exhortation.” Paul rises to speak.

Exhortation suggests an urgent call to action, bold truth-telling, and tough love. As part of Paul’s exhortation, he tells how John the Baptist had urged people to prepare for a savior. Indeed, years before Paul’s ministry, “with many . . . exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news” (Luke 3:18): “Repent! Do right! Prepare for the Lord!” Today, six months before we celebrate Jesus’ birth, the church observes the lesser festival of John the Baptist. He would approve of the lesser billing (v. 25).

Exhortation is at the heart of preaching the good news of Jesus. The gospel, it is said, comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. The next time a sermon makes you uncomfortable, consider that you may be hearing needed exhortation: Repent! Do right! Love God and your neighbor!

**O God, help me hear and respond to your calls
to repentance and action. In Christ’s name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Bold preachers and leaders

Psalms 141; Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:57-80

Faithful giving

**We want you to excel also
in this generous undertaking. (v. 7)**

Many donors want to designate their giving for a specific use they can see. For example, they want to fund building a church, not pay for heating it. Donors often want to learn how they changed lives.

More is asked of faithful donors. They are asked to trust and give without restriction, to care less about *feeling* good about their giving and more about *doing* good through their gifts. For example, after a disaster, it might feel good to give teddy bears and clothes; it likely does greater good to give money to be used as response teams deem best. Faithful donors learn how people and communities used donations to change their lives.

Paul wants the wealthy in the Corinthian church to contribute to the financially poor church in Jerusalem. He does not want the wealthy to feel superior or the poor to feel shamed. He does not want the church in Jerusalem to feel less-than or beholden. In his invitation to give, Paul teaches faithfulness in giving and receiving.

**Spirit of God, inspire me to generously give as I am
able and to graciously receive as I need. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Generous giving and gracious receiving

Psalm 30; Lamentations 2:1-12

Identity and mission

**What have you to do with us, Jesus
of Nazareth? . . . I know who you are,
the Holy One of God. (v. 34)**

Jesus begins his ministry among the impoverished and oppressed people of Galilee. In his hometown, Nazareth, he claims his identity and mission with a reading from Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, [and] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [The Spirit of the Lord] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and . . . let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18).

Shortly after this, in a Capernaum synagogue, the faithful are astounded and amazed by the authority and power of Jesus. It is a demon, though, who names Jesus as "the Holy One of God." Jesus confirms this identity and affirms his mission by miraculously casting out the demon and freeing the man held captive by it.

In the name of Jesus, "the Holy One of God," we claim our identity and mission. Affirming our baptism, we make promises, including "to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed . . . and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth" (*ELW*, p. 236).

**Help and guide me, O God, as I grow in discipleship.
In the strong name of Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Dismantling systemic racism

Psalm 30; Lamentations 2:18-22



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 13

**Jairus . . . fell at [Jesus'] feet. . . . The woman . . .
fell down before [Jesus]. (vv. 22, 33)**

With desperate courage and faithful fear, a father and a woman come to Jesus for healing. The father falls at Jesus' feet and begs. The woman fights the crowd and her social station just to touch Jesus' cloak. There is no pride, no decorum, no well-crafted petition. Each prays with their posture, from their gut, and through their breaking heart.

After Jesus asked aloud, "Who touched my clothes?" (v. 30), the woman approached him "in fear and trembling" and "fell down before him" (v. 33). When their daughter is healed, the father and mother are "overcome with amazement" (v. 42). God's amazing grace and awesome power are fearsome.

It would be easy to reduce these two miracles to faith. After all, Jesus tells the woman, "Your faith has made you well" (v. 34), and tells the man, "Only believe" (v. 36). The healing miracles of Jesus, however, are less about the faith of the healed and more about the God-power and God-authority of Jesus the healer.

**O God, for Jesus' sake, hear my petitions
for healing. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Prayer ministers and ministries

**Psalm 30; Lamentations 3:22-33;
2 Corinthians 8:7-15**

Faithful and suffering

**I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eye grows dim through sorrow. (vv. 8-9)**

"During the bleak time," a dear and now-departed friend confided, "I would physically shake my fist at God. It was a comfort to realize being angry at God proved I still believed in God."

Night and day, our faithful, suffering psalmist prays to God (vv. 1, 9, 13). Still, there is no miraculous healing, no relief.

Friends abandon the psalmist, heaping on misery (vv. 8, 18). It still happens, all too often. It can be fearful and faith-testing to be around someone who doesn't get better.

If only the psalmist had a friend to lessen the emotional pain so the physical suffering would be easier to bear. If only.

I imagine my friend and the psalmist having a heart-to-heart conversation. My friend says, "I believe you. Your suffering is real. I don't believe God causes suffering. I believe God is with us in our suffering. I know God loves you."

