

Christ in Our Home

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Lesser festivals and commemorations

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

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

Writers

January 1–15 John A. Berntsen is a retired ELCA pastor who resides with his wife, Mary Lynn, and their dog, Prudence (as in the Beatles' "Dear Prudence, won't you come out to play?"), in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He is a member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Perkasio. John and Mary Lynn are parents of two adult boys and grandparents of three.

January 16–31 Laura Holck is pastor of Lutheran Church of the Cross in Calgary, Alberta. She has a doctorate in preaching, and she recently completed a degree in fine arts and enjoys exploring ceramics. She and her husband, Phil, have three grown children.

February 1–14 Greg Wilcox is a pastor who served for many years in specialized ministry. After he retired, he began a series of calls as an interim pastor. He and his wife live on a small lake near Lindstrom, Minnesota, where they enjoy the summer and endure the winter.

February 15–28 Kathryn Haueisen is a retired ELCA pastor and member of Messiah Lutheran Church in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. She and her husband enjoy day trips to sightsee and long trips to visit children and grandchildren around the country. She writes regularly about good people doing great things in our global village.

March 1–15 Paige Evers is a pastor at Reformation Lutheran Church in Milford, Delaware. She is passionate about equipping the people of God for ministry and discipling young people and their families for lifelong faith.

March 16–31 Michael Sherer is editor emeritus of the Twin Cities newspaper *Metro Lutheran*. A retired ELCA pastor, he spent most of his ministry as a religion communicator for the Lutheran church, including having served as editor of *Christ in Our Home*. He and his wife, Kathe, live in Waverly, Iowa.

Name of Jesus

And he was called Jesus. (v. 21)

On the eighth day, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to be circumcised and named, marking him as one of God's beloved and chosen people. Imagine having to live up to the name *Jesus*. The Hebrew root of the name, like that of the hero Joshua, means "God saves," "God helps." Perhaps the burden of his name (*What, me a savior?*) is why we don't hear much about Jesus until his adult mission begins.

Sometimes people change their names. In the Bible, Sarai becomes Sarah and Abram becomes Abraham—signs of God's new revelation, his changing work among us. My late father, a singer, was tempted to change his name in the 1930s. Because of the antisemitism of the time, he worried that his name, Berntsen, sounded too much like the Jewish name Bernstein. In the end he said, "Let them deal with me."

Your name is more than a label or a fashion accessory. Given at baptism, it reflects the burden and joy of your calling. Live into it this coming year.

Holy Jesus, name above all names, I need you every hour, for you are my help and my salvation. Amen.

Prayer concern: Mentors and guidance counselors

**Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7;
Philippians 2:5-11**

A loud witness

Extol the LORD, O Jerusalem! (v. 12)

Extolling the Lord is much like praising the Lord, but it adds a twist. To extol means to praise, but here *shabach* means to do so by shouting out loud. Make some noise!

The psalmist lauds the safety and security God provides. The agent is always God's word. From creation throughout human history, it is God who strengthens the bars of your gates (v. 13), grants *shalom* within your borders (v. 14), fills you with the finest wheat (v. 14), sends out his command (v. 15), hurls down hail like crumbs (v. 17), and declares his word to Jacob (v. 19). No one has seen anything like it.

At a recent musical play, our middle grandchild, who is on the autism spectrum, called out to his older brother when he appeared on stage. Nobody shushed him. It only enhanced Timon and Pumbaa's song from *The Lion King* about "no worries for the rest of your days." *Hakuna matata*, indeed! Our solemn assemblies can use some noise. The sound of silence cries out for it.

**Holy Lord, I shout your name from the rooftops,
for you are God-with-me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People on the autism spectrum

Psalm 72; Genesis 12:1-7; Hebrews 11:1-12

Unmixed blessings

**Blessed be . . . God . . . , who has blessed us
in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the
heavenly places. (v. 3)**

Ephesians seems written for a general audience, not tied to local circumstances, although we know the church is multicultural. Gentile and Jewish Christians are trying to get along. Common blessings are the vision for life together.

