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Name of Jesus

**Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name . . . above every
other name. (v. 9)**

When my parents named me, they honored a grandparent and a great-grandparent. Apart from those connections, though, my first and middle names already told a story—they mean “dependent on God.” They point to a God whose grace claims and sustains me each day.

We are invited to be dependent on God, to lean into the fullness of God’s name: the name that is stronger, wiser, more compassionate, and more loving than any other on whom we may call. The name of the One who knows the sound of our voice. The name of the One who reaches out to us when we are in free fall. The name of the One whose mercy and love are deep and wide. The name of the One whose forgiveness sets us free and loose in this world and the next. The name of the One who will never forsake us, no matter what.

**Gracious Lord, by your name,
reveal your love and mercy present
in my life, now and always. Amen.**

***Prayer concern: Audiologists and speech
pathologists***

Psalm 8; Numbers 6:22-27; Luke 2:15-21

Faith moves

**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen. (v. 1)**

Take a moment and read again, slowly, this verse from Hebrews. Notice how faith moves: It assures us of things we hope for; it also convinces us of things we cannot see. The passage invites readers to appreciate the ways these two moves, assurance and conviction, have been embodied in the lives of many faithful followers of Jesus. The list of followers the writer mentions is neither exhaustive in terms of who follows Jesus nor in the ways those moves become embodied in their lives. Scripture is many things, but a catalog it is not. Who has not been mentioned? How has their witness conveyed both assurance and conviction for you? How does their embodiment of faith both challenge and strengthen your own? Why do you imagine they lived out their faith in the ways they did? If you could talk with them about it, how might that conversation unfold? What would you hope to learn—about their faith and your own?

**Thanks for the ways you move within me,
O God. Make me attentive to your love. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Spiritual directors and prayer groups

Genesis 12:1-7; Psalm 20

A different map

**For [the king] delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper. (v. 12)**

From my home office, I heard my ten-year-old daughter and her friends playing school. One person was the teacher, another the principal, and still another the school cook. This left only a few friends to play the students—a role they all know well. As I worked, I heard the students being yelled at by those who pretended they were in charge. When they were done, I pulled my daughter aside and asked if the teacher, principal, and cook at her school treat students like that. She admitted they do not. I wondered, *Why the yelling at the students? Where did they learn this way to lead?*

Psalm 72 sets the stage for a different way to exercise authority. Instead of hostility, the king is alert, attentive, and open to the concerns of those otherwise silenced by society. The psalm draws a different map to live by, one in which justice, mercy, and love are the measure of a kind of leading that welcomes and invites, listens and responds.

**O God, open me to lead with grace
that welcomes and invites those
whom many push away. Amen.**

Prayer concern: School cooks

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

Second Sunday of Christmas

**[Jesus] was in the world, and the world
came into being through [Jesus],
yet the world did not know him. (v. 10)**

A little under a month before Christmas last year, I was in the hospital after having a stroke. Medical professionals asked me questions I would normally be able to answer; I couldn't find the words. Friends and family called, but I didn't always recognize their voices. Yet when my daughter and wife nestled their heads against my shoulder, I knew I was loved.

While Jesus' arrival had long been foretold in prophecies, no one imagined that his birth would happen the way it did and in the place it did. No one fathomed that his presence with the sick, the weak, the poor, the oppressed, sinners, and those who had died would be a sign that God's grace and love had become flesh. Nothing, though, has ever held Jesus back from his deep love and care for the world—including us. Hidden though Jesus may be from our sight, God's grace and love endure forever.

**Jesus, wrap me in your love,
especially when I have forgotten. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People with chronic illness

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

Witnesses

**Therefore, since we are surrounded
by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight. (12:1)**

I was notified a while back that I would need to be available for jury duty. I imagined the kind of case I might hear, the opening statements, the witnesses who would tell what they had seen—true or not—and the outcome. I had watched television shows that glamorized the process. I was especially intrigued and unnerved by the role of the witnesses. What they saw and reported held the likelihood of a person's guilt or innocence. I wondered, too, if a witness felt any guilt or fear based on what they had to say on the stand.