O God, there is so much suffering and despair. Send your Spirit, send me, to comfort and console. Amen.

Prayer concern: People with mental illness

Leviticus 21:1-15; 2 Corinthians 8:16-24

Peter and Paul, Apostles

**I have fought the good fight, I have finished
the race, I have kept the faith. (v. 7)**

After the death of the first disciples and apostles, including Peter and Paul, whom the church celebrates today, early church leaders struggled with questions about faith, salvation, death, and life—questions like “What did it mean?” Someone stepped up and wrote the biblical books of 1 and 2 Timothy, attributing authorship to Paul. It was common in that era for followers of a key leader to lend the authority of their teacher to their words.

By framing 2 Timothy as Paul’s last words, the writer readies leaders to hear the exhortation to proclaim, convince, rebuke, encourage, and teach (2 Timothy 4:2). Using Paul as a model, the writer encourages church leaders to keep going, keep the faith, and know that God is with them (vv. 7, 17).

Some people write their own obituary, often with humor and humility, to interpret their life, witness to their faith, and encourage others. This too is a way to reflect on questions of “What did it mean?”

**O God, may my life be a witness to faith
and encouragement for others.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Congregational leaders

Psalm 87:1-3, 5-7; John 21:15-19; Acts 12:1-11

A perfect response

**The father of the child cried out,
“I believe; help my unbelief!” (v. 24)**

Jesus, Peter, James, and John return from the transfiguration mountaintop to find the other disciples amid a great crowd and much commotion. Jesus learns that his disciples had tried to heal a boy and failed.

Clearly frustrated with the disciples, Jesus speaks harshly to them. Then he asks to see the boy. The boy's father pleads, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us” (v. 22).

Jesus counters, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes” (v. 23).

The father immediately cries, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Given the slow-to-understand disciples, this perfect response likely surprises and encourages Jesus.

As followers of Jesus, sometimes we fail, and sometimes we get it right. We both disappoint and encourage. Like the father, we cry, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

O God, I believe; help my unbelief.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Prayer concern: Children and adults with disabilities

2 Kings 20:1-11; Psalm 88

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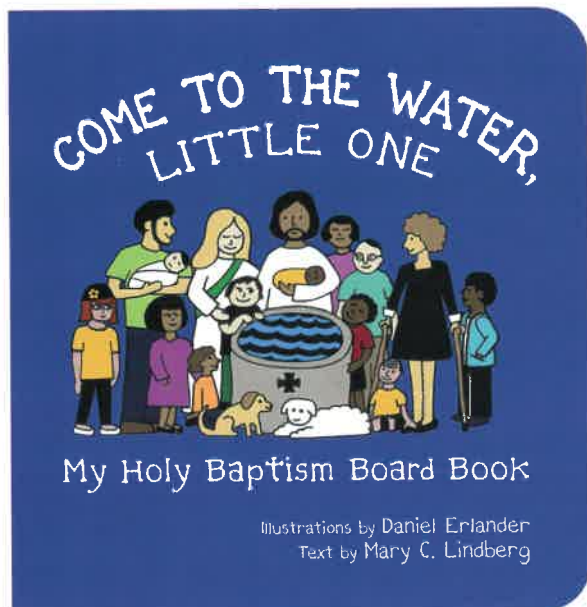
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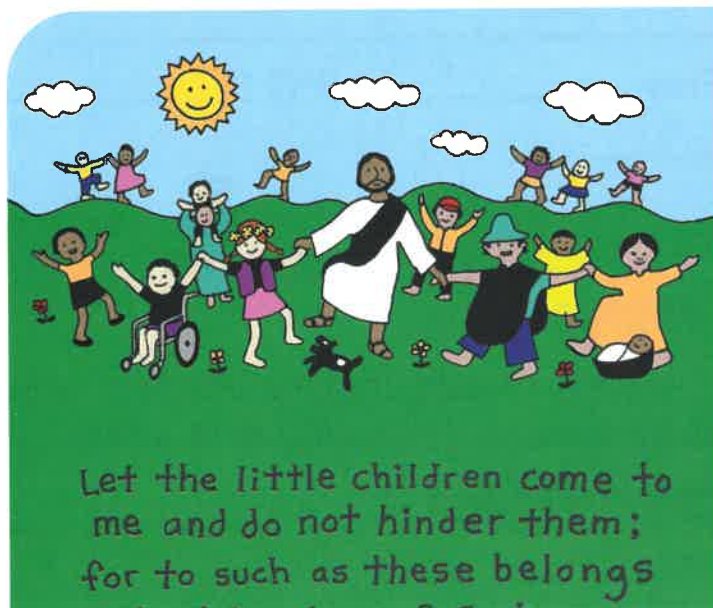


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