A dear colleague and mentor worried that when we say we have been blessed, it means that other people *aren't* blessed. We agreed to disagree on this matter. To say we are chosen and adopted might sound like we think we are deserving of special treatment. However, spiritual blessings "in the heavenly places" are never rationed to the few, nor are they the "mixed blessings" of our world. They overflow like a well from within.

The Bible understands being chosen not as privilege but as responsibility, extra duty (with no pay!), and working overtime. The reward for this status is that we get to give ourselves away. Those whom we think are "other" are in Christ near and dear. They bless us every day.

**Savior of the nations, blessed Jesus,
bind us together. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who work night shifts

Psalm 72; Genesis 28:10-22; Hebrews 11:13-22



Second Sunday of Christmas

And the Word became flesh and lived among us. (v. 14)

“Jesus is God with skin on,” said the vicar in response to our candidacy committee’s question. Her words sparked a conversation about what it means to be spiritual. How can we reconcile the impulse to be “above it all” with the good news that in Jesus, God is “down to earth”?

In the Bible the word *flesh* can mean different things. In John’s gospel flesh also includes the physical body. For Martin Luther, Jesus is God deep in our flesh. Hear what Luther says: “He [Christ] did not flutter about like a spirit, but He dwelt among men. He had eyes, ears, mouth, nose, chest, stomach, hands, and feet, just as you and I do” (LW 22:113).

My dermatologist is a great doctor. When he gets done scraping, cutting, grafting, freezing, and irradiating my skin, he asks me heavy questions about medical ethics. Dare we trust that God cares about our whole being, even our physical selves? Why does the Word become flesh? Because our words alone fail us.

**Christ, healer of my every ill, lay hands on me
and I shall be made whole. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Health-care workers who mend
the body

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

Endurance race

**Run with perseverance the race . . . ,
looking to Jesus. (12:1-2)**

The book of Hebrews is more of a sermon than a letter. The language is high-flown and polished. Its theme is perseverance in the face of ostracism and persecution. The preacher urges: Don't give up on your faith in Christ when the world is hostile. In all things, run with perseverance the race.

Our track coaches always had one rule: Whether you are first or last or stumbling, run *through* the finish line. We might think of Winston Churchill's wartime speech (October 29, 1941) to his alma mater: "Never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty."

This perseverance may seem impossible on one's own. It is. But like the runners in an Olympic marathon, you enter the stadium and run a final lap to the roar of the crowd. Think of it this way: They make up that "cloud of witnesses" (v. 1) that surrounds you from heaven. Running can be lonely, but not when you look to "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (v. 2).

**Jesus, refuge of the weary, uphold me
when I grow faint. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Coaches and physical therapists

Psalm 72; Joshua 1:1-9

Epiphany of Our Lord

**[The magi] left for their own country
by another road. (v. 12)**

We are told that the magi went home “by another road.” Under threat from King Herod, another way was not only prudent but also in keeping with their personal transformation. In Matthew’s gospel, this story is about a clash of empires. Will Herod’s rule of violence and earthly power prevail, or will the reign of God, the reign of peace and justice, emerge victorious? Why does the prince of peace pose such a threat to the Herods of this world? What is the other way home?

Once during Christmas I caught a young boy stealing lights from the bushes in our front yard. “What are you doing?” “I’m stealing your lights.” “But why?” “This is what I do when I get mad.” “What are you mad about?” “My brother and his friends are picking on me.” “I’m a pastor, you know.” *Head hangs low.* I will not divulge whether I went around the block to tell his parents. He would be in his thirties now. Each year I wonder, did he ever find the light? And his way home?

**Jesus, light of the world, lead me home
in peace and joy. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Peace and reconciliation within families

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

Charity cases

I pray that you may . . . know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. (vv. 18-19)

When you read what Ephesians says about love and knowledge, you might think that knowledge is being disparaged. After all, love “surpasses knowledge.” But read on—as well as what comes before—and you realize that by using the word *surpasses*, the writer means this love is beyond comprehension.

