

# **Peace at the Last**

Visitation with the Dying







## Introduction

*Peace at the Last* was birthed out of congregational need and experience in a specific time and place: Lake Chelan Lutheran Church in Chelan, Washington, beginning in 2007. A member said to me “Pastor, it feels like people are coming to us to die!” For a long stretch of time our little congregation was facing the deaths of so many. The last of our charter members were lingering at death’s door. At the same time, several younger people—so vibrant and alive—faced chemotherapy and radiation, rising hopes dashed by the relentless diseases that afflicted the body.

Through this time of travail, the ministry of accompaniment was born. Our congregation has continued to be called upon to walk with people who are sick and facing death. People in our congregation and in our larger community have asked us to join them in their journey. Over the years, we have gathered a group of people who go to visit the dying, the sick, and the elderly. One of our people put it well when he said, “I’m completely afraid of being with people who are dying. So I know I have to go to them.”

This honest expression of fear sparked a conversation about *why* people are afraid to visit nursing homes, hospitals, and sickbeds. What we found was that people are reluctant to go into such situations for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. “Should I talk about death? Do I touch the person I am visiting? Should I pray? What do I pray?” These are all real issues for people who would like to bear witness to Jesus in the face of mortality, but who do not have what they need to do so.

From this came the idea of creating a liturgy for the visitation of the dying. Of course, pastors have prayers and liturgies at their disposal in pastoral care resources, but we wanted to create something that was accessible to *everyone* and that was visually beautiful.

For several months our group of eight or nine people met to gather resources that would be appropriate for such a liturgy. Our musician, Rolf Vegdahl, wrote several of the musical pieces in the liturgy. Others found or wrote prayers and blessings. We chose psalms by asking members of the congregation which ones they found most meaningful and reassuring. From start to finish, the liturgy is completely grounded in the experience of our congregation. We believe that truth rooted in a particular congregation can carry truth for the wider church. Indeed, isn’t that what art itself makes clear?

While the liturgy was being compiled over 18 months, Wendy Schramm, the artist, was busy honing her watercolor craft. Lake Chelan Lutheran has a room dedicated

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to art and Wendy spent hours and hours in the art room and in the natural world around the Chelan area, painting and praying over the liturgy. When we finally had a complete draft of the liturgy, she went to work painting the frame for each piece. Restful and comforting beauty was her goal as she painted. What she found was that not every piece of the liturgy, and, of course, not every moment of dying, is restful. There are stark pieces in the liturgy that she has matched in visual art. Restful, stark, reassuring; it is all beautiful. And, as is proclaimed in the Akathist of Thanksgiving, “All true beauty draws the soul to You.”

Beauty is at the heart of the Christian faith. We may discuss whether beauty is necessary or not, affordable or not, but as Alexander Schmemmann points out, “Beauty is never ‘necessary,’ ‘functional,’ or ‘useful.’ And when, expecting someone whom we love, we put a beautiful tablecloth on the table and decorate it with candles and flowers, we do all this not out of necessity, but out of love.” I would add that what the liturgy makes clear is that this beauty is an expression of *extravagant* love!

We who follow Jesus use this and all kinds of beauty to express the love of God to the least among us. It’s a fool’s errand in one sense—to create such a work of beauty for dying people. But I also believe this: if the church dedicated itself to just one thing, to accompanying the dying well, it would not be wrapped up in the anxiety of whether or not the church itself was going to survive. It would have no time for such anxiety. It would be too busy ministering to people who knew where to come to die and to live in the beauty of extravagant love.

—Paul Palumbo, pastor, Lake Chelan Lutheran, Chelan, Washington

## About the art

It can be hard to visit the dying. When we decided to create this resource we wanted to make it easier. We wanted it to be read like a beloved children’s book, a prayer book, or a hymnal. Creating the illustrations was my part of the project. Here in the rural Pacific Northwest we have few religious symbols. Living at the foot of the Cascade Mountains gives us daily opportunity to look at God’s ever-changing creation. By using watercolor illustrations, many of them painted on location, I hoped to connect the sacred presence we see with the liturgical words and music we hear, speak, and sing.