The word translated “witness” in the New Testament refers to either one who suffers or one who testifies. Or it's possible one leads to the other: Testifying could lead to suffering, and vice versa. Yet, when the message about which we testify in our lives is the good news of Jesus Christ, the suffering is ultimately Christ's own, for our sake. Jesus sets us free to tell the story. What, then, shall we say?

**Set me free to tell the fullness of the story of
your love and mercy in my life, O God. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Witnesses and jurors

Psalm 72; Joshua 1:1-9

Epiphany of Our Lord

**They saw the child with Mary his mother,
and they knelt down and paid him homage. (v. 11)**

Though Herod feigned curiosity toward the news of Jesus' birth, the gospel writer Matthew lets readers in on what fueled Herod's real interest: He was afraid. He was disturbed. The magi saw this in a dream, and they followed "another road" home (v. 12).

In this story there is more than one moment of revelation: one in which the magi meet the Savior of the world, and the other by which the magi are confronted by an authority whose power seeks to quell the release of God's abundant love into the world. But fear's motives will be exposed. The magi don't fall in line behind fear. They recognize the limits of fear's promise. The magi have met a love in tune with life. And when death ultimately comes, it doesn't remain: Jesus' death means life for us and consolation for our fear.

**Console me, O God, when fear overtakes me.
Reveal the depth of your love for me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those with anxiety

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

Blessings

Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighteded in you and set you on the throne of Israel! (v. 9)

At the close of worship services, I speak the benediction, closing it with the sign of the cross. Once, I noticed a young person mouthing the words as I spoke them. And when the cross was made, the young person made the same sign toward me. After the service, they came through the line and said, “*Everyone* has been blessed by God. I wanted you to know this.” I have long since forgotten this person’s name. I’ll likely never forget their blessing of me, and their explanation.

The words spoken to Solomon remind him not only of how he has been blessed but of how those around him have been blessed too. In that reminder, the queen of Sheba proclaims that those blessings have come from God.

It can easily slip our minds: We are blessed, and those blessings come from God. So many things crowd our minds and distract us. Thanks be for those sent to remind us of all that God has done for us.

**Thank you, God, for your gracious blessings,
including those who befriend and
support me. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who bless us

Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:14-21

You are a minister

But each of us was given grace . . . to equip the saints for the work of ministry. (vv. 7, 12)

On the cover of bulletins in many congregations I have served is a list of those participating in the service: the lector, the cantor, the ushers, the acolytes, communion preparers and servers, those who play the organ and piano, those who will offer special music, the preacher and presider. I'm always grateful for this list, knowing people are using their God-given gifts for the work of ministry. Some bulletins even identify all congregational members as ministers. While congregations are served by pastors and deacons, they are also full of ministers who serve the gospel in the church and world using their unique gifts. In our baptism into Christ, each of us is gifted to help "equip the saints for the work of ministry." Each of us does this in our own way. Each of us is called to use our gifts. Each of us plays a role. Each of us is equipped. Each of us is a minister. What gifts has God given you?

Gracious God, empower me to use the gifts you have given me for the work of ministry. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who doubt their gifts

Psalm 72; 1 Kings 10:14-25

A good shepherd

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD. . . . And they shall live secure. (v. 4)

A friend of mine grew up on a sheep farm. While others would rush around caring for their flock, my friend liked to perch on top of a fence and watch how the sheep interacted, how they sought nourishment, how they communicated, how they would tussle, and how they would rest. One day my friend came up to me and said, "Sometimes sheep can be really dumb." He regaled me with stories of how sheep would get their heads caught in fences when they tried to escape. "They do this over and over again," he said. The shepherd has to free them every time. I asked him what the sheep taught him. "Sometimes I've wondered if there's little difference between the sheep and us." When I asked what he meant, he said, "Sometimes we all need to be protected."

