

THE WORD IN SEASON

Large Print Edition



January, February, March 2022

And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?

My hope is in you. (Psalm 39:7)

During the pandemic I bought a fiddle-leaf fig plant. Then one of the heart-shaped leaves developed a brown hole. Next, a leaf fell off. And then another. One by one, the leaves fell—until a single leaf remained. I searched online for answers. I asked my librarian. I changed how I watered the plant. I waited. Months later, a new leaf appeared. Then another. And another. Now my plant seems healthy.

I am often amazed at how God can bring new life to situations that appear hopeless. We heal. A rift is mended. New possibilities appear. As you read these devotions, look for messages of hope. Then consider your life: how is God renewing you?

—Pastor Rochelle Melander

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Name of Jesus

**And he was called Jesus, the name given
by the angel before he was conceived. (v. 21)**

Jesus was not an unusual name for a Jewish person. Jesus had the same name as Joshua in the Old Testament. The original name for both men, in Hebrew, is actually *Yeshua*, and it means “salvation.” The name Jesus was not merely a nice name; it was chosen for a reason, and it suited Jesus. Joshua and Jesus had much in common. Both had unshakeable faith. Both used that faith to help people.

Joshua trusted that God was faithful and announced to the people new life in a land that would become home. In the face of enormous obstacles Joshua saved his people. Jesus, too, saved people—all people. He announced and brought healing and liberation from the powers of sin and death. He died and rose again to bring salvation to all. He gives us new life and an eternal home.

When you call on Jesus in your prayers, remember the power that Jesus was given to forgive sins and give us a new life in this world and forevermore.

**Jesus, God of salvation, give me the courage
to hold fast to you in life and in death. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Downhearted people

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

Second Sunday of Christmas

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word
was with God, and the Word was God. (v. 1)**

This passage is a Christmas story, John's story of Christ's birth. John's gospel is different than the other three. John's Christmas story speaks of Jesus in human terms. But John also places Jesus' birth in the context of eternity. Jesus, truly God and truly human, was, is, and always will be.

John proclaims that in the beginning Jesus was—that he was with God and that he was God. Jesus came to live with us and to become one of us—to be fully human. Jesus loved us with the love God has had for us from the foundations of the world. And this Jesus who is fully God and fully human now loves us and gives us power to be children of God.

"Jesus loves me, this I know" is the way the children's hymn begins. John asserts that Jesus always has loved us and always will love us. That love is eternal. Only God can love us eternally. Christ's amazing love is beside us our whole lives and beyond.

**Jesus, love eternal, fill me with your love
in this world and the next. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lonely people

*Psalm 147:12-20; Jeremiah 31:7-14;
Ephesians 1:3-14*

The source of all wonders

**Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things. (v. 18)**

I'm not a scientist, but I'm in constant wonder at the natural world. Simply to look at that world is healing. God intended it that way. We experience healing in the gifts of God all around us—in beholding the wondrous creation of God. In spring where I live I marvel at the opening of buds and flowers. In summer the busyness of birds and animals keeps me enthralled. Even in the cold winter I look at the endless variety of snowflakes and experience awe.

From a college meteorology class I learned that if I look closely at how a snowflake is formed, I'll likely see something no one has seen before and never will again. Add God's deeds of Psalm 72, that God cares for us lovingly and intimately, and I am left dazzled. It's a relief to know that the one who made mountains and snowflakes, flowers and trees, and all creation also made me and cares for me. That knowledge alone helps renew my spirit.

**Creator God, open my heart and senses
to behold your greatness. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Frazzled people

Job 42:10-17; Luke 8:16-21

God's glory

**I am a man of unclean lips, . . . yet my eyes
have seen the King, the LORD of hosts! (v. 5)**

Isaiah 6 is one of the jewels of the Old Testament. It's an account of the prophet Isaiah when in a vision he was brought before God's throne. This and other encounters with God greatly enrich our understanding of God. Isaiah experienced sights and sounds that transformed his understanding of both God and himself.

Isaiah understood the "contradiction" that often arises when God is revealed to us. We're lifted up to behold God's glory, yet we realize our own unworthiness. But we also understand that God chooses to show us who God is and to use us to reveal God to others. As God is revealed to us, we discover God's glory and love and our unworthiness. Yet with that understanding comes the certainty that God seeks a bond with us and chooses to love us. We are loved indeed.

**God of power and glory, thank you for
calling me and revealing yourself to me. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: People feeling unworthy
of God's love***

Psalm 72; Acts 7:44-53

Redemption is ours

**For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him. (v. 11)**

When I hear the word *ransom* I think of movie kidnappings. In such stories, the family pays a ransom, and the kidnapped person often goes free. That's not a bad way to think of God's rescue of Israel and us. (The name *Jacob* stands for Israel the nation.)

In Israel's case, their temple and homes were destroyed, and they were taken captive into exile in Babylon. Three generations later, they came back to Israel to restore their destroyed temple and country. Jeremiah declared that God had redeemed Israel/Jacob, rescuing the people from arms "too strong for him" (v. 11).

We too, who have experienced the captivity of sin, look to God the redeemer. The powers of sin and death have oppressed us, so we cry out to God, who promises redemption and liberation. Christ Jesus proclaimed release to the captive and by his death and resurrection gives new life to us and to the world. Thanks be to God for our redemption and for the freedom that is coming.

I rejoice, O God, in the new life you give. Amen.

Prayer concern: People who feel trapped

Psalm 72; John 1:[1-9] 10-18

Epiphany of Our Lord

**“Where is the child who has been born
king of the Jews? For we . . . have come
to pay him homage.” (v. 2)**

Today is Epiphany. *Epiphany* comes from a Greek word meaning “appearance.” This day is called Epiphany because we celebrate that God was revealed in Jesus to the world—not only to the Jewish nation but to all the nations of the world. We celebrate today that God reached out to the magi in lands far east of Jerusalem. From the beginning Jesus was God’s revelation and God’s gift for the world.

In his ministry Jesus reached out to Gentiles multiple times, including a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28) and a Samaritan woman (John 4:4-26). But in this reading and on this day we are told that even as a child Christ Jesus was revealed to peoples from all nations as God’s promise for the world. Epiphany reminds us that we who have beheld God’s glory in Christ are sent to share Christ with the world (Matthew 28:19-20).

**Jesus Christ, light to all nations,
show me your truth. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Seekers of Christ

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

Growing in wisdom

**But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden,
which God decreed before the ages. (v. 7)**

When I was young I longed to be grown-up. I also longed to be wise. Now that I'm nearly sixty I may be grown up, but I still don't feel "grown-up." Nor do I feel particularly wise. But looking back I realize I'm wiser than I was as a child. Yet such wisdom (and any human wisdom, really) pales when compared to the wisdom of God as revealed in the Holy Spirit. One important reason we pray is so God can reveal such wisdom to us.

The Holy Spirit and the Spirit's wisdom often come to us over time. We seek God's wisdom and pray for God to reveal it. And we might wait and wait. But we can be certain that even now God is revealing the wisdom of the ages: Christ Jesus crucified for you is God's power and wisdom for us. God loves you and is revealing that love for you and for the world. We pray that God would send us out to reveal God's love to everyone.

**Divine wisdom, show me who you are
and who I am. Amen.**

Prayer concern: New Christians

Psalm 29; Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

The importance of relationship

**[There is] a time to embrace,
and a time to refrain from embracing. (v. 5)**

Some boundaries are limits we set on ourselves for ourselves: where we end and other people begin. Boundary setting can be the good work of a lifetime: truly defining who we are, what we are willing to do, and how we can most truly be ourselves as God blesses us and blesses the world.

Part of good boundaries is knowing when it's okay to ask a probing question or to touch someone. There is indeed a time to embrace and a time to refrain. The trick is to learn the difference. We should strive to be aware of others' feelings, lest we hurt others and even ourselves. If we don't know, we should ask others and respect the boundaries they set. We can ask God to guide our actions. Ecclesiastes says there's a time for everything under heaven. This is a way to talk about boundaries. We pray that God would help us guard and protect these boundaries, so that we might better love ourselves and our neighbors.

**God of love, teach me how to
truly love others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Unmindful people

Psalms 29; 1 Corinthians 2:11-16

Baptism of Our Lord

**“You are my Son, the Beloved;
with you I am well pleased.” (v. 22)**

Why do we get baptized? Because we were commanded by God and because God comes with promises. Declared forgiven and loved by God, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, the power of God. Why was Jesus baptized? For similar reasons: because it was necessary and God was sending him out, filled with the Holy Spirit. Crucial to Jesus' ministry from the start, this anointing and sending propelled him into the world.

But what about being cleansed from sin? Jesus was sinless, so there was no need for him to be cleansed in the waters of baptism. I believe his baptism was to show that Jesus was sinless. One of the worst sins we Christians might have is pride. False pride, thinking ourselves better than others, is perhaps the start of other sin. When we think we're better than others, we think we can do as we please. For Jesus to submit himself to baptism, though sinless, proved his humility. It showed that false pride wouldn't hinder the ministry of Jesus in any way. Small wonder, then, that God was pleased.

Jesus Christ, teach me your humility. Amen

Prayer concern: Prideful people

Psalm 29; Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17

The certainty of God's love

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

Not long ago I was talking to a young man. He was in his mid-twenties, and he was despairing because he hadn't yet found a loving relationship. The man was kind and brilliant in his own way. But he lacked the confidence to engage in conversation with others, so he seldom connected with another person, even in friendship.

I encouraged the man to pray, to pour out his heart to God, and also to reach out to God without words, in meditation. I was certain that when he prayed in these ways he would experience the love of God. God's love is greater than human love because it is more constant and faithful. Nothing, not even sin, keeps God from loving us. Once connected to God in love, we know we're lovable because God loves us. We're able to love and be loved by others.

**Source of all love, remind me of your love
so I know I am lovable. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel hopeless

Judges 4:1-16; Ephesians 6:10-17

Aligning to God's will

**If we ask anything according to his will,
he hears us. (v. 14)**

How I wish this scripture verse meant that I could have anything I ask for! But it's not so. To pray for something is more complicated than that.

To pray is to want something that God wants also. That sounds easier than it is. To align ourselves with God's will requires that we know God, and know what God wants. To know God and the will of God is the work of a lifetime.

Praying is complicated because life is complicated. We may know what God wants in general, but not what God wants *now*. God may make us wait, or at least it might seem like that.