As we learned in Bible studies, this is the love of agape, unconditional love that is sacrificial and asks nothing in return—in other words, the love of Christ. The writer lifts up the Ephesians in prayer because their human differences and divisions (Gentiles and Jews in one church) make it tough for them to love one another.

The word *charity* has gotten a bad name. Growing up, I can remember some old timers saying things like, “Nobody ever gave me a dime. I’ve earned everything I’ve got.” I used to think, *Gee, he sounds happy*. But when it comes to the love of God, aren’t we all charity cases? We all need what others have to offer.

Sovereign friend, give us grace to know that without you, and one another, we can do nothing. Amen.

Prayer concern: People who struggle with pride

Psalm 72; 1 Kings 10:1-13

The life that awaits us

**See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare. (v. 9)**

God's people were in a world of hurt. Invaded by a hostile neighbor, leading citizens deported, the great temple of Solomon in ruins—how low could a people go? Amid the chaos and despair, God announces through the prophet, “New things I now declare.” God was faithful in the past. Now, “new things . . . spring forth” (v. 9).

As I write this devotion, wildfires rage in Los Angeles. Sadly, some bad actors threaten to withhold aid to the city in political retribution for who knows what? Thankfully, compassionate people are prevailing. How low do you have to go before a new day dawns?

People may speak of “hitting bottom” in life, but can anybody really measure this depth? It remains a great mystery that can be lived into only in faith. Ask those in recovery groups. The one certainty is that God has taken us by the hand and made with us a new covenant.

Sometimes we must give up the life we have planned in order to welcome the one that awaits us.

**Holy Wisdom, teach me the difference between
what I can and cannot change. Open me
to your future. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Staff and residents in
rehabilitation centers

Psalm 29; 1 Samuel 3:1-9; Acts 9:1-9

Thundering doxology

The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness. (v. 8)

If you like hymns that hold nothing back, then Psalm 29 is for you. The “voice of the LORD” thunders forth seven times. All creation quakes. The voice of the Lord disrupts everything. Compared to lowly gods, like Baal, the nature god of the Canaanites, the Lord sits enthroned over all. Ascribe to God, then, the glory of this name.

What small gods do we worship? Wealth, knowledge, fame, power, ease, security, control? Commenting on the first commandment in his Large Catechism (1, 1–29), Martin Luther diagnoses our human condition. A “god” is anything in which we place trust, he says. Mammon reigns.

We don’t have to dress up and go to a church to have a god, but merely claiming we are spiritual but not religious is a weak foundation. In what or whom have you placed your trust?

In the end, I have two certainties as I walk by faith: There is a God, and *I’m not God*. What a relief! Time for some doxologies.

**Most high God, I lift my voice
and sing of your glory. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The trust to let God be God in
all things

1 Samuel 16:1-13; 1 Timothy 4:11-16

No partiality

**[Peter said,] “I truly understand
that God shows no partiality.” (v. 34)**

Conversion to Christ is never once and done. After Jesus' resurrection, Peter went on to spread the word among his fellow Jews. But his encounter with Cornelius and his family presented Peter with a question: Can the Holy Spirit be poured out even on Gentiles, people with different ethnic and religious roots?

In a vision (vv. 1-13) a voice tells Peter that what God has made clean he must not call profane. Because God “shows no partiality,” neither must Peter. Later, Peter goes back to Jerusalem to share this conversion story and to promote a mission to Gentiles. It won't be easy.

Once when I was guest preaching, I overheard an usher refer to someone in attendance as an “outsider.” He used a local dialect I didn't know. Later I asked some people, “What's the word for ‘insider’?” They said, “We don't know.” “You mean, you know who's out but not who's in?” I asked. Silence. The Holy Spirit has a way of taking us out of our comfort zone.

**Welcoming God, rid me of all mistrust for those who
are different from me and open my arms. Amen.**

Prayer concern: New vistas in our
congregation's mission

Psalm 29; 1 Samuel 7:3-17; Acts 9:19b-31



Baptism of Our Lord

**Then Jesus came . . . to John at the Jordan,
to be baptized by him. (v. 13)**

I learned the circumstances of my baptism at midlife. On April 11, I pause, pray, and lift a glass to remember my baptism. This curbs the fear that, in the words of Bob Dylan, I am a “rolling stone . . . with no direction home.”