God leans in to provide for the sheep. God nourishes and protects God's people. Though God can be gentle, God can also place Godself between the sheep and the harm that looms.

**O God, protect and watch over me
when I am in harm's way. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Shepherds

Psalm 72; Luke 13:31-35

When God speaks

**The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. (v. 4)**

Many evenings when I lay my head on a pillow and close my eyes, I am transported to the shores of Lake Superior. I watch with wonder at the dance of wind and waves and how the waves collapse upon the shoreline. The spray reaches the lenses of my glasses every time. If I listen closely, I can hear the waves as they travel to shore. I return each night, intent on listening for the elements as they perform their daily concert. In this music, I listen for how God speaks to me and to the fullness of the world.

There is splendor in the imagery the psalmist uses to convey both the beauty and grandeur of God's voice. God's voice here offers wisdom, power, comfort, strength, caution, and a display of glory. God is fully present, whether we know it or not. God's presence is not timid. When God is present and at work among and through our lives, God promises to be with us always; God's presence leads us to thanks and praise.

**Let your voice resonate in my life, Lord,
and let my praises rise to you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Composers

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

Baptism of Our Lord

**[Jesus] saw God's Spirit descending like a dove
and alighting on him. (v. 16)**

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell the story of Jesus' baptism. Like most storytellers, their versions share some similarities and have some differences. Matthew's account raises questions of righteousness: Who should baptize whom? John thinks Jesus should baptize him; Jesus clarifies that John's baptism of Jesus will "fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). While this is a noteworthy detail, it's not the main point. The central action comes when the Spirit descends like a dove and these words tumble from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (v. 17). We don't see or hear the crowd's reaction. Still, the community carried forward the account of how Jesus was named, claimed, and sent.

Whatever else happened when each of us was baptized, the Spirit descended and words fell on us: God called us "Beloved." We were claimed by God's love. We were sent in God's name. With us, God is pleased.

**Open my heart, God, to listen for your voice
calling me. Stir me to follow your call. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Seminaries and lay ministry schools

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

A mighty God

**O LORD God of hosts, who is as mighty
as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness
surrounds you. (v. 8)**

Rain fell hard against cement, in seed beds, on car roofs. Thunder and lightning punctuated the force of the rain. Wind threatened to push over anyone who went outside to put abandoned lawnmowers and bikes into garages. My daughter and I rushed around, trying to rescue toys.

“Is there anything more powerful than the wind and rain?” she asked as she hid behind me, her hands gripping me for dear life. “I don’t know,” I said. “What do you think?” An empty garbage can blew across our yard; the sounds made the scene more ominous. “I don’t know. But I’m scared.” I picked her up and held her tight. We looked up in the sky and watched the water pour. “I wonder what God’s doing right now,” I said. She thought for a moment. “I think God is with me because I’m scared.” We played a game listing all the people God might be protecting. “God is with us,” I said. “Amen,” she said.

**God of all, thank you for the power and might
of your love. Rain your grace upon me. Amen.**

Prayer concerns: Weathercasters

Genesis 35:1-15; Acts 10:44-48

Amazed by grace

**They listened eagerly to [Simon] because
for a long time he had amazed them. (v. 11)**

When I was in college, I was a youth director in a small congregation. I had neither any idea what I was doing nor the courage to admit it. I tried to convey to the kids that everything was under control. But this was far from the truth. One week I invited someone to lead the group. We weren't friends, but I had heard how effective he was in youth ministry. The adults in the congregation were surprised by my choice of leader for the week. They had heard things—and what they had heard wasn't good. "Well, let's just wait and see," I said. "Let's listen to what he says to them." I had no idea what would happen.

In our first hour, this person was a little clunky in how he presented. But then, in the second hour, he told his life story. And in that telling, any doubt or concern I had about this person fell away. We became friends because we got to know each other. We came to know each other as siblings in Christ.