It may also be that something good now will be even better for us later on. Or even that God gives what we ask but a little at a time or in ways we aren't aware of. All this (and much more) makes praying one of most challenging, yet rewarding, things we Christians can do.

**Ever-listening God, teach me
how to pray each day. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel God is silent

Psalm 106:1-12; Judges 5:12-21

Our inheritance as Christians

**“If a man dies, and has no son, then . . .
pass his inheritance on to his daughter.” (v. 8)**

Sometimes I work as a mediator for the state of Minnesota’s court system. I work with a lot of attorneys. When you ask an attorney a question, the most common answer is, “It depends.” And it’s true. What is fair often depends on many factors, not just a single one. That’s why we have laws based on actual cases, not just simple rules. That’s also why we Christians have an entire Bible of faith stories, not just the ten commandments. The stories of people in the Bible illustrate how to live a life of love and following the commandments—and what happens if we don’t.

Today we have a case where five daughters were for the first time given inheritance rights equal to men. God inspired Moses to change how things were done, the better to serve the people of God.

**God of justice, thank you for inspiring me to
change the injustice I see in the world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Attorneys and law clerks

Psalms 106:1-12; Luke 11:33-36

God, the animal lover

You save humans and animals alike, O LORD. (v. 6)

I'm a "crazy cat lady"—or at least a cat lady. We have five now. Besides my husband's and my love of cats, we decided early on that it would be good for our boys to learn to care for creatures more vulnerable than they. Similarly, I appreciate the words of Bradley Miller, founder of the Humane Farming Association: "Teaching a child not to step on a caterpillar is as valuable to the child as it is to the caterpillar."

Care for all living creatures is an important mark of the divine character. God's love and concern are poured out on all, not in proportion to our merits, abilities, or love for God but unconditionally, and for "humans and animals alike"—and plants and bodies of water and the air. God pronounced all creation good. During the flood God cared not only for Noah's family but for the animals. And God had compassion on the people of Nineveh—and also its "many animals" (Jonah 4:11).

Whether we are "pet people" or not, may we follow God's lead in caring for all of creation.

**God, thank you for your tender love,
even for animals, and even for me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Veterinarians and zookeepers

Jeremiah 3:1-5; Acts 8:18-24

The overarching principle of love

Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. (v. 7)

Today's reading doesn't translate well into present society. Spouses don't tend to think of ceding authority over their own body to their husband or wife. But Paul is responding to a particular community "concerning matters about which [they] wrote" to him previously (v. 1). If we write a letter or email to a friend or relative about a specific matter, we don't expect that same letter to apply fully to another loved one at a different time and place. With passages like this from Paul, we can instead put his general, overarching instructions to work in our lives.

In marriage, he says, each spouse has unique God-given gifts and should use them to look out for the other. For Paul to apply this guidance to both husband and wife is remarkable in a society that considered women subservient to men. Paul follows Jesus in valuing all people, lifting up the downtrodden, and calling us in all our relationships to put others' needs ahead of our wants.

Jesus, thank you for teaching me to practice self-giving love in all my relationships. Amen.

Prayer concern: Marriage counselors

Psalms 36:5-10; Jeremiah 3:19-25

Wandering children

**Return to me, . . . or else my wrath
will go forth like fire. (vv. 1, 4)**

“STOP!” my husband yelled, with a force in his voice we didn’t typically use with our kids. It worked. Our three-year-old halted just before running headlong into traffic. “Come here,” his dad continued, more calmly but still nonsense. “You need to stay with us. We don’t want you to get hurt.”

Perhaps God seems harsh in today’s reading. But consider another parenting story: My mom cried and hugged my two-year-old sister, then looked her in the eye and said, “Don’t ever wander off like that again. I don’t want to lose you!” Somehow, my sister had walked two blocks from home and gone inside a public building. It could have ended tragically. No wonder my mom was upset.

And no wonder God gets upset when Israel strays toward rulers and “gods” who don’t have their best interests at heart. No wonder our loving God calls forcefully to us sometimes too: “Stop! Come back here. My dear child, I don’t want to lose you.”

**God, thank you for always calling me
back to you and welcoming me
into your loving embrace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Missing and exploited children

Psalm 36:5-10; Luke 11:14-23

Second Sunday after Epiphany

**Standing there were six stone water jars . . .
each holding twenty or thirty gallons. (v. 6)**

When the wine runs out Mary calls on Jesus. This will be his first “sign,” but a mother knows. Initially he balks. But maybe he feels for the wedding host, who will be shamed by this *faux pas*. So Jesus quietly changes some 150 *gallons* of water to wine! In modern terms, at four ounces per glass that’s 4,800 servings! At a small affair in a culture that disdained drunkenness that’s way more wine than needed!

But John wrote theologically, not literally. Bible scholar William Barclay explains that Jews considered the number seven symbolic of completeness, so six water jars for purification rites indicated the incompleteness of the law. John wrote earlier: “The law . . . was given through Moses; grace . . . came through Jesus Christ”—and not just a little grace, but “grace upon grace” (1:16-17). Like gallons of delicious wine to gladden a gathering. Grace enough for everyone and to spare! And not just on one day long ago, but today, tomorrow, and forever.

**Jesus, thank you, more than words can say,
for loving me beyond all measure. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Couples preparing for marriage

Psalm 36:5-10; Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Holy hand-me-downs

**One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts. (v. 4)**

When I think of things passed from generation to generation, I think of words like inheritance, bequest, legacy. Another word for things, especially clothing, used and passed along is hand-me-downs. Kids who seldom get brand-new clothes because their older siblings' attire is "handed down" to them might not like that word. Yet my younger son loves wearing T-shirts he admired when his big brother wore them. That's the happy type of hand-me-down our focus verse calls to my mind.

I wouldn't be who I am had my parents and others not declared to me God's mighty acts and shown me how to wear the relationship of faith by wearing it themselves. I bet people have handed the Christian faith down to you too: teaching you by words and deeds what it means to love God and neighbor. That's both a happy and a holy hand-me-down!—one the giver doesn't have to stop wearing, and one you can pass along in turn.

**God, thank you for dressing me in the faith
with which you clothed countless people
before me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Garment workers

Isaiah 54:1-8; Romans 12:9-21

Confession of Peter

**[Jesus said,] “You are Peter, and on this rock
I will build my church.” (v. 18)**

A play on words enlivens this statement: in Greek, *Petros* is “Peter”; *petra* is “rock.” It’s like the name Rocky in English. But can a fallible human be the foundation of the church? Soon Peter flubs up so badly that Jesus calls him Satan! Ouch! The Old Testament uses rock imagery this way: “There is no Rock like our God” (1 Samuel 2:2). And in Jesus’ parable about building on sand or rock, the rock refers to his teachings.

Many believe Peter’s confession is the rock on which Christ will build the church. It’s key then to hear Jesus say, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (v. 17).

Maybe neither Peter nor his faith is the church’s foundation—indeed, Christ is—but Peter is the first human stone, after which many will be laid. In a letter named for him we read: “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into . . . a holy priesthood . . . through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). Now we can all be called Rocky!

**God, thank you for revealing the Messiah to
me. By your Spirit, increase my faith. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Construction workers and builders

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

Embracing the new

“New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.” (v. 38)

As the pandemic threat lessened, many pondered what the “new normal” would be: Would we go back to pre-COVID routines or retain changes made during the pandemic? In 2020 our local school held drive-up graduation, then the grads and their families drove through town as the community cheered. Commencement 2021 also featured a parade—a practice born of necessity, now embraced as a new tradition.

In today’s reading, Jesus uses metaphors for how the old must give way to the new. One replaces old wineskins with new for new wine; one dons a new garment rather than tearing off a piece of it to patch old clothing. Jesus’ new teachings about life in God call for new openness. His embrace of people society pushes aside calls us to new ways of thinking and living. Perhaps it takes something monumental to prompt us to embrace the new. Like the pandemic. Like God coming to us in person.

Jesus, help me to embrace the new life you offer and to share it joyfully with others. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those dealing with COVID-19

Psalm 145; Song of Solomon 4:9–5:1

Simply wise

**The decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple. (v. 7)**

In frustration have you said, “Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it!”? We often like rules that are clear-cut: yes or no, right or wrong. Sometimes we try to make rules to ensure that people do things as we think they should be done. Our rules become hurtful if we use them to choose who we include and who we exclude based on people’s behaviors or differences. Verse 12 reminds us that we often don’t see these errors in our rules or our faults in making them.

However, God’s decrees have no errors. God’s rules are perfectly wise, but they’re surely simple. God simply says to love God and love our neighbors (Luke 10:27). Challenging as loving our neighbors may seem, with God’s help, that’s simply it! That’s also wisely it. When we each love God and our neighbors, *everyone* is loved. Everyone’s needs are met. Everyone knows they belong.

**God of all wisdom, please help me
love you and love my neighbors so we
all know we belong. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who don’t know they belong

Isaiah 61:1-7; Romans 7:1-6

God's grace to you

**We have gifts that differ according to
the grace given to us. (v. 6)**

I waste a lot of time despairing in the valley of “would’ve, could’ve, should’ve.” While wandering aimlessly in that gloomy gorge, I also spend too much time envying other people’s gifts or abilities and their work or accomplishments. This isn’t productive and healthy for me or good for the community in which I live. Nor is this how our God wants me—or anyone—to use valuable time.

It’s grace that leads me out of this dismal valley of despair and wasted time. It’s God’s grace that forgives and forgets mistakes I’ve made—and we *all* know that sometimes we’ve made would’ve, could’ve, should’ve mistakes. It’s God’s grace that gives me my abilities—an assortment of gifts that are bundled together with a variety of God-given experiences. It’s God’s grace that makes me uniquely me. It’s through my bundle of uniqueness that God calls me into joyful, loving service. Into what exciting service is God’s grace calling the wonderfully unique you?

**Gracious God, lead me to use every gift
you give me in loving service among
all my neighbors. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People seeking to identify their gifts

Psalm 19; Nehemiah 2:1-10

Our heart's treasure

**[Jesus'] mother treasured all these things
in her heart. (v. 51)**

Jesus' parents mistakenly left him behind when they began travelling home. I get it! We also left our child behind when we each assumed she was with the other parent. Like Jesus' parents, we had "great anxiety" when we realized our child was missing. We, too, began searching. Similar to Jesus, our child once answered my worried calls by saying, "But I knew where I was." When we love someone, we have heartfelt pain when we're unsure of their whereabouts and safety. We also treasure in our hearts the joyful memories of our reunion and the reassuring words our loved ones speak.