In the waters of baptism it is acclaimed to us and to those around us that we are beloved. When I remember my baptism, I remember God’s love for me. When I witness the baptism of others, I remember God’s love for them, for me, and for the world.

I was once taken off guard after giving a children’s sermon on baptism when a grandmother told me that she was worried because her grandchild, who had come up front, hadn’t been baptized and that the parents were indifferent. She didn’t want the child or the parents to be in the wrong. But that child was at that moment experiencing the love proclaimed in baptism. God loved and loves that child. Baptism declares, just as I declare to you now: You are loved. Go share that love.

**Voice from on high, you have called me your
beloved. Seal this good news in my heart. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel like they do not belong

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43

Flabbergasted

**The circumcised believers . . .
were astounded. (v. 45)**

As Peter was preaching, the believers were amazed to learn that God was still at work. The Greek word *exestēsan* (“out of one’s mind”) describes their amazement. *You mean, there’s more to us than we imagined?* Again, the Holy Spirit rule applies (see above, January 10): What God has made clean, especially us, we must not call profane. Nonetheless, we often tell ourselves (as does the world) what my beloved seminary teacher Father Henri Nouwen often wrote and spoke about as “the great lie”—that we deserve rejection.

Last year I did a funeral for a man who swore he had no friends. His sisters and former wife shared this information in our planning. His final years had been plagued by substance abuse and deep depression. When I arrived at the funeral home, I expected to see few people. The gathering was standing room only. Even in human terms, he was loved beyond measure. I trust that in heaven, he is astounded—and now in his right mind! Are you?

**Amazing God, your grace finds me when I
am lost. Give me a right mind and lead me
to your truth. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel imprisoned
by self-hatred

Psalm 89:5-37; Genesis 35:1-15

Youthful discretion

**[The LORD said,] “Do not say,
‘I am only a boy.’” (v. 7)**

Jeremiah had the usual attitude for a prophet being called: reluctance. “I am only a boy,” he objected (v. 6). But God declares, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’ for you shall go . . . , and you shall speak whatever I command you” (v. 7). And what’s more: “Do not be afraid . . . , for I am with you to deliver you” (v. 8). The boy prophet will have to learn as he goes. But God goes with him.

My new family doctor went to high school with our youngest son. My pastor is of the same vintage. What gives me comfort is that because they have been trained more recently, I know that I am receiving the very best of their professions! Would I want to go back and do all that they are doing? Not on your life.

For everything there is a season, and sometimes the season is to receive the gifts of others—and to be grateful that when they started their journey, they took it seriously and humbly enough to be reluctant. Rejoice in the young! We all need them.

**Strong, loving, and wise teacher, let me trust that
you see in me the gifts I cannot yet see. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are starting new jobs

Psalm 89:5-37; Acts 8:4-13

Speaking out of turn

**And [Jesus] ordered them
not to make him known. (v. 16)**

The religious leaders don't like the fact that Jesus is doing so much good. Healing on the Sabbath (v. 10)? Plucking heads of grain because people are hungry (v. 1)? What about the Sabbath restrictions? Jesus doesn't react to their threat but simply departs (v. 15) and goes on his way, not as a strategy or out of fear, but to fulfill Isaiah's promise of a meek and quiet servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-4). Witness through speech will always matter, but so will meekness.

I was once approached in the parking lot of a home improvement store by a man demanding to know: If I died today, would I be saved? I told him that Christ Jesus had died for me two thousand years ago. Christ had saved me. I hope my few words witnessed to God's love for me and for him. I hope my quiet witness always blesses others.

The measure of all things, even witness, is the great commandment to love God above all and your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34-40).