**O God, help me release my prejudice
so the fullness of my life can be met
by your grace. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Human resources professionals

Psalm 89:5-37; Jeremiah 1:4-10

Paying attention

Listen . . . , you who know righteousness, . . . who have my teaching in your hearts; do not fear. (v. 7)

One of the summers of college, while working as a Bible camp counselor, I was put in charge of a group of hockey players. My group liked to sit in the back row during chapel, arms crossed, baseball hats on backward. At other times they'd carry on conversations about anything but what we were supposed to be doing. I asked them later what they talked about. "Stuff," they said. The group gave a muffled laugh. I felt out of my league. Even though I had been to many hockey games, I never played it. This group scared me a little bit. What in the world was I going to do?

At one point, one of the kids told me he had learned his parents were going to divorce. "They told me this as I was headed to camp," he said. We talked long into the night. After a while, we each headed to our bunks. "You know," he said, "I thought you were a geek when I met you." I was seen; he was right. "But I'm also glad you listened to me and let me talk. Thanks for being a friend."

**Living Word, when I feel overwhelmed
and afraid, visit me with your comfort
and strength. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hockey players

Psalms 89:5-37; Matthew 12:15-21

Waiting—not my virtue!

**Let your steadfast love and your faithfulness
keep me safe forever. (v. 11)**

I've gotten worse at being patient while waiting. I had hoped that with age, I might get a little more "chill" (as Gen Z folks say) and better prioritize what's worth getting frustrated and anxious about. But no. I get antsy if I've chosen the slowest grocery line, and city traffic causes me to honk more than I should. Patience is not my virtue. Maybe that's the case for you too.

Along comes the psalmist who "wait[s] patiently for the LORD" (v. 1). Most of us don't do that either. But isn't it a relief to know that God has patience with us? The psalmist reminds us that when we do wait patiently, it shows our trust in God. We may find ourselves in more than a slow line, maybe sitting in an actual waiting room that might lead to bad news that feels like a "desolate pit" or a "miry bog" (v. 2). It's good to remind one another that despite both the small and significant things life throws at us, God's steadfast love and faithfulness remain.

**Patient God, help me to anchor
my trust in you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel impatient

Isaiah 22:15-25; Galatians 1:6-12

Now and not yet

**For John baptized with water, but you will
be baptized with the Holy Spirit. (v. 5)**

Having just come through the holiday season, perhaps some of us can now see what a rush it was—when all we wanted to do was move through Advent and Christmas with a sense of thoughtfulness, taking it all in. If there are children in our household, each day during December can be an exercise in staying in the moment but also honoring the expectation of what is to come.

The gospels give us remarkable stories of Jesus teaching the disciples and all who drew near about the kingdom of God. The book of Acts gives us a glimpse of those forty days post-resurrection. Jesus shows up to teach a bonus class, as it were, reminding the disciples of convincing truths and the promise of what is ahead. He is ready to leave them and let the Spirit take over.

What a gift for us and for the church to be both in the now and the not yet. Like the disciples, we can always use assurance that we do not face the future alone. It is Spirit-led and beyond what we can imagine.

**Gracious God, help me to remember I am
Spirit-soaked, today and for all my days. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those worried about the future

Psalm 40:1-11; Genesis 27:30-38

Mantle of faith

**Then [Elisha] set out and followed Elijah
and became his servant. (v. 21)**

Talk to anyone about their faith story and you'll hear about significant people in their life—a parent, grandparent, friend, or church worker perhaps. For some people, a teacher or coach played a central role. We do not come to faith in isolation. The story of Elijah calling Elisha reminds us of that.

This call story is different from others in scripture. It's nothing like God speaking to Moses from a burning bush. Or God speaking reassuring words to Jeremiah. In fact, there's not even a direct encounter with God. Elijah the mentor calls Elisha into discipleship by throwing his cloak over him. Faith is rooted and grows in relationships, in community, after all. Maybe it wasn't with a mantle, but many of us can trace a vocational shift to someone who recognized gifts in us and encouraged us onto a new path. Thanks be to God for those who have shaped our lives and for the reminder that we can do the same for others.