Jesus' mother gives us a hint of how God feels about us, God's children. God is overjoyed by us. No matter how much Jesus' parents loved him or we love our family, it's *nothing* compared with God's love for us. We can treasure this in our hearts!

**Parent God, thank you for your infinite love
for me, which I always can treasure
in my heart. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Parents and children
who are estranged***

Psalm 19; Nehemiah 5:1-13

Third Sunday after Epiphany

**[Jesus said,] “Today this scripture
has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (v. 21)**

“They’re here! They’re home!” Have you joyously shouted those words as you welcomed home a friend or family member who had been away for a long time? Did you resume your conversations where you left off years ago? However, as you talked, did you discover that their experiences away from home had changed their insights? Perhaps now they spoke with authority, which can be confusing if we knew them as a child.

This happened to Jesus when he returned to his hometown, Nazareth. During a worship service, he read the prophet Isaiah’s words foretelling of a time when people would be liberated from oppression. After he read, Jesus declared that *in him* these words were fulfilled. Yet his listeners were confused. How could this hometown son fulfill the prophecy? We’re blessed to see that Jesus *did* bring God’s kingdom of love and grace into each of our hometowns.

**Liberating God, help me share your
good news and seek justice with people
in every hometown. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People bearing injustice

*Psalm 19; Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10;
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a*

God is constant!

Your faithfulness endures to all generations. (v. 90)

It's said the only thing that is constant is change (Heraclitus, 500 BCE). For many of us, constant change is completely disorienting and exhausting. During the pandemic's pandemonium we longed for our routine activities. Yet it seemed we had to pivot, to change courses of action so often that it felt more like we were pirouetting—spinning in place while constantly changing directions.

However, change is *not* the only constant. *God is constant.* God's words to us are constant. In today's text, the psalmist reminds us that "The LORD exists forever" and God's "word is firmly fixed" (v. 89). Next we read that God's "faithfulness endures to all generations" and the earth "stands fast" (v. 90). Take a deep breath and slowly exhale a sigh of relief. When everything around us seems to be spinning in constant change, rest assured God is constant. God's faithful, grace-filled love endures forever. You can constantly and eternally count on God.

**Eternal God, thank you for your
faithful, consistent word and your loving,
constant presence. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People facing difficult life changes

Jeremiah 36:1-10; 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

God transforms

**[God] called me through [God's] grace . . .
so that I might proclaim [God]. (vv. 15-16)**

When we think of stalkers, oppressors, and tormentors, Paul could be among the worst of the worst. He admitted it. He pursued and persecuted Christ's believers. He tried to destroy the early Christian church. What value could Paul ever be to God?

Yet God reached out to Paul, forgave him, and called him to proclaim the good news of salvation through Christ. Paul became a leader in early Christianity, and his teachings guide us today. However, none of Paul's radical change was his own doing. It was God's intervention. Paul was transformed *solely* by God's grace through Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

God also can transform us. No matter what we've done—no matter how bad it was, how often we did it, or how long we continued it—God loves, calls, forgives, and *amazingly* transforms us. God can use each of us to share God's love with everyone. In God's sight, we're of enormous value.

**Transformative God, forgive my past!
Shape me to love and serve you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People seeking transformation

Psalms 67; Acts 9:1-22; Luke 21:10-19

God's word remains

[The Lord said,] “Write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll.” (v. 28)

Many of us stay informed about events by relying on television, radio, and online news or social media. We may have abandoned paper books for e-books that inform and entertain us. Often we send emails and texts rather than hand-written letters. However, when the power goes out or the internet is down, our communication slows or even stops. We may feel very uninformed, without guidance, and completely out of touch.

When King Jehoiakim burned the first scroll with the Lord's written words, the Israelites might have feared they'd be out of touch with their God. How would they learn about God's commands and promises? They didn't need to fear! No human or any force can destroy God's word. Through Jeremiah, God inspired the writing of another scroll. God won't allow God's children to be uninformed about God's words of guidance, grace, and love. God always finds ways to communicate with us.

**Persistent God, thank you for
constantly speaking to me with your
words of guidance and love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Reading students and their teachers

Psalm 119:89-96; Luke 4:38-44

Refuge and rescue

In you, O LORD, I take refuge. . . . (v. 1)

I am amazed by the writers of the psalms in the Bible and their faith and trust in God. Psalm 71 is one such psalm. Its author boldly asked for God's lifelong protection and support. The psalmist trusted in God's refuge and rescue from the author's enemies. In turn, the writer of Psalm 71 would trust in God all through life.

I ponder the times in my life when I needed refuge and rescue and am grateful to those who provided it. I thank my loving parents for giving me refuge during difficult times in my life and rescuing me from dangerous situations. I thank my family, friends, and fellow sisters and brothers in Christ for providing me refuge and rescue throughout my life. And I thank God in Jesus Christ for being "a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me" (v. 3).

**Be my strong refuge, O Lord, and rescue me
from danger and destruction. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Refugees

2 Chronicles 34:1-7; Acts 10:44-48

Listening

**He did not listen to the words of Neco
from the mouth of God. . . . (v. 22)**

“You’re not listening to what I say!” How many times has this been said to us or by us? Listening means taking the other person seriously. It means considering where they are coming from. And in the case of King Josiah of Judah, it means considering if the word the other person is speaking might be coming from God.

King Josiah wanted to join Pharaoh Neco in an upcoming battle, but Pharaoh Neco said, “What have I to do with you, king of Judah?” (v. 21). King Josiah did not listen to Pharaoh Neco, disguised himself and took part in the battle, and was mortally wounded and died.

Josiah was a righteous man, but even he failed to listen and discern God’s will. A warning to the kings and peoples of the earth to discern God’s will, this is also wisdom for us. How might we listen to what God is saying—even through those we might not expect to speak a word from God?

**Open my ears and mind to listen to your words
of life and obey your commands, O Lord. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are hard of hearing

Psalm 71:1-6; Acts 19:1-10

Being humble

**He did not humble himself before
the prophet Jeremiah who spoke from
the mouth of the LORD. (v. 12)**

Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, “was evil in the sight of the LORD his God” (v. 12). He did not humble himself before Jeremiah. On the other hand, Pharaoh Neco humbled himself before God and followed God’s command.

Being humble, along with its companion, humility, can be challenging, especially for those in positions of power. Yet power and authority can be more effective by practicing humility—that is putting someone else before oneself and not taking credit for service to others. Jeremiah and the other prophets were humble. Jesus was certainly humble and set an example of humility. Being humble to God and God’s word empowers one to live as a humble disciple before others, and to promote peace and do justice in the world. Being humble before God and others is power in love for the world.

**Lord of humility, may your word of love
humble me before you and others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People in power

Psalms 71:1-6; John 1:43-51

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Then [Jesus] began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (v. 21)

Today’s gospel reading is a continuation of last Sunday’s reading (Luke 4:16-19). Jesus was visiting his hometown and preached in the synagogue. Quoting from the book of Isaiah, Jesus announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” At first the hometown folk were amazed by Jesus stating he had fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy. But then amazement turned to anger and rejection of Jesus.

The good news in this is that Jesus did fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy “to bring good news to the poor” (v. 18), along with releasing captives, giving sight to the blind, and freeing the oppressed. Jesus has fulfilled God’s plan to release all who are captive and oppressed by sin and death.

**Healer of our every ill, thank you for
fulfilling God’s promise. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are captive or oppressed

Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Light of life

**For you have delivered my soul from death,
and my feet from falling, so that I may walk
before God in the light of life. (v.13)**

Today's reading, Psalm 56, speaks to all who have been bullied, mistreated, abused, or oppressed.

I am blessed not to have experienced discrimination and persecution because of my race, gender, culture, or religious beliefs. However, I am married to a person of color who is a naturalized citizen. We have in a few instances experienced prejudice and discrimination. Yet we rejoice and give thanks for God's grace and protection and for the vast number of people who have welcomed my wife in love and acceptance. Psalm 56 concludes with the psalmist praising God for delivering him from death and danger, "so that I may walk before God in the light of life." My wife and I also "walk before God in the light of life." May those who are bullied, abused, persecuted, discriminated against, and oppressed also take that walk with God and receive the light of life.

**Light of life, protect and defend people
experiencing oppression. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are bullied and abused

1 Kings 17:8-16; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Wash and be clean

**So he went down and immersed himself
seven times in the Jordan, according to the word
of the man of God. (v. 14)**

In today's reading Naaman had contracted a disease of his day, leprosy. Lepers were called and considered "unclean." Fortunately, he was informed of a prophet in Israel, Elisha, who could heal him. After some persuasion, Naaman obeyed Elisha's prescription to wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman's flesh "was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (v. 14).

In baptism, the water and God's word clean one from the stain of sin and restore one as a child of God. After baptism, frequent cleaning is required through confession and repentance of sins, which are still present. There is no vaccine for sin, but through the love of God we are made whole again.

**Thank you, Lord, for cleansing me
from sin. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Doctors, nurses,
and health care workers***

Psalms 56; 1 Corinthians 14:13-25

Presentation of Our Lord

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (v. 22)

Today is celebrated as the Presentation of Our Lord. Following the account as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph presented the baby Jesus to God at the temple in Jerusalem. They offered the required sacrifice before the elderly Simeon and Anna. Simeon gave a prediction to Jesus' parents of their firstborn son's future role for humankind. The widow Anna praised God and spoke "about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 36).

The ritual of presenting someone or something is still carried on today. Worshipers present offerings at church. Parents present children for baptism. In faith, hope, and love we can present ourselves to God in service to Christ and neighbor.

**May we lovingly present ourselves
to you, O God. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Children and animals

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

God's care for all

**For though the LORD is high,
he regards the lowly. (v. 6)**

Throughout the pages of scripture, we read of a God who cares for all people. God is not concerned only with the affairs of the powerful; God does not only attend to the concerns of people with wealth; God does not only reserve love for those the world loves. The psalmist writes that God cares deeply for the lives and experiences of people with little power and affluence. The author of this psalm expresses the gift of God's presence amid deep struggle. This presence sustains us no matter where we find ourselves, regardless of our circumstances. As the psalmist writes, "your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever" (v. 8). To the gift of such abundant love, we respond with gratitude!