**Lover of my soul, make me bold and wise in my
quiet desire to witness to your salvation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Missionaries and evangelists

Psalm 89:5-37; Isaiah 51:1-16

Formed in the womb

The LORD called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. (v. 1)

Of the two Hebrew words for “womb,” this verse uses the feminine *beten*, which can be rendered “belly.” (The masculine *rechem* connotes compassion.) The prophet assures the exiled and despairing nation of Israel that God knew them before they were even born. Their calling to be a “light to the nations” (v. 6) is prenatal. New life and renewed purpose lay hidden in their hopeless circumstances.

When our first son was born, I was given one task in the birthing suite: to watch the fetal monitor for contractions and signal my wife. However, I was reading the monitor upside down! I was sternly corrected and given remedial instruction. This is forever a cautionary tale and part of our family lore.

Trusting that we are formed in the womb empowers us to live joyously and purposefully in an otherwise haphazard, sometimes upside-down (even of our own doing!) world. Your life is meant to be, even if you were told you were the “surprise” child!

Mothering God, nurture me in the sure and certain hope of my calling to be a light to all. Amen.

Prayer concern: Expectant parents

Psalm 40:1-11; Isaiah 22:15-25; Galatians 1:6-12

When things don't go our way

**[The LORD] put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God. (v. 3)**

Some days I think things are definitely not going my way. Relatives in my parent's generation are dying at an alarming rate. I am lucky to have lived this long in the love and care of so many of my elders, but these deaths are a lot to deal with.

Psalm 40 is a prayer for such a time. Whether we are mourning a loss, questioning our faith, worried or stressed, fearful or regretful, or shaken in any other way, the psalmist's words remind us that we are in good and faithful hands.

We cannot assume a life of control and comfort, that things will proceed as we wish. Life often requires change, adaptation, and trust. But we have been designed for love. We have been invited to lean on the grace and goodness of God, even when we cannot see them.

When things aren't going our way and we turn to God, God can put a new song on our lips and change our mourning and fear into a song of praise to our creator God, who holds us fast in sure and loving hands.

**Life-giving God, place a song of praise in my mouth.
I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People experiencing loss or fear

Genesis 27:30-38; Acts 1:1-5

Nothing is missing

I [Paul] give thanks . . . that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait. (vv. 4, 7)

Paul writes to the church in Corinth (the “Sin City” of Paul’s day), to a people desperately needing spiritual grounding but living in an environment hostile to the idea. The young church is divided against itself. It faces huge challenges: Married men are unfaithful; women are gossiping; everyone is partying. Paul will ultimately guide the church to unity and love, but here in the opening words of this letter, he reminds the people that Jesus already called them and will be revealed in time. They already have what they need.

This is a vital truth of the Christian way. Nothing is wrong. Nothing is missing. Our calling is not to flounder in need but to claim the gifts already among us. We are called to build community among those already gathered, talk *with* each other (instead of *about* each other), and build love and trust. Our Lord Jesus Christ will perfect and unify us. He will bring about the healing and growth of the church.

**Jesus, reveal yourself to us in each other. We pray
in your perfect name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People worried about
the church’s witness

Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Kings 19:19-21; Luke 5:1-11



Second Sunday After Epiphany

**[Jesus] said to them,
“What are you looking for?” (v. 38)**

People are looking for all sorts of things that the church cannot provide. Recently, a woman called our church office asking for rent and security deposit money, claiming, “The church is rich.” She was angry and confused when we turned her away empty-handed.

In the beginning of his ministry, Jesus asked people, “What are you looking for?” I suspect he knew the answer before he asked. Here was the Lamb of God, the giver of all wisdom, all community and shelter, and all peace. They could not help but seek him.

Jesus has continued to ask the same question of everyone who seeks him. If we want the church to pay our rent, we will probably be disappointed. If we seek wealth or fame or power, Jesus might not have much to offer us. If, however, we seek wisdom, community, unity, and peace, if we seek ways to love one another, Jesus will reveal himself to us and ask us to draw near to one another and to him. He will teach us to listen and learn.

**Lamb of God, give me new life, that I may
share your love with others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are experiencing lack

Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Confession of Peter (transferred)

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (v. 16)

Jesus was asking his disciples who people were saying that he is and discovering that everyone was getting the answer wrong—everyone except Peter. Today, we celebrate the feast day of Peter’s confession: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Getting the answer right is the beginning of a life in relationship with God.