**Thank you, God, for those who shaped my faith
life and for those who continue
to strengthen it. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Godparents

Psalm 40:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Second Sunday After Epiphany

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

As a person who has moved in church circles most of my adult vocational life, I have participated in lots of small groups. As a youth director, I led plenty of groups too. From icebreakers to deeper questions, I was pretty good at crafting them. In this account from John, Jesus has a doozy: “What are you looking for?”

This is a question worth wrestling with at any stage of life. As my recent college graduate packs up his belongings to leave home, I’m hoping this question launches us into a thoughtful conversation. It could also be a pivotal question for congregations and would certainly hold up when one is leading a small group with the goal of going deeper. As the disciples soon discovered, Jesus had an invitation for them: “Come and see” (v. 39). His words bid them—and us—to dwell with him, join him in ministry, and be filled with love that never fails.

**God, although I don’t always know
what I’m looking for, I’m confident
you’re my compass and companion. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in life transitions

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

Confession of Peter (Transferred)

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

It has been the practice in churches I've served that confirmation students choose a Bible verse for their confirmation service. For many students, it's a challenging task. Some go for the familiar John 3:16 or one famous for its brevity: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35, RSV). Peter's answer to Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” (v. 15), puts him at the head of his confirmation class: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter cuts through the other name suggestions to the heart of the matter.

How might people today answer that question? How would they describe Jesus? How would you answer the question? Our answers might be bold one day, hesitant the next. Thank goodness for communities of faith that hold us, regardless of our answer. With Peter's confident response, a new community is established. It is the start of the church and an invitation to be part of something bigger, living out that question in faithful service to others.

**Holy Spirit, help me to be bold in my witness
and generous with my service. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those in faith formation

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

Healthy lament

Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me. (v. 11)

It doesn't take much for me to be drawn to a lament psalm. The state of the world usually calls for it, without even taking into consideration my personal litany of woes. I may not, like the psalmist, be encompassed by evil or bear iniquities "more than the hairs of my head" (v. 12), but we all do have troubles of our own.

To make matters worse, we live in a society—even a world—that loves to emphasize happiness. A list of the happiest countries is published every year. Lists like this are so prevalent, we might think there is no room for lament. But lamenting—naming our sorrows, worries, and woes—is good for us. Lament is even healthy. Most of us hesitate to share our struggles, even our deepest pain, with others. We don't want to be a downer. But the struggle is real. And when we're unable to find someone who can empathize, the psalmist reminds us that God is always ready to hear our cries and does not withhold mercy.

**Loving God, I rejoice that your mercy
is new every day. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Mental health hotline staff

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

Looking for joy

Declare this with a shout of joy; proclaim it. (v. 20)

It's not always easy for me to relate to stories and people in the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures. Is it ever that way for you too? The Old Testament stories are filled with a depth of drama I don't always understand—family relationships and politics of the day that I just can't follow. I can do some digging on my own, but I'm grateful I can also depend on sage theologians who shed light on the times, culture, people, and messages.

What I can usually find on my own, however, is a gem of promise. Such is the case in Isaiah 48, which shows us both God's rebuke and God's hope. It almost feels like a "tough love" message from a parent "who teaches [us] how to succeed" and "the way [we] should go" (v. 17). We're reminded to obey and trust in God. And in so doing, we can boldly declare with Jacob "a shout of joy . . . to the end of the earth" (v. 20).

**God of Jacob, help me remember that you
are also my God and that I can find hope
and promise in scripture. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Biblical scholars

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

In times of trouble

**For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble. (v. 5)**

Imagine life circumstances that bring you to your knees. You're alone and distraught; you cannot see a way out. Maybe, just maybe, you decide to open a Bible. As chance would have it, you open to the middle and find yourself in the book of Psalms. If that's the case, you could do no better than landing on Psalm 27, ranked among the most popular of psalms.