**Holy God, thank you for caring for me
with love, embracing me as your own. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are struggling

Numbers 20:22-29; Acts 9:19b-25

The love of community

**Meanwhile the church . . .
had peace and was built up. (v. 31)**

In the book of Acts we read about the stories, communities, and leaders from the earliest Christian communities. As often happens within the lives of diverse and vibrant communities, these early Christian churches struggled with disagreement. Even though they were grounded in a common commitment to show forth Christ's love, they did not always trust one another. Such was the case with the church of Saul's day: his fellow Christians did not all accept him, and many distrusted him. Yet "the church . . . had peace and was built up."

Despite seasons of conflict and turmoil among its members, the church has continued throughout the centuries. Christian community, like all community, is imperfect. Despite these imperfections, we learn to value one another as members of the household of God. We learn, as those earliest Christians did, to accept one another as God's own, beloved in all our brilliant diversity.

**God, thank you for community.
Help me to embrace my neighbors
as your beloved children. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Communities in conflict

Psalm 138; Numbers 27:12-23

God listens

**But when the Israelites cried out . . .
the LORD raised up a deliverer. (v. 9)**

Some of the most honest prayers are those we pray when we feel we are at the end of our rope. No pretense, no holding back, we pour our hearts out to God, who loves us. With nowhere else to go, we cry out to God, who is gracious and delivers. The Israelites, too, had nowhere else to turn. They trusted God to be faithful, even when they had not always been so faithful. Now in exile and suffering, they cried out to the God who is faithful and heeds the cries of those who suffer. God heeded the Israelites' cries and delivered them. God's faithfulness carried them out of oppression and suffering into a new season of liberation, life, and renewal. God is faithful and listens to our prayers as well. God is faithful—no matter what. And God will deliver us into freedom and new life. Thanks be to God.

**Holy God, lead me to pray honest prayers,
trusting in your faithfulness to hear me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People starting a prayer practice

Psalms 138; Luke 4:42-44

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

[Jesus] said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” (v. 4)

Many of Jesus’ followers were people who fished for a living. Their livelihoods were spent within the rhythms of embarking upon the water, casting nets, and hauling fish ashore. On the day Jesus joined Simon in that fishing boat off the Gennesaret shore, Simon must have been astonished. They’d been fishing for hours—overnight, even!—and hadn’t caught anything. Who did this Jesus think he was, a non-fisherman who had come aboard their boat with confident instruction?

Of course Jesus knew what he was doing. He simply came with an encouragement: Give the deep water a try. See what might happen. And it worked. Jesus’ instruction to Simon Peter holds deep wisdom for Christ-followers of all times and places. When the well-worn rhythms of our lives fail to produce faithful results, perhaps Jesus is calling us to cast our nets into deeper waters, attentive to what might emerge from new depths.

God, grant me the courage to venture into deep waters, trusting in your guidance. Amen.

Prayer concern: People in need of a helping hand

Psalms 138; Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13]; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

God's wide and beautiful world

**May you be blessed by the LORD,
who made heaven and earth. (v. 15)**

In the southeastern region of the United States, winding throughout the Blue Ridge Mountains, there is a 469-mile scenic highway called the Blue Ridge Parkway. Around every twist and turn of the parkway are incredible views of the mountains and surrounding land. Driving the parkway, it is difficult not to feel small. In the midst of a vast and beautiful landscape like that of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the experiences and circumstances of our own human lives pale in comparison. We remember that God created the world to be wide, beautiful, and diverse. The psalmist here proclaims that it is a gift to be part of this beautiful world. But we need not feel small; let's turn our wonder to praise, praying with the psalmist, "We will bless the LORD from this time on and forevermore" (v. 18).

**Creating God, thank you for caring for me
just as you care for the life of the earth. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Restoration of the earth

Judges 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Encouragement amid change

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

Transition is hard. Whether the change at hand is expected or unexpected, big or small, the process of undergoing a life transition is often emotional and requires a great deal of energy. In this scripture text we hear of a transition in leadership: God calls Saul to be the new ruler of Israel. Saul feels unequipped for the role; he asks if God is sure he's the right person for the job. But amid Saul's struggle Samuel anoints him with oil, blessing him. In this difficult transition, Samuel offers encouragement and wisdom, assuring Saul that he is indeed the right person for the job. This kind of encouragement is a gift during seasons of change.

When we feel unsure, encouragement and wisdom from a friend or loved one can make all the difference. From whom have you received encouragement during a time of transition? To whom might God be calling you to offer encouragement today?

**God, help me to see where I might offer
encouragement today, trusting in
your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People going through life changes

Psalm 115; 1 Timothy 3:1-9

Abundant hospitality

**Then Levi gave a great banquet for [Jesus]
in his house. (v. 29)**

Have you ever known someone with a particular gift for hospitality? The kind of person who throws dinner parties where everyone feels warmly welcomed, where the food and drink are abundant, and where people linger over the table long after the meal is over? Jesus was and is the model for that kind of hospitality. He and his disciples shared meals with the *entire* community—not only those the religious and cultural elite readily accepted. In this story from Luke, Levi's hospitality even got him into trouble with the powerful leaders of his day!

Over-the-top hospitality is one of the practices to which Jesus calls us, generation after generation. When we extend welcome to a neighbor, we learn how to love one another as Jesus loves us. Hospitality reminds us that we are *all* children of God, beloved and embraced just as we are.

**God, teach me to show your love to others
by extending generous hospitality. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Neighbors

Psalm 115; Isaiah 8:1-15

Rooted in grace and love

**They are like trees planted
by streams of water. (v. 3)**

Along portions of the southeastern coastlands of the United States, enormous live oak trees thrive, dripping with gray Spanish moss. These trees are almost mythical in their size and age; they have been around for generations, privy to the struggles and joys of those who have gone before us. In this very first poem of the book of Psalms, the psalmist compares God's faithful people to trees like those live oaks. They remain steadfast through the ages, bringing forth abundant life. Trees serve as images of faithfulness throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, reminding us that when our lives are rooted in God's grace and love, we flourish like a strong tree planted along a fertile coastland. We change with the seasons, but we remain steady, planted deep within the soil of God's faithfulness through the ages.

**God of grace, thank you for your steadfast
faithfulness throughout generations. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The well-being of local coastlands

Jeremiah 13:12-19; Acts 13:26-34

Loving like Jesus

Love one another deeply from the heart. (v. 22)

In many Christian worship services, a pastor closes the service with a “charge,” calling worshipers to be faithful to their Christian calling throughout their daily living. A pastor I know often follows this charge with the words, “It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard.” The call to love one another as Christ loves us is deceptively simple! The author of 1 Peter knew this. He encouraged his first-century readers to remember that although there are many aspects to living a Christian life, they all boil down to a single instruction: remembering the love of Jesus, “love one another deeply from the heart.” When we follow this instruction, our lives come to mirror the deep love of Jesus. As that pastor said: it’s all that easy and it’s all that hard.

**Thank you, O God, for the love of
your Son Jesus Christ. Help me to love
as he loved. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who need encouragement

Psalm 1; Jeremiah 13:20-27

Joyful witness

Blessed is the womb that bore you . . . ! (v. 27)

The woman in this story from Luke's gospel can hardly contain her joy. Upon catching a glimpse of Jesus, she proclaims, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" She knows she is in the presence of something remarkable—the very Son of God, come to preach and teach in her own community—and she cannot help but cry out in joy. Even in the midst of Jesus' strange speech about spirits and the powers of evil, this woman is comfortable reminding those around her that Jesus is someone special.

Two thousand years later, we can learn from this joyful woman's witness. We can discern the presence of God in our midst and proclaim with joy that something remarkable is afoot. We can sense the Spirit's movement in our communities and remind our friends and neighbors that God is present, always leading us onward and prompting our praise.

**Merciful God, I praise you for your presence
in my life and in my community. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: All who struggle to feel
God's presence***

Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:1-4

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

**Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled. (v. 21)**

In 2019 in Asheville, North Carolina, a group of artists unveiled a large-scale fresco painting entitled *Haywood Street Beatitudes*. This piece of art was meant to serve as a contemporary depiction of Jesus' words in Luke 6, often called beatitudes. The artists thought carefully about Jesus' statements of blessing, wondering together who Jesus might have called blessed in their own modern community. The artwork depicts members of the community who are often overlooked or marginalized—people who live without permanent housing, street musicians, wandering animals. The artists were certain that if Jesus were to preach his beatitudes in their hometown, he would have called these people blessed. The *Haywood Street Beatitudes* fresco brilliantly invites us to examine our own lives and communities. Who in your own community might Jesus call blessed?

**Loving God, open my heart to those
in my community whom you would
call blessed. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who lack housing

Psalms 1; Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

The God who listens

**In my distress I cry to the LORD,
that he may answer me. (v. 1)**

If we were to read the book of Psalms from cover to cover, we would read diverse prayers and songs that express the full breadth and depth of human emotions. There are psalms of triumph and praise; psalms of terror and anguish; psalms of thanksgiving and abundance. The authors clearly sought to express the broad spectrum of our life experiences, demonstrating that throughout all those experiences, God listens to our prayers.

Prayer, though, need not come in the form of eloquent poems or brilliant song. God hears us no matter how we pray. Whether we pray through verse or prose, song or silence, dance or stillness, God is faithful to listen to our prayers. Today, what burdens or joys might you share with God? How might you learn from the psalmist's insistence upon honest and vulnerable prayers? Spend time trying out a new way of praying, trusting that God receives your prayers no matter how you offer them.

**God, thank you for listening when I pray.
Remind me that you are always with me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who need someone to listen

2 Kings 24:18–25:21; 1 Corinthians 15:20-34

The seesaw of faith

We are your boast even as you are our boast. (v. 14)

A traditional piece of schoolyard play equipment that endured through many generations is the seesaw, or teeter-totter (although many have disappeared due to safety issues). Two children take their places on either end of a board supported by a central pivot point. When one child's weight pushes the board toward the ground, the other end buoys the second child into the air. This steady back-and-forth motion of the seesaw serves not only as a fun plaything; it also offers an apt metaphor for Christian living. Just as the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1, God calls us to lives of mutual encouragement, taking turns encouraging and being encouraged, moving steadily back and forth just as a seesaw teeters from side to side. In this seesaw motion, God forms us into faithful followers of Christ, caring for one another and receiving another's care.