I once thought that if I prayed enough of the right kind of prayers, I would be protected from the pains and losses of life. In practice, I was professing belief in a kind of vending machine God who gave me only what I earned. My faith was more about what I was doing than who Jesus is.

Peter teaches us all to profess faith in the true Messiah, the Son of the living God who accompanies us through life, no matter what life brings. His profession provides a true compass to point us in a life-giving direction. This claim has the power and gives us the assurance to live in a meaningful way.

Son of the living God, point me in a life-giving direction. In your name I pray. Amen.

Prayer concern: People whose prayers feel bankrupt to them

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

God hears

You [LORD] have given me an open ear. (v. 6)

The tale of a wish-granting genie living in a lamp was captured in *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folktales compiled in the Middle Ages. Sometimes the story has made me wonder, *What wishes would I make if I had that lamp?* I have thought about everything from an unending money supply and a self-cleaning kitchen to world peace.

Is this speculating a complete waste of time? Not if it reveals something about God. The psalmist tells us that God is far more generous than this genie. God's gift to all of us is an open ear. God hears the whole of our lives from a place deep inside us where words have yet to form and sets about ordering life for our growth and development. God hears beyond our recognizable wants and opens God's hand, "satisfying the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16).

Why speculate about holding a lamp with a wish-granting genie when the God of the whole cosmos turns an open ear to our lips?

God of the cosmos, teach me to speak to you.

I pray in the name of your loving Son. Amen.

Prayer concern: People fantasizing about a better life

Isaiah 53:1-12; Hebrews 10:1-4

Doing our own thing

**I am the LORD your God, . . . who leads you
in the way you should go. (v. 17)**

We were created and designed to be in relationship not only with God, but also with each other and with every other created thing. It's nearly impossible to be in relationship, though, when we are doing our own thing.

That I want to do my own thing, to live my own way, might not seem like much of a problem, but multiply that by the total number of people on the planet and it becomes a big problem: 8 billion people each doing their own thing in their own way.

We often see that single-mindedness in the world today, resulting in a disrespect for scientists, principals, and teachers; the loss of green spaces; and challenges in the church. Real community is taking a hit not because it isn't possible, but because we aren't willing to compromise and collaborate for the greater good. We don't want to do that work.

What would we have to give up for community to flourish? How would we have to change to notice God is already leading us?

**Challenging God, turn me to your way
for the sake of all your beloved creation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Community leaders

Psalm 40:6-17; Matthew 9:14-17

New light

**Those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (v. 2)**

What is deep darkness for you? Being outside relationship, lost, isolated, or incapable of finding your way, whatever the reason? All of us sometimes feel like we are in deep darkness, tossed about by life's hardships, finding ourselves in situations beyond our capacities.

We all have days—or seasons—when we are people in deep darkness. We all need a pathway forward, a companion who has walked difficult roads before us, and insights that get us unstuck. We all need a transformational “Aha!” We all need light to shine. Isaiah promises us that it does.

Even when we live in the deep darkness of disease or death, lack or oppression, we are not beyond hope. We are promised that God's light shines everywhere, even where we are and when we need it most. Even the smallest glimmer breaks the darkness. The darkness, no matter how deep, is no match for the glow of a candle or a single ray of light, let alone the dawn of a new day.

**God of light, shine on me and all who struggle
to find their way in the dark. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The darkness we each face

Psalms 27:1-6; 1 Samuel 1:1-20; Galatians 1:11-24

God provides

**One thing . . . I seek: to live in the house
of the LORD all the days of my life. (v. 4)**

Long before Abraham Maslow formulated his hierarchy of needs, people of the Siksika Nation in Alberta knew some human needs precede others. They lived in a system of communal wisdom predating Maslow's hierarchy that afforded everyone in the community a path from food, water, and shelter to love, belonging, and self-determination. Interestingly, when Maslow developed this now-famous theory, he omitted the most fundamental need identified by the Siksika Nation: reliance on the Great Creator.