When we use this liturgy, we begin in our church at the baptismal font. Our stained glass cross, and specifically the dove, visually continue throughout the pages. The pictorial memory of some of our favorite places connects word and sacrament to location and experience: looking down on the Chelan Valley from high on the hills, sitting in a boat on the still waters of Lake Chelan, hiking Railroad Creek Valley near Holden Village, and standing in the stark black of our burned forest. In these pages we also visually remember and share the touch of peace.

I pray that these illustrations, so meaningful to us, may be helpful to the larger body of Christ, and that others too may hold the comfort we have found in these pages.

—Wendy Schramm, artist





## How to use this liturgy

We have included instruction on pages where explanations are needed. In addition, the following may be helpful.

1. Being present with the dying can seem like a daunting task. The first four pages of the liturgy are intended to give courage in the face of fears. Before going forth to visit, choose a centering space (church sanctuary, a home) to do the readings and prayers of preparation.
2. Be generous with silence, both in preparation and in the visitation. We have found that silence, often a source of anxiety in visiting, has become a time of richness and grounding. Make friends with silence.
3. The beginning of the visit should include warm greeting by name to the person facing death (whether they are conscious or not), and a kind touch on the shoulder. We often greet people with the kiss of peace.
4. The art and beauty of this work are for those who are visiting as well as for the person who is dying. It is appropriate to read or sing each page and then turn the book as one does when reading a picture book to a child.
5. When singing the chant “If We Live,” take time to repeat as often as seems called for. “Mortal Days Are like the Grass” may be spoken or sung along with “If We Live.” If sung, the music is found in the back of the book.
6. A number of psalms are included in this liturgy. We do not intend that all of them be used in a single visit. Choose one or more to be read or chanted. If a specific mood is discernible in the room, select a psalm that matches that mood.
7. Signing of the cross. An assigned person (visitor, family member) makes the sign of the cross on the parts of the dying person’s body named in the liturgy. Take the index finger or thumb and mark the cross with a line top to bottom and left to right. This is a time for touch. In other words, it is not a sign of the cross *above* the body, but *on* the body. The sign of the cross is made as the blessing is voiced. Anointing oil may be used. After each signing, the refrain “Shepherd Me, O God” may be sung. After the last sign of the cross is made, those gathered may repeat the refrain several times.

8. A final song, prayer, and blessing conclude the liturgy.

May this resource bring encouragement and peace to you and to those to whom you minister.