Most of us have had such life-altering circumstances. This psalmist is also in the depths of despair, amid intense pain and threats from enemies. Still, the psalmist's prayer is couched in trust and light. The writer of this prayer is in a life-and-death situation yet begins the psalm with trust. When life brings me to my knees, I admit that this is not how I come to God. I'm focused on my situation, which I can't look past. This is a good reminder to keep Psalm 27 handy. On both good days and bad ones, we can find shelter in the Lord, who is our light and salvation. Whom shall we fear? (v. 1).

**Help me, loving God, to remember
that when I am at my lowest,
you set me high on a rock. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People experiencing trouble

1 Samuel 1:1-20; Galatians 1:11-24

Anointed for service

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

Saul went from chasing lost donkeys to being anointed as king. What followed is described as a “prophetic frenzy” (10:5-6). Saul became a “different person” (10:6). Anointing with oil is also part of our tradition as Christians; it may be done in baptism, for healing, and at death. In baptism, a cross is traced on the newly baptized’s forehead as the pastor says, “You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever” (*ELW*, p. 231).

As children of God, we have become different people too. Since we never know what “prophetic frenzy” might lie ahead, this identity is worth remembering. Recently, our college graduate stood before our congregation to announce he will spend the coming year abroad in the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission program. We gathered at the font where he was baptized twenty-two years ago to affirm that saving act. For him (and us), faith life began at the font. After he was baptized, he received oil for service!

**Help me remember, loving God, that I am
sealed with the cross of Christ forever. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who serve in global mission

Psalms 27:1-6; Galatians 2:1-10

A physician's faith

Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick." (v. 31)

As I listened to the gospel reading at the funeral of a well-known and respected physician, I smiled at the choice by the family—or maybe the physician himself—to include this reading. After all, he was always honest and open about how his faith informed his vocation.

In this reading, the Pharisees complain about Jesus associating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus had called Levi, who dropped everything to follow him. Then, ready to start a new life, Levi threw a party in Jesus' honor, attended by friends—including other tax collectors.

This message both to the Pharisees and to us is the crux of the gospel: Jesus didn't come for those who have their act together, but for those who are falling apart. He didn't come for those who are respected, but for those whom others despise. The elderly doctor knew this truth, and his funeral was an opportunity to remind hearers that Jesus came for those who were sick, poor, or lost.

**Strengthen my faith, O God, so that like Levi,
I may follow you without hesitation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Health care providers

Psalm 27:1-6; 1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

Third Sunday After Epiphany

Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news. (v. 23)

There is no shortage of people who complain that the church and preachers have become too political. But let's consider Jesus the preacher. By quoting Isaiah, who prophesied against empires, Jesus points to how the Roman Empire had subjected generations to difficulty and death. This is not God's will, he tells his listeners. And he calls disciples to join him in a prophetic, radical movement of ministry. Considering the Roman occupation of the day, Jesus' words are certainly political.

The empire may have thought John the Baptist's imprisonment would stop the mission, but it did not. On the contrary, Jesus begins his ministry with fervor. This movement is passed on to his disciples, to the larger community, and to us. We are called into a transformative movement to follow Jesus rather than those who occupy and oppress. Jesus entered the synagogues, preaching mercy and justice and abundance. He was probably called too political. Now, how do we join him?

**Help me to inspire others to join
this movement of transforming communities
for justice. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Grassroots organizers

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

Conversion of Paul

But when the one who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace . . . (v. 15)

If ever there was an example of stark transformation, it was Paul. He went from persecuting the church to being its foremost apostle. Paul shares his faith story with the Galatians to encourage them in their faith.

This gives us the opportunity to examine our own faith history. What is your story? Have you had a faith transformation? What experiences and people have influenced you along the way? Asking one another how we have felt called by God can stir memories and even revitalize our faith. That's one of the roles of a faith community.

I've been part of two congregations that have implemented faith storytelling events, something akin to testimonies—not a common part of the Lutheran tradition. I've heard countless sermons I don't remember, but I've heard faith stories of fellow travelers that I'll never forget.