**Gracious God, teach me to encourage others
and to receive encouragement. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel unsupported

Psalms 120; Ezra 1:1-11

A sturdy foundation

**Woe to him who builds his house
by unrighteousness. (v. 13)**

In every movement for civil and human rights across the globe there are brave leaders who speak out boldly for justice. In the American struggle for racial justice in the 1950s and 60s there were numerous examples of those courageous voices for change: Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, the “Little Rock Nine,” Fannie Lou Hamer. But behind the scenes of these movements for justice are *a/so* countless people who labor without recognition, working hard to ensure that all God’s people are able to flourish. These are faithful people who follow God’s path of righteousness, living in the way that prophets like Jeremiah sought to encourage. Jeremiah warns against those who ignore God’s call of justice—in fact, he refers to them as those who have built their houses by unrighteousness. The deep and broad love of God, Jeremiah reminds us, is the strong foundation on which we ought to build our lives.

**Thank you, God, for bold leaders who work
for justice. Help me to join the struggle. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who work for justice

Psalm 120; Luke 11:37-52

Delight in the Lord

**Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you
the desires of your heart. (v. 4)**

I once delighted in getting a certified driver's license so I could drive a truck. On the first day of class, the instructor let us drive a little. But the second day opened my eyes. I gazed upon the large book of rules and regulations I'd have to memorize. I heard about the myriad of truck parts I'd have to learn. After two days, I no longer delighted in driving a truck.

The psalmist says delighting in the Lord delivers a wonderful life. Enjoying the things that violate God's commands and principles leads to disappointment. Even innocent things won't deliver what they promise if they aren't in God's will for us. Envy of what others have steals our delight and offers false hope.

When we delight in the Lord we commit everything we do to God, seeking the will of the one who knows what is best for us. The lover of our soul holds our best interests. Delight in what delights the Lord, and God will lead you to the right desires.

**Providing God, give me the strength to seek
the things that please you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Travelers

Genesis 43:16-34; Romans 8:1-11

Love the right things

**Do not love the world
or the things in the world. (v. 15)**

Dad loved ice cream. Me, on the other hand? I love all things Little Debbie[®]. Ever since I was a middle schooler and Mom stocked the pantry with them, I've been hooked. Yet eating too many isn't healthy. I try to remember the saying: All things in moderation.

John writes to those of various spiritual ages—from new believers to old saints. And his message is the same to all: loving the things of the world will only lead to disappointment.

God created a perfect world; sin corrupted it. God gives us good things to enjoy; we can use them in sinful ways that elevate them above our love for God.

Staying close to God creates self-control. Rather than hoarding things for ourselves, we choose a spirit of generosity and use what we have to serve others and improve our world. Let worldly things be an avenue through which you serve others.

**God of all, may I use your blessings
to bless others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those with misplaced priorities

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 44:1-17

Make things right

**“On the way make an effort
to settle the case.” (v. 58)**

A misunderstanding pierced Max and his son. Max had tried to explain, but to no avail. His text messages went unanswered—as did his phone calls. Regardless of how hard Max tried to make things right, nothing worked. Almost three long, lonely years passed before his son finally came around and spoke. Max relished the reconciliation.

No matter how hard we try to avoid it, conflict is inevitable. When conflict between us and others erupts, Jesus encourages us to make things right. Regardless of whether we're the offender or the offended, we should also prepare ourselves for the possibility that others might reject our efforts at reconciliation. If our efforts end in vain, we can leave the matter in God's hands.

**Reconciling Spirit, give me the strength
to make things right. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those struggling with conflict

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 44:18-34

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

**Love your enemies, do good to those
who hate you. (v. 27)**

Ray and I were good friends. Then something happened. I messed up and failed to live up to his expectations. He couldn't forgive me. Although I apologized, he moved from being a friend to becoming my enemy. When he passed me in the hallway, he wouldn't speak. He used every opportunity to destroy my character. Sadly, the friendship was not repaired.

Jesus' instructions are simple yet tough: love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. And he provided a living example. Even from the cross, he asked God to forgive those who crucified him.

When we love our enemies, we won't judge them self-righteously, thinking we are better than they are or incapable of doing some of the things they do. Nor will we retaliate. We will look for ways to give to them, regardless of their response. We ask God to give us the power to love those who don't love us.

**God of love and mercy, help me to love
as you love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Persecuted Christians

*Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Genesis 45:3-11, 15;
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50*

Crying out to God

**For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden. (v. 4)**

Discipline. When I was a youngster, that word carried connotations I disliked. Dad disciplined in a calm and measured manner. Mom only disciplined us when my brothers or I had frustrated her. But my parents disciplined me because they wanted to push me back onto the right path.

In Psalm 38 the psalmist anguishes over what is happening and wonders aloud, like the prophet Job, at the enormity of suffering and its cause. The psalmist asks God to end the suffering—his terrible health problems, loneliness, and despair—that feels like God’s wrath. Is this God’s discipline?

Despite our best efforts, we will fail. Some of these failings are rightly called sin. We experience suffering both related and completely unrelated to sin—ours or that of others. Suffering happens, and when it does we cry out to God for mercy, asking God to show up with love.

**Do not forsake me, gracious God. Save me,
O God of my salvation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are suffering

Genesis 33:1-17; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

The gifts of holy communion

**Examine yourselves, and only then
eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (v. 28)**

Exams are rarely enjoyable, whether they are tests taken for school or the kind of examination Paul is calling for here. The early church enjoyed fellowship meals coupled with the eucharist. Some ate and drank excessively, consuming everything before all had arrived. Because of this lack of caring and sharing, some went hungry. "Examine yourselves," Paul wrote. Are you being the church Christ calls us to be? Are you recognizing God's presence in others? Are you welcoming and feeding as you have been welcomed and fed?

Celebrating holy communion reminds us that Christ gave himself for us. His body was broken, and his blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Joining together in this meal allows believers to unite around our common goal: to share Christ's gifts with the world. Division distracts us; love unites us.

**Holy God, help me to examine myself daily,
that all may share in your gifts. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those experiencing temptation

Psalm 38; 1 Samuel 24:1-22

A good influence

**Jesus said . . . , “Occasions for stumbling
are bound to come, but woe to anyone
by whom they come!” (v. 1)**

Dad always warned me to choose my friends carefully. He knew the temptations young boys faced. Throughout elementary and middle school I obeyed his wise instruction. But when I entered high school I began choosing the wrong friends. Not only did I let them influence me, but I also negatively influenced others.

Jesus warns us that we will be tempted, but he cautions against being the stumbling stone in another's path, especially the path of little ones. We influence others whether or not we intentionally do so. Our example is important. Occasions for temptation are bound to come, so we tend to ourselves and to others by having a healthy prayer life, preparing for temptation ahead of time, and avoiding situations we know will tempt us. God can empower us to have a good influence on others.

**Almighty Spirit, help me to influence others
for the good. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those struggling with peer pressure

Psalm 38; Leviticus 5:1-13

Praise the holy one

**Extol the LORD our God, and worship
at his holy mountain. (v. 9)**

Maurice. The mention of my friend's name brings to mind several adjectives: kind, dedicated, and forgiving. Maurice was a jack-of-all-trades in his farming community. When anyone needed help, he showed up. He demonstrated dedication to his family and was a faithful member at his church. And if someone wronged him, he forgave, whether or not they asked.

The psalmist praised God's name. God's name calls to mind holiness, as well as a reputation of faithfulness to those who follow God. Through our private and corporate worship experiences we praise the holy name of our God. We also honor God's name with our thoughts, actions, and attitudes. Although God meets our needs as we worship, our praise is more about God than about us. Worship celebrates that we have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Our sins have been forever forgiven. God has accepted us into a spiritual family where we will all dwell for eternity.

**Holy one, I adore and praise you
for who you are. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those outside the church

Deuteronomy 9:1-5; Acts 3:11-16

Speak love through actions

**[Cornelius] was a devout man who feared God
with all his household. (v. 2)**

Justin and Suzie traveled some six hundred miles to help those in need. Justin himself knew need. Doctors had diagnosed him with Parkinson's at age forty. But this new situation did not prevent Justin from helping others. He too could and did help to feed the hungry.

Cornelius was not Jewish. Nevertheless, he honored and prayed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He too gave to those in need, as Justin and Suzie did. God received Cornelius's prayers and told him to send for the apostle Peter. Peter came and told Cornelius and all present about Jesus.

Loving God and loving neighbor are of a piece. The whole law can be summed up as loving God and loving neighbor (Luke 10:26-28). For Cornelius this meant praying constantly and giving to those in need (Luke 10:25-37). God sends us abundant opportunities to show love to others.

**Almighty lover, I want to love others
as you have loved me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are hungry

Psalm 99; Deuteronomy 9:6-14

Crush the temptations

**Then I took the sinful thing you had made,
the calf, and burned it with fire. (v. 21)**

We finished our meeting. I told him I would send him my answer by email. He told me to be patient with his response. His wife had to filter his emails. He once had an internet-related addiction. He dealt with it by avoiding the internet and letting his wife read his emails.

As the Israelites prepared to enter the promised land, Moses reminded them of their rebellion at Mount Sinai forty years earlier. They had made a substitute god in the form of a golden calf. Moses had burned it, dumped the ashes into water, and made them drink it.

Temptations will come in life. We are tempted to be turned in on ourselves, and we fail to love God and to love neighbor as we should. But the Holy Spirit can crush such temptation. When we are reminded of God's love for us, and of Christ's work of forgiveness for us, we can honestly face our weaknesses. We can ask for forgiveness and do the hard work of confessing, avoiding temptation, and seeking to do better.

**Merciful God, I depend on you
to give me power over temptation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those battling addictions

Psalm 99; Luke 10:21-24

Transfiguration of Our Lord

**And while he was praying,
the appearance of his face changed. (v. 29)**

Every year our elementary science teacher hatches a few chicks. One day I wandered over. She offered to put an egg in the candler so I could see the chick. “What you see,” she said, “is the chick’s eye.” I gazed with amazement as I witnessed what I could not perceive otherwise.

Jesus took three disciples to a mountain where they too witnessed what they had not perceived before. Jesus glowed, and Moses and Elijah appeared with him. Peter wanted the experience to last, but they had to come down the mountain. When they did, they encountered a father who begged Jesus to heal his son.

The transfiguration of Jesus revealed that Jesus was God’s Son and the Savior who came down the mountain to heal and to save. God’s glory is revealed, we learn, in the healing of the boy. And it is revealed most fully in Christ’s death on a cross. We are sent down the mountain too, to proclaim God’s greatness—our salvation—in Jesus.

**God of glory, reveal your majesty in the love
you have for all people. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who seek God

Psalm 99; Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

God to the rescue

You have seen, O LORD; do not be silent!