—The Lake Chelan Lutheran Church Visitation Group  
December 2015

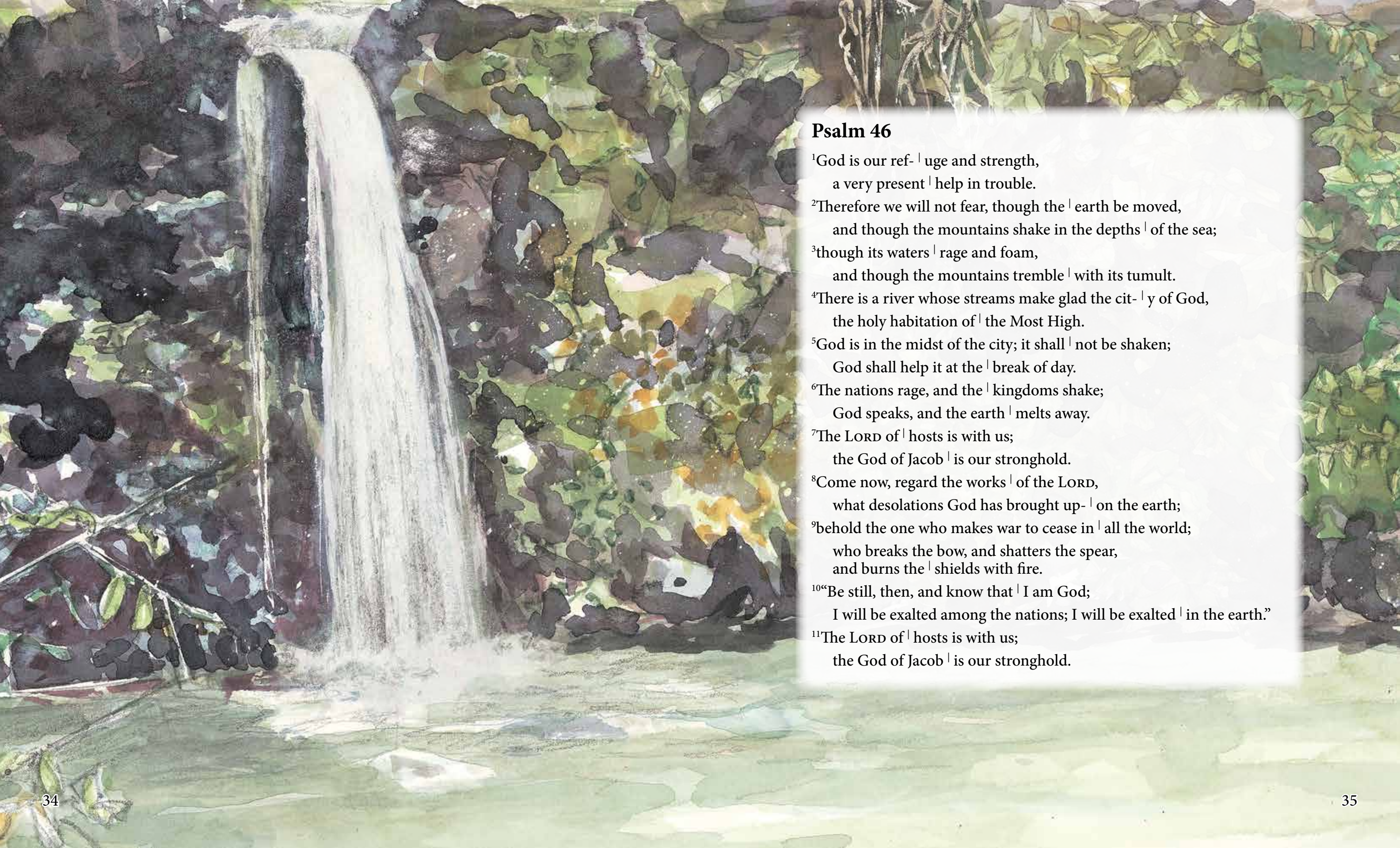




## COLLECT

*Let us pray.  
Holy and Living God,  
by the mystery of the death of your Son,  
you have filled the world with hope.  
As we gather this day,  
we draw near to his death and to our own,  
remembering your promises  
and trusting your Faithful One, Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.  
Amen.*





## Psalm 46

<sup>1</sup>God is our ref- | uge and strength,  
a very present | help in trouble.

<sup>2</sup>Therefore we will not fear, though the | earth be moved,  
and though the mountains shake in the depths | of the sea;

<sup>3</sup>though its waters | rage and foam,  
and though the mountains tremble | with its tumult.

<sup>4</sup>There is a river whose streams make glad the cit- | y of God,  
the holy habitation of | the Most High.

<sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of the city; it shall | not be shaken;  
God shall help it at the | break of day.

<sup>6</sup>The nations rage, and the | kingdoms shake;  
God speaks, and the earth | melts away.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD of | hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob | is our stronghold.

<sup>8</sup>Come now, regard the works | of the LORD,  
what desolations God has brought up- | on the earth;

<sup>9</sup>behold the one who makes war to cease in | all the world;  
who breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,  
and burns the | shields with fire.

<sup>10</sup>“Be still, then, and know that | I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted | in the earth.”

<sup>11</sup>The LORD of | hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob | is our stronghold.



*The Lord be with you.  
And also with you.*

*Let us pray.  
O Lord,  
support us all the day long of this troubled life,  
until the shadows lengthen  
and the evening comes  
and the busy world is hushed,  
the fever of life is over,  
and our work is done.  
Then, in your mercy,  
grant us a safe lodging,  
and a holy rest,  
and peace at the last.  
Amen.*