Without the Great Creator, we are left to meet our own needs, whether individually or corporately. We struggle alone to become the providers of the things needed for a fulfilled life. But when we are in relationship with the Great Creator, every need is met by a gracious, unseen hand. From the gifts of that hand, we learn to trust more and more with each step of our journey. Only one thing is really needed, the generous hand of a generous God.

**Great Creator God, let me live beside you
and follow your path all my days. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People providing for themselves

Psalm 27:1-6; 1 Samuel 9:27–10:8; Galatians 2:1-10

Traveling advice

**Be knit together in the same mind
and the same purpose. (v. 10)**

The words of today's focus text are often spoken at weddings, offered as advice for couples setting out to make a life together. These words are a sort of road map to ensure their travels will be smooth. When I think about my days as a new spouse, I remember the rough times we experienced as we tried to think and reason together. We came from different cultures and living patterns and had much to work through. The path wasn't always smooth.

Paul doesn't write this advice for a bride and groom; he writes for a young church in its early days. How difficult it is for a council, pastor, and congregation to think and reason together. The small congregation I serve now has about a hundred different cultures, voices, and opinions. Yet Paul's advice remains: "Be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose."

Through rough times and smooth times, we would do well to travel together with care, purpose, listening, thinking, and reasoning.

**God of relationship, guide the church in the ways
of love you have shown us through your Son. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Church councils and congregations

Psalms 27:1-6; 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Luke 5:27-32



Third Sunday After Epiphany

Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (v. 17)

Jesus’ proclamation in today’s focus text was the first act of his public ministry. Before he called disciples, before he healed anyone, before he taught, he told people the kingdom of heaven was near.

Growing up, I always thought the kingdom of heaven was far away, on the other side of life, only reachable after death and only if you had been good. I realize now that such a belief is more of a prescription for getting gifts from Santa than God’s welcome into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is saying something different here. He is saying the kingdom of heaven has drawn close to us, before we have died, no matter how we have behaved.

We can see the kingdom of heaven from here and experience it while we are still living. It is possible to see and experience God’s realm now, and all the other things Jesus does and says help us figure out how to dwell in it—today. He started by leaving his comfort zone and paying attention to the prophets.

**Jesus, help me to notice and share the things
that bring your kingdom near. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel undeserving
of God’s love

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Conversion of Paul (transferred)

[Jesus said,] “Make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance.” (v. 14)

The apostle Paul was trained in the law and therefore was able to prepare and present eloquent arguments. Today, as we celebrate the feast day of his conversion to follow Christ, we notice Jesus instructing his disciples to do the opposite. Following Christ often results in reversals like this. We are trained to use our skills and abilities in a particular way, but Jesus asks us to use them differently.

I have sometimes looked back over my life and experienced a sudden moment of clarity, seeing things come together for a purpose without my knowing. When I was called to ministry, for example, I felt all my Girl Scout skills, engineering education, Toastmasters training, volunteering with troubled teens, and lessons in parenting, along with the prayers and faith of my parents and grandparents, being knit together to be used in a way I hadn't anticipated.

Christ is like that. He takes what was already good and uses it for something great.

**Jesus, help me trust the work
you are doing in me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People suffering with social anxiety

Acts 9:1-22; Psalm 67; Galatians 1:11-24

Not alone

Work on your own salvation with fear and trembling. (v. 12)

The “you” addressed in today’s focus text from Philippians is plural, meaning Paul is not speaking to anyone individually. Paul is asking the whole church to work on its own salvation together, rather than asking each of us to work on ourselves in isolation.

This matters greatly because it means we are not alone in our questioning about life, faith, and the meaning of scripture, nor in the work of continually asking, *What is salvation? What does it do? How does it change our living now?*

Together and with God, we can give one another safe space and grace to work with life’s big questions. Together and with God, we are called to unity of faith as we work on our own salvation and on the salvation of all creation.

In the Greek language of the New Testament, pronouns matter. They matter in our language too. We might better translate this text, “Work on *all y’all’s* own salvation with fear and trembling.” We are called to do this work together.