O Lord, do not be far from me! (v. 22)

The church leadership team decided to have the congregation's financial records audited annually. The treasurer viewed the decision as a swipe against her integrity. As the team leader, I became her target. Try as I might, I could not quell her anger. All I could do was pray for her and for the healing of our team.

This psalm and others like it seem hard on our ears, but the psalmist merely asks God to deal with "treacherous enemies" and the evil they represent. Jesus later puts a softer spin on requests such as the psalmist's by telling us to pray for our enemies. We don't respond as they expect. We love instead of hate. We realize vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us. As it relates to evil and its effect on us, God doesn't always act according to our timetable or in the way we think is best, but God will always come to our rescue. Our job entails trusting God's wisdom, not ours.

**Rescuing God, help me to trust you
to surround me with your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those facing fears

Exodus 35:1-29; Acts 10:9-23a

Love for all

**But God has shown me that I should not
call anyone profane or unclean. (v. 28)**

My grandfather loved everyone. He had taken over the family farm at twelve, but later left the farm to work on an ice truck. Then he transitioned to delivering milk and later ice cream. As a youngster, I worked with him on the ice cream truck. I watched him give away imperfect items to kids who had no money. And I listened as he made the orneriest customers into his friends.

Peter was a devout Jew whom God had to teach to love all people. Through a vision of a sheet filled with all types of animals—ones he wasn't supposed to eat, according to Jewish law—God taught Peter to love everyone.

God demonstrated love for all by sending Jesus to die for humanity's sins. During his earthly ministry Jesus revealed this same love for all by hanging out with folks from all walks of life as he taught them how to connect with God. When God changes our hearts we too learn to love all types of people through our words and actions.

**Loving God, teach me to love all people
as you do. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in conflict

Psalm 35:11-28; Ezekiel 1:1–2:1

Ash Wednesday

[Jesus said,] “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” (v. 1)

For three years, she expressed sorrow for talking in class when she should not have, but she kept doing it. I reminded her that sorry implies trying not to repeat what we are sorry for.

Donning ashes implies repentance and is a part of the Lenten season for many Christians. We find occurrences of this in the Old Testament when in times of sorrow over sin people repented in “dust and ashes.”

Jesus reminds us that our repentance and sorrow should involve sincerity, then gives examples of how our giving, praying, fasting, and attitudes about possessions can be hypocritical. Genuine repentance, unlike perpetual promises to do better, comes because the good news of forgiveness is proclaimed to us. When God comes with promises to forgive, we cannot help but be honest in our confession. The joy that comes with forgiveness shows up in the newness of life God gives us.

Forgiving God, may my ashes symbolize my genuine sorrow for my sins. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those bound by specific sins

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

Sheltering in the right place

**You who live in the shelter
of the Most High. . . . (v. 1)**

The words of this psalm form the lyrics to a well-known hymn. In the story of the temptation of Jesus, Satan quoted this psalm as the basis of one of his jousts toward Jesus (Luke 4:9-11). Some religious groups have mistakenly used it to validate the idea of handling poisonous snakes as an act of faith.

Think about the significance of those uses of this psalm. When a modern hymn was based on this psalm, that was a perfect use of its poetry and intent. When Satan tried to use it as a tool to get Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, that was a twisted use of its method and message. The same is true about handling snakes.

The Bible is an amazing shelter for us. It is able to keep us grounded during difficult times. God's shelter is not from reality but from our having to face hardships alone or without spiritual resources. That sort of shelter is special indeed.

**Most high God, I eagerly rest
in your shelter. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Those impacted by
harmful religious teachings***

Exodus 5:10-23; Acts 7:30-34

Life's low points

**. . . but they would not listen to Moses,
because of their broken spirit. (v. 9)**

The people were at a low point. Moses had interceded for them with Pharaoh. In response, Pharaoh had bet he could split the people from their leader. He demanded the same brick production of them, with fewer resources! His gambit seemed to work. The leaders of the people criticized Moses for being all talk and no results. Soon Moses too was at a low point, and as today's reading starts, he had just flung his complaints at God.

When did you last find yourself at a low point in life? A common denominator in life's lows is that sense of brokenness. It comes from some mix of frustrated ideals and a loss of hope. If someone then tries to comfort us with trite words, it just gets worse! Moses and God model the path out of life's low points. Their talks were honest, and God's commitments turned out to be sure. While we cannot protect ourselves or others from low points, honest emotions at least direct us toward God, who is faithful.

**God of hope, let my words be honest
and my deeds be a credit to you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those facing criticism or a setback

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Acts 7:35-42

Tears and laughter

. . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh. (v. 4)

Sometimes we cry and are dismissed for it. Other times we simply refuse to cry. Crying can be complex.

Is laughter different? If you deduct negative occasions like awkward or mocking laughs, then laughter seems in the emotional clear compared to crying. That doesn't account, though, for all the times laughter should have happened and didn't. In our serious world laughter can seem frivolous. Plenty of moments end up in a joyless monochrome rather than the full color of life.

Ecclesiastes was written as currencies emerged. It was a time of enormous economic change. The corresponding pressures threw people off balance and left many emotionally on empty. The author wrote as something of a sage outsider who managed to keep perspective: there is a time and place for crying in life. No apologies! Just as certainly there is a time and place for laughter too.

**Living God, whether I'm crying or laughing,
help me be more alive today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Emotional honesty

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16; John 12:27-36

First Sunday in Lent

**Jesus . . . returned from the Jordan
and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. (v. 1)**

In the Bible the wilderness is a symbol for a place apart from normal life. It is where God encounters us away from daily distractions. It is a spiritually alive place!

Like the physical wilderness, the spiritual wilderness can be beautiful as well as scary. We can nurture it or ruin it. By the time of his temptations, Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days. Forty is also symbolic. In biblical literature it means a long time. Jesus had not wasted that time. Fasting made him physically hungry but spiritually aware. He batted the temptations aside as if impatient with the devil's weak sauce.

Fasting and prayer times used to be more a part of this season of Lent. If done only from habit they can and do ruin the spiritual wilderness. But if chosen by any of us as a good spiritual workout they can regain value. They teach us to be ready, not just for temptations, but for the needs of our world, famished for both bread and life.

**God, remind me to prepare my spirit for
today's beauty and today's needs. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Wilderness places of every kind

*Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Deuteronomy 26:1-11;
Romans 10:8-13*

One little slip

. . . my feet have not slipped. (v. 5)

The man's feet did slip. On the winter ice. The subsequent fall was one of those where both feet escape the earth and the body crashes down. No bones broke, but a left shoulder rotator cuff tore. Surgery followed. Then came the hard part.

For six weeks the man had to spend three hours a day in a chair that lifted his arm up and down. The passive motion kept the joint loose until more active therapy could begin. All the time in the chair was drudgery.

The writer of today's reading could probably relate. Psalm 17 is a lament about the harm done by enemies over whom the writer had little control. Though discouraged, the writer's steps stayed steady. A better future was possible despite a difficult present. The final verse is an expression of hope.

That man in the chair sees a better future too. I'm typing this devotion with one hand, but tomorrow is my last day in this bizarre chair!

**Very present God, lead me past
discouragement to life. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Physical therapists

1 Chronicles 21:1-17; 1 John 2:1-6

Badge of honor

The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.” (v. 4)

Imagine this picture. A woman has a huge smile on her face and a bag with clean clothes in her hand. The clothes she has on are filthy. She has just led a group of confirmation students on a caving expedition. The caves were muddy, and each year the exit from the caves, known as “the squeeze,” seemed to get a little tighter. Those dirty clothes were a badge of honor. Getting out and looking forward to clean clothes was worth a huge smile!

When the Jewish people returned home after being in exile, the dirty clothes of a man named Joshua symbolized the hardships they had endured. Replacing them with something clean celebrated the return of hope.

That woman in the picture led one more year of caving, then passed into God’s eternity after a sudden illness. Her smile remains, as does our trust that our dirty clothes will be exchanged for God’s embrace. Hope like that fits her, and all of us, well.

O merciful God, walk me from all my losses into the fullness of your love. Amen.

Prayer concern: All the people we miss

Psalm 17; 2 Peter 2:4-21

Prayer and presence

. . . blessed be the name of the LORD. (v. 21)

The book of Job tells the legend of the character after whom the book is named. Caught up in a test of wills between God and Satan, Job starts out richly blessed, then suffers grievously, and ends up doubly blessed. At least that's how the book starts and ends.

However, if you then read the thirty-nine chapters in between you encounter something entirely different. Those chapters explore the hard questions about suffering. Why would a loving God allow it? How can we endure it? Three characters in this section pose many of the traditional answers to those questions. Job exposes their responses as uncaring or shallow.

The takeaway is that imposing our answers on others is usually a mistake. Prayers and presence are far better gifts to offer someone in deepest pain than any single answer. Answers speak to our heads but prayers and presence are matters of heart. In our deepest losses, the heart is a better place to start.

**Merciful God, make me wisely attentive
to the pain of others. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Anyone who receives
bad news today***

Psalm 17; Luke 21:34–22:6

Chosen

**If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up. (v.10)**

Many children are raised by someone other than their biological parents. One woman bore no ill will toward her biological parents but liked to think of her adoptive parents as the ones who chose her. Plus, as a child she got two “birthday” celebrations out of the deal! One was for her biological birth date, the other celebrated the day of her adoption.

The writer of Psalm 27 understood the complexity of human relationships. God transcends all our ups and downs. God loves those who birth, those who raise, and those who make all the good, bad, and hard decisions along the way.

On her wedding day the woman stood at the altar. She’d picked her adoptive parents to be her wedding party and she stood beside her husband-to-be. Surrounded by three people who had chosen her in life and in the presence of her God, she felt loved indeed.

**Living God, thank you for anyone
who gives me life. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Any parent, anywhere

Genesis 13:1-7, 14-18; Philippians 3:2-12

Earthly things, eternal perspective

... their minds are set on earthly things. (v. 19)

A snarky response to Paul's words in today's reading is to ask, "Whose mind *isn't* set on earthly things?" It's where we live and pretty much all we know. Of course our minds are set on earthly things!

The apostle Paul wrote to the believers in the Macedonian city of Philippi. He was imprisoned and likely not far from execution. Given his predicament, the letter could have been filled with negative, score-settling acrimony. But it's not. Yes, today's reading is mildly in that direction, but it's an exception within a letter remarkable for its gratitude and grace.

It's not that Paul didn't know we have earthly needs and interests. It's more that he didn't want our needs and interests to be limited to earthly things. Life is way more than what we see. Love is frequently not visible, yet its power in our relationships spreads out into eternity. Put in the positive, earthly things are only part of loves and truths that last forever.

**Eternal one, encourage me to embrace
what needs my best attention today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Someone I have ignored

Psalm 27; Genesis 14:17-24

The best of now is also forever

**O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever. (v. 29)**

The free medical clinic works out of three church buildings. Each building represents a different part of the Christian tradition. Those who work in the clinic come from multiple faiths and speak several languages.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the clinic started doing vaccinations in all three churches—not in the usual basement spots, but in the worship spaces so that more people could be accommodated. Sanctuaries that had been empty for months were populated again. Celebration was in the air! One holy moment after another happened as people gave to the sacred space their gratitude, laughter, and praise.

Today's psalm describes plenty of distress and hardship. That it ends with thanksgiving is no mistake. Like the people in those sanctuaries, what is good is also special, and what is special endures.

**Ever-present God, alert me to your holy
presence in the simplest of things. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Those able to communicate
across languages***

Psalm 27; Matthew 23:37-39

Second Sunday in Lent

**... as a hen gathers her brood
under her wings. (v. 34)**

The birder was watching the owl from a distance. He could see its swiveling head as it perched and looked for prey. Then it suddenly stiffened and flattened its feathers into a thinned silhouette. It took a while for the birder to see what the owl had noticed. High overhead an eagle was passing through. Alert to the potential predator, the owl had made itself as invisible as possible. The owl escaped notice and eventually returned to its own hunt.

Jesus had probably observed hens clucking around in the places where he lived. When threatened their instinctive trait was to gather and shelter their chicks under their wings. That his audience seemed to also know of this trait is of credit to the hens. Something so quick and potentially self-sacrificial is the essence of love. Jesus longed to offer spiritual shelter to his listeners—an offer that remains open to us. And open in a way a mother hen would surely appreciate.

**Savior of us all, remind me that your shelter
is as sure as it is filled with love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Loss of natural habitat for birds

*Psalm 27; Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18;
Philippians 3:17-4:1*

The twelfth green

**... let the hearts of those who
seek the LORD rejoice. (v. 3)**

The first thing that went wrong with the wedding was the pandemic. Families were stressed. Plans hard to make. Finally the wedding was scheduled at a golf course that had never done something like this before.

What could go wrong? Let's make a list. The service was outside, just off the twelfth green. The pianist hauled all her stuff out there on a golf cart. A bullfrog in the adjoining water hazard competed for attention. No one had the rings until a golf cart rushed back to the clubhouse, where the rings were found. The battery powering the keyboard died during the recessional. But the couple still got married! The reception was the best.

So many obstacles, yet so much joy. Obstacles are not unconquerable, and rejoicing is not by chance. It is chosen, and the people at that wedding were all-in for the couple. True to today's psalm, they sought the Lord, and, wow, did they rejoice!

**God of celebration, help me to rely on you
in the face of obstacles and to rejoice! Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Remember a moment of joy
in your life***

Exodus 33:1-6; Romans 4:1-12

Is complaining fatal?

**And do not complain as some of them did,
and were destroyed by the destroyer. (v. 10)**

If you complained about something lately and we take the apostle Paul's words literally, does that mean you are doomed and facing destruction?

Let's back up and think about Paul a little bit. He was trained in Jewish religious law and Greek philosophy, both of which employ ample helpings of exaggeration to make their points. That takes the pressure off us a bit. If you recently complained about something, you might have some regrets, but you're not doomed.

Paul's forcefulness reflected his concern about idolatry. Idols were everywhere in his world and idol worship created cynicism. Praying to a statue just didn't work, and when it didn't people would complain and the whole premise of God would be in doubt. Paul wanted something better for the Corinthians. Our God does not exist to answer every material prayer but rather to foster lives of grace and welcome. About such things, there are few complaints!

**Hear my complaints, O God, then move me
toward hope and purpose. Amen.**

Prayer concern: An end to toxic negativity

Psalms 105:1-15 [16-41] 42; Numbers 14:10-24

Whispers of peace

**They rose early in the morning and went out
into the wilderness of Tekoa. (v. 20)**

Today, Tekoa rests on an abandoned plain, some 2,800 feet above sea level. It has not been occupied in centuries. In biblical times it was a chokepoint on the road from the Dead Sea to Jerusalem. Built as a way of slowing traffic or even levying taxes, in today's reading its unique geography created a military obstacle that bedeviled those who wished to attack Jerusalem.

At first it might seem a little sad that a place where important things once happened is now unoccupied. An alternative viewpoint is that the military slaughter that ends today's reading is far sadder than one place or another being left unoccupied. We have the story because it recalls the deliverance of one people but at great expense to another. When Jesus comes along, he pushes us away from zero-sum thinking about winners and losers. His love envelops all peoples.

**God of peace, let me always travel
on the wide road of your love. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Those endangered by war
and violence***

Psalm 105:1-15 [16-41] 42; Luke 13:22-31

Night guardian

**... When I think of you on my bed, and meditate
on you in the watches of the night. (v. 6)**

It's 1:23 a.m. I turn away from the clock to stare at the wall. Moments later I toss back the other way. Whether it was a bad dream or my own unruly thoughts, my mind can't seem to settle. In the dark watches of the night it's easy to let worry grow. Every challenge seems bigger. Every fear feels more imminent.

During these times I need to remind myself of the psalmist's wise words. When I am lying in bed with my mind racing I need to consider what I am thinking about. Let me encourage you also. Instead of dwelling on every troublesome thought, the psalmist counsels us to think of God. When we feel alone and frightened, we can remember that God is with us. We can pray, hum a hymn, or reach for our Bibles. Focusing our attention on God's characteristics—love, peace, faithfulness, and so much more—will settle our souls. We can give up the endless tossing and rest in our guardian's peaceful presence.

**Night guardian, watch over me as I sleep,
and help my mind rest peacefully in you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Night-shift workers

Daniel 3:19-30; Revelation 2:8-11

Celebrate

**Remember then what you received
and heard. . . . (v. 3)**

Two years in a row I called my friend to sing happy birthday on the wrong day. First, I was a day late. The second year I was so eager to be on time that I called a day early. Fortunately this is a dear friend, and we laughed about it together.

With any relationship, it is important to remember key events and personal milestones. It may not be birthdays, but instead times spent together, personal accomplishments, or other memorable moments. These small celebrations grow our bond. The same is true with our relationship with God. It's important that we acknowledge the major commemorations like Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, but also key moments in our own faith journey. We can write down scriptures that speak to us, the times we felt God's presence, and the answers to prayers. Remembering these times will strengthen and grow our faith.

**Precious friend, help me to remember
what you have done for me and to
treasure time with you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those celebrating birthdays

Psalm 63:1-8; Daniel 12:1-4

Joseph, Guardian of Jesus

But just when he had resolved to do this . . . (v. 20)

Have you ever started a story with the words “I thought it was a good idea, but . . .”? This is how today’s reading begins. Joseph was in a terrible predicament. The woman he was betrothed to marry was pregnant, and Joseph knew the child was not his. After considering his options, he decided to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angelic encounter changed Joseph’s plans.

We will never be in a situation exactly like Joseph’s, but all of us face challenges where we struggle to make the right decision. Despite our best efforts, we may come to the wrong conclusion. The good news is that even if we get off track, God will redirect us. An open door may suddenly close. A friend may share wise counsel we need to hear. Or God may prompt us directly through a Bible reading. We do not need to fear our choices. When we seek God’s guidance, our initial plan can be replaced with a new and better resolution.

**Holy God, help me to hold my resolutions
loosely. Please redirect my path
as needed. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Single mothers

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

Third Sunday in Lent

**Let it alone for one more year, until I dig
around it and put manure on it. (v. 8)**

God can bring good out of our worst circumstances. Events we think are the complete unearthing of everything we hold dear could actually be moving us closer to God's beautiful plan. The shattering of dreams, relationships, or our security is terrifying. It can feel like we are being tossed rootless down a mountainside with nothing to cling to. Yet God is still in control. Sometimes problems can only be fixed by digging down to the root, shaking off everything that is not helpful, and infusing God's presence into our lives.

During challenging times we cling more dearly to our Savior. It is this connection—like a tree to its healthy roots—that allows us to grow into the love, peace, and joy that God intends. When our world is shaken, we can hold onto the promise that God is tending to us. The greatest caretaker will turn what feels like an ending into a new life. We can trust God's provision and timing.

**Great caretaker, grow my faith as you tend
to me during life's darkest storms. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Arborists

Psalm 63:1-8; Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Breathing deeply

Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. (v. 5)

Take a deep breath in and out. Do you feel the air moving as your lungs expand and contract? A breath is quick, but it is also life-giving. A good, deep breath can release tension and rebalance energy. There is power in this simple action.

Like a breath, our lives are fleeting, but they can also be powerful. To have the greatest impact, we must balance life's urgent pressures with the recognition that this world is not our final home. When we focus on our own plans it is easy to forget that what feels urgent and all-important may not be. We need God to review our to-do lists. Are there areas that need to be rebalanced? Do we need to take more time for ourselves or for others? With God's guidance we can use our days to leave an impact that will ripple far beyond the breaths we take. We may never know all we have done, but God will take our willing heart and multiply even small actions into broad-reaching blessings.

**Spirit of breath, blow into my life
and take me deeper with you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Pulmonologists

Jeremiah 11:1-17; Romans 2:1-11

Worth thinking about

**God, through Jesus Christ, will judge
the secret thoughts of all. (v. 16)**

Paul warned those who relied on the law for their salvation that merely knowing the law is not enough. The law would need to be followed perfectly, and perfection would be impossible to attain. Nothing, not even a secret thought, would be hidden from the judgment of God.

Thank God we do not have to rely on the law for our salvation! Jesus lived the perfect life we could never achieve, and his righteousness is offered to us. Following Jesus does not mean we will never make mistakes or have bad thoughts. It does mean we can safely offer all our thoughts to Jesus, who will teach us how to be hearers, doers, and thinkers of the word. When God, through Jesus Christ, judges our secret thoughts, the focus will not be on all the wrong things we have done, but on our seed of faith to which we trust in Jesus. Jesus, and not our own efforts, is the source of our salvation. Now that's a thought worth thinking.

Dear Jesus, I offer my thoughts to you. Cleanse them and guide them toward you. Amen.