**Saving God, remind me I am not alone.
I pray in the name of Jesus the healer. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who are incarcerated

Psalm 27:7-14; Judges 7:12-22

Here now

**I believe that I shall see the goodness
of the LORD in the land of the living. (v. 13)**

A word I sometimes use to describe people in North America these days is “unsettled.” When I hear people talking about the state of the world in general, and politics in particular, I hear a restlessness and uncertainty that seems to permeate everything. It seems everyone everywhere is upset all the time.

I have heard people say that we cannot expect too much goodness in this life, that only when we meet God face-to-face will goodness prevail. But scripture tells us something different. Amid abandonment, adversity, and conflict, the psalmist boldly declares that God’s goodness can and will be made known here and now.

Today’s focus text is a call to wait on the Lord. Do not be naive about the realities we all face or the adversity inherent in human living, but believe in God and God’s love more. Believe you shall see the goodness of God here, now, in the land of the living. Then watch and wait for the results. God’s goodness lives.

**God of the living, reveal your goodness to me today.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who too often think
they are right

Genesis 49:1-2, 8-13, 21-26; Luke 1:67-79

Imagining God's pain

[The LORD says,] “O my people, what have I done to you? . . . Answer me!” (v. 3)

We normally hear words from the prophet Micah in worship on Good Friday, echoed in the solemn reproaches calling for self-examination. We hear God's exasperated cries of wonder, confusion, and anger at the ways we have fallen short as God's children.

God, the giver of every good thing, showers blessings on us, softens our hearts, and transforms us into the image of Christ. God also asks us to pass on this goodness, to share God's grace with others. When we don't, God feels it.

We have been assured that we don't have to do anything to earn God's love, but God does call us to join in the work of re-creation. God calls us to practice love, reconciliation, and peace and to build sanctuaries of safety, refuge, and praise. God equips us for relationship and community.

In Micah 6, God asks, *Why aren't you living according to your purpose—nurturing relationship with me and my creation?* In Jesus, God shows us the way.

**From your place of pain, O God, heal me,
through the work of your beloved Son. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who don't know they need God

Psalm 15; Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 1 Peter 3:8-12

Good enough

**O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill? (v. 1)**

God spins the planets and lights the stars. God lays out a blueprint for galaxies, crafts worlds, and fills these spinning orbs with a variety of wondrous creatures. We are created in God's very image, complete with power, autonomy, and freedom.

Aware of the awesome power and majesty of God, the psalmist declares that nobody is worthy of standing in God's presence, let alone living in God's residence. His conclusion is that only those who are blameless and righteous—namely, none of us—may approach God.

If our standing with God depended on our ability to elevate ourselves to God's level, we would be disappointed. The Bible, however, tells an unfolding story of a loving, generous God who sets aside magnificent and awesome power and makes a covenant to love us. We were created fragile and fallible, but God has called us good enough.

Who may abide in God's tent and dwell on God's holy hill? The ones God loves. Namely, all of us.

**Loving God, help me see beauty in the diversity
of your whole creation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel unworthy

Deuteronomy 24:17–25:4; 1 Timothy 5:17-24

You matter

**God chose what is weak in the world
to shame the strong. (v. 27)**

As a young person, I often heard people such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. used as examples of what I could become if only I let God work with me. I could be the president of the United States if I worked hard, I was told. It turns out that is a terrible way for a kid to be raised, constantly expected to be much bigger than they can imagine.

I was at a baseball game once when a young woman a few rows behind me tapped me on the shoulder and told me that something I had said changed her life and saved her faith. I didn't remember the incident. That's how God works. We are called, just as we are, to be present, honest, heartfelt, and faithful. Then God uses those interactions, knits them together for others, and heals people and the whole creation.

God calls us in our weakness and insignificance to make a huge difference—to bear love and grace to those around us, wherever we happen to be, whether we know it or not.

**God, use me to make a difference for someone else.
I pray in your life-giving name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who want to make a difference

Psalm 15; Micah 3:1-4; John 13:31-35