Prayer concern: Pastors

Psalm 39; Ezekiel 17:1-10

The purpose of fruit

**“We came to the land to which you sent us . . .
and this is its fruit.” (v. 27)**

In today's reading Moses sent twelve leaders into the promised land of Canaan to bring back a sample of fruit. Moses could have chosen something different, but the goal was to bring fruit. The reason was simple: fruit would tell the whole story of the land. If the fruit was good, they would also know that the soil, weather, roots, and plants were good. Indeed, good fruit would indicate that the whole land was good.

In the same way, what we produce in our lives as Christians tells us a lot about ourselves. “Good fruit” indicates the presence of God's Spirit working through us, while “bad fruit” shows us areas we need to grow. We can thank God for the good fruits of joy, peace, and patience. These are blessings we can enjoy. We can also thank God for showing us our weaknesses, tempers, and addictions. We should not be discouraged. Recognizing a problem and getting to its root can help us produce better fruit in the future.

**Holy Spirit, show me the fruit I produce.
Root me in your love and grow good fruit
in me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Grocery clerks

Psalm 39; Luke 13:18-21

Enjoying our forgiveness

**Happy are those whose transgression
is forgiven. (v. 1)**

I returned from a long work trip to find a small vase of flowers on my kitchen table. This simple gesture from a friend sent a feeling of warmth and welcome through me. It felt good to return to such a loving gesture.

A similar feeling of warmth and welcome awaits us in the arms of our ultimate friend and Savior, Jesus. Today's reading reminds us that happiness awaits those whose transgression is forgiven. That gift of forgiveness is for every one of us. Just as the flowers from my friend were a free gift I received simply for returning home, we can experience ultimate love and forgiveness simply by returning to God. Take a moment now to whisper anything you are struggling with. Know that God receives your prayers and welcomes you into a warm embrace. Do not dwell on what you have done wrong, but focus on how God can help you to grow and enjoy each day. Thank God for this beautiful bouquet of forgiveness!

**Heavenly friend, I receive this most
precious gift of forgiveness from you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are in prison

Joshua 4:1-13; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5

Annunciation of Our Lord

**But she was much perplexed
by his words. . . . (v. 29)**

Imagine being visited by an angel. When you tried to tell someone about the encounter, what would you remember most? Perhaps it would be the sudden appearance, the powerful presence, or the brightness of the unusual countenance. Perhaps it would be the awe that you were visited at all.

In the encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary, the first response that was recorded was not about any of these things. Instead, Mary was most perplexed by the words of Gabriel's greeting.

Words are extremely powerful. They can communicate both information and emotion. They can sow dissension or build harmony. They can create or they can destroy. The attention paid to words in this amazing encounter should remind us to be careful with our own words. We may never have an exchange as miraculous as the one between Gabriel and Mary, but the words we speak can have a deeper impact than we realize.

**Glorious creator, guard the words of my mouth
and use them for good and not harm. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Teachers

Psalm 45; Isaiah 7:10-14; Hebrews 10:4-10

Where is your focus?

**The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once!
Your people . . . have acted perversely.” (v. 7)**

In today's reading we witness a fascinating exchange between Moses and God. While Moses communed with God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites foolishly turned away. They fashioned an idol out of gold and called it their god. Moses did not know this was happening, but God certainly did. God recounted to Moses what they had done, and the more the conversation focused on the Israelites, the more God's righteous anger burned. Then came an interesting shift. Moses appealed to God not by addressing the sins of the people but by focusing instead on God's power and promises. With this shift the wrath of God subsided.

There is a principle here for each of us. When we think about the things we have done wrong and the challenges we face, our own anger, grief, and guilt can grow. When we focus instead on the attributes of God, we encounter peace, protection, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our focus makes the difference.

**Powerful creator, I stand in awe of you.
Keep my focus on you as you care
for my needs. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lawyers and advocates

Psalms 32; Luke 15:1-10

Fourth Sunday in Lent

**Then Jesus said, “There was a man
who had two sons.” (v. 11)**

Relationships are complicated. Consider a coworker, sibling, parent, friend, spouse, or others. You do not have to be in a relationship for long before you start to experience a mixture of give and take, joy and sadness, deep connection and misunderstanding.

We see these complexities in the parable Jesus told about the prodigal child and the older brother. While this parable is a beautiful analogy of God’s forgiveness toward us as wayward children, it is also a lesson in how we should respond in our other relationships. Just like the father in this parable, we are called to forgive those who make mistakes. Holding onto jealousy, resentment, and anger keeps us from enjoying our lives. No matter how complicated a relationship may be, one clear action we can take is forgiveness.

**Heavenly counselor, instill in me
your spirit of forgiveness and guide me
in my relationships. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are struggling to forgive

Psalms 32; Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Seekers

**God looks . . . to see if there are any who
are wise, who seek after God. (v. 2)**

“Peek-a-boo!” I yelled. I pulled my hands away from my face, and my friend’s daughter squealed with delight. When I covered my eyes again, I felt a gentle tug. She wanted to pull my hands away so she could see my face.

This simple game reminds me how God watches us to see what we are seeking. Will we seek after God with the same intensity as a young child playing peek-a-boo? Or will we get distracted and begin seeking wealth, relationships, or fame instead? God is always watching us, as intently as I watched from behind my fingers. Just as covering my eyes didn’t make me actually disappear, God never disappears on us. Even when we can’t feel any evidence of God’s presence, God is still with us, coming to us as we read the Bible, seek God’s will, and receive the gifts of God’s presence in word and meal. We pray the Holy Spirit will come to us and bring us the wisdom to seek God’s presence.

**Beautiful Savior, help me to never lose the
childlike wonder of seeking your face. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Children in orphanages
and foster care***

Leviticus 23:26-41; Revelation 19:1-8

Take note

And the angel said to me, “Write this: . . .” (v. 9)

My desk is covered in sticky notes. I keep a notebook and pen by my bed. I have a filing cabinet full of personal letters and legal documents. When something is important, I write it down so I don’t forget. Written words also allow me to share stories more precisely or defend contracts more officially. Writing adds something tangible, authoritative, and shareable to words.

When the angel spoke to John, the instruction was not simply to listen or to pay attention. The instruction was to write it down. Clearly this was a message that was important enough to record so that it would not be forgotten. It was also a message that was intended to be shared with others. The angel told John, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (v. 9). This simple statement paints a vivid image of Jesus—the Lamb—returning to bring us home in celebration. We need to remember and share with others these true words of God.

**Sweet Lamb, thank you for giving me
your written promises so I can read
and remember. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Writers

Psalm 53; Leviticus 25:1-19

God meets us where we are

**“Send the crowd away . . . for we are here
in a deserted place.” (v. 12)**

The crowds around Jesus had traveled to a remote and deserted place desperately looking for something. That same innate desire also drives us to seek God. Physically, we may not be in a remote desert, but our searching may bring us to a place that feels equally hard and isolated. Like the disciples, we want to leave that place and go into the villages and countryside to find provisions and rest. Yet sometimes God brings us into our own personal desert, away from our self-sufficient ways, for us to witness the miracle.

The desert may be barren to us, but it is not barren to God. The Bible records that Jesus fed five thousand with the miraculous bread and fish. All were filled and leftovers were gathered in baskets. We should not be fooled by our desert place. We may feel utterly alone, but God will meet us there. God can bring forth what we need and fill us no matter where we are, what we have done, and what we are facing.

**Great provider, meet me in my desert
where I wait fervently for you to appear. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel isolated

Psalm 53; 2 Kings 4:1-7

Hope in the desert

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

The Negeb is an arid region covering part of modern-day Israel and Palestine. For much of the year this rugged area is pocked with dry streambeds. The land is hot, dry, and seemingly lifeless. Then suddenly, after months of nothing but blazing sun, the winter rains come. Flash floods roar through the streambeds, gouging new watercourses and bringing a sudden abundance of life. There is nothing gentle or small about the outpouring when it comes.

The psalmist reflecting upon these streambeds is reminding us that God pours out blessings in the same way. You may be going through a challenging time, facing impossible barriers, or enduring physical, emotional, or spiritual dryness. Do not lose hope! Although you are in a desert season, in due time God will meet your needs and carve new and beautiful paths. Like that rushing water there will be nothing gentle or small about the outpouring when it comes.

**Lord, I cling to your promise that
hard times won't last forever. Sustain me
with your Spirit. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those awaiting test results

Isaiah 43:1-7; Philippians 2:19-24

Morning

As the light slowly breaks to the dawn of a new day, I wonder where I will see you at work, Lord. Will I be able to recognize your in-breaking or will the meaning of this day need time to be known? Grant me a curious heart as I journey through a new day, so I know you are both hidden and revealed in the quick arc of the day. Amen.

Evening

As I say good-bye to this day I reflect on how I have especially felt your presence today. There may be days when my senses are dull, and others when my awareness is keen. Lord, throughout my life you have fulfilled your promise to be with me in all circumstances. Thank you for this day and my journey of life. Amen.

Sunday

God of all creation, I greet this day with my heart filled with hope and peace. My senses are awakened to your presence all around me. I see your presence in those around me, I hear your guidance in my heart. I'm ready for the sweetness of spring and for your grace in the bread and wine. Amen.

Monday

The needs in the world can be overwhelming, and it can be hard to focus my prayers on those most in need. It seems too simple to say, "God be with everyone." Yet that is my prayer. God be with everyone and hear their prayers. Grant that they sense your peace. Amen.

Tuesday

There are times when my prayers are clearly directed because the need is for someone I love most. My prayers

are specific prayers: for those dealing with cancer, for those living with the pressure of debt, for those uncertain in their purpose. Today I pray for _____, as you have placed them on my heart, O God. Amen.

Wednesday

My world is small, but the world you created is immense. My prayers focus on what I know, but I hope they have an impact beyond what I can see each day. Lord, open my eyes and push me to pray for the whole world you love. Amen.

Thursday

Life and death happen each day. Today I pray for new life that comes through birth, recovery, and life-giving experiences. Today I pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one, the loss of their dreams, or the loss of hope. Be with those, Lord, who are dealing with both life and death on this day. Amen.

Friday

Change is hard and is constant in our lives. The world seems to be changing around us faster than we can fully comprehend. Lord, help us to see where you are amid change and how you are pushing us toward love that is deeper and wider than we can imagine. Amen.

Saturday

God of the faithless, sometimes I feel empty and lost. Your word rings hollow, and my prayers feel unheard. At times like this, remind me that you know my prayers before they are uttered and that you are present even when I am unaware. Renew me and fill me with your love and grace. Amen.

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