**Give me courage, Holy Spirit, to ask others
how they've been called by God, and to share
my faith story. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Storytellers

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

Worthy of a chant

**Wait for the LORD; be strong,
and let your heart take courage. (v. 14)**

I remember the evening I was introduced to Taizé chant, which originated in an ecumenical Christian monastic community in France. I was in a candlelit sanctuary with a diverse mix of people seated on pillows and the chancel steps. To this day, I remember how the repetitive song—"Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong; take heart!"—made its way into my soul. Many of us have the chance to sing these words frequently now, from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (262).

Even if we don't feel the trust of the downtrodden and forsaken psalmist, verses 13–14 of beloved Psalm 27 can speak to us in this time and place. We live in a culture of lies and misinformation. It's difficult to know who and what to trust. Every source needs to be checked and corroborated. But despite our fears, doubts, and suspicions, our trust and confidence in God can hold strong. Perhaps we'll even find courage in the waiting.

**Even as I wait for you, Lord,
my doubts overtake me. Help me
be of good courage. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Ecumenical partners

Judges 7:12-22; Philippians 2:12-18

Manifest—more than a hashtag

**Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us. (v. 78)**

When I read that the Cambridge Dictionary word of the year for 2024 was *manifest*, I muttered, “Huh?” Clearly behind the times, I hadn’t noticed the prevalence of the word—for at least a year. My familiarity with *manifest* was only through a few hymns. But then I started hearing it everywhere. I learned that it was prevalent on TikTok as a Gen Z buzzword to describe tangible change or achievement, with the hashtag #manifest, of course. For some, *manifest* is a spiritual practice.

So, something old is new again! Zechariah’s prophecy comes to us across time and space, reminding us of God made manifest. God saves us from enemies and misery and showers us with tender mercy. God restores us and offers us salvation. Even in the shadow of death, God brings peace. This is more than divine presence; this is a sweeping history of God’s restorative action. Zechariah’s song becomes our song in these days after Epiphany to proclaim: “God in flesh made manifest” (ELW 310).

**God of our ancestors, as you
become manifest in my life, may I
be stirred to serve others. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hymn writers

Psalms 27:7-14; Genesis 49:1-2, 8-13, 21-26

True to yourself, true to God

**Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who . . .
speak the truth from their heart. (vv. 1-2)**

Authenticity is something many of us yearn for. While our true identity is gifted to us at birth, the world of sharp tongues and “cancel culture” all too often suppresses our inner being. Speaking our truth, and not just what sounds good, is empowering and freeing. And honoring that truth in others is what we should yearn for.

The writer of this psalm provides a plan for those who shall abide in God’s sanctuary. It is for those who build up and do not tear down; those who foster unity, not division. It’s about respecting others, even when they’re different from us. Imagine if we all lived this way: What kind of world would we create by building bridges, not walls, one genuine kindness at a time? Psalm 15 assures us that in doing these things, we become a part of God’s beautiful plan.

**True God, shine through me
as your truth lights my path. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Athletic coaches

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

The echo for justice

**You shall not deprive a resident alien
or an orphan of justice. (24:17)**

God has a heart for justice, especially for the vulnerable. Jesus echoed this in his work, demonstrating that this isn't just ancient law; it is timeless action. We are called to protect the foreigner, the parentless, and the widow. In doing this, we reinforce the integrity of justice that God's law and Jesus' love provide us. Who are the most vulnerable around us, and how are we advocating for them?

During my thirty years as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) in four states, I've had the opportunity to help lift the voices of children who are neglected and abused. Together with others, we helped parents work through the messy, modern world. In the end, we united families and strengthened communities, fostering love and fair treatment in all areas of life, including courtrooms.

**Anointed One, anoint me to protect
and provide for all people, in all places. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Advocates for children

Psalm 15; 1 Timothy 5:17-24

A new commandment

I give you a new commandment. . . . Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (v. 34)

It must have been a beautiful scene. Even with a devastating betrayal and death on a cross looming, in a quiet, dimly lit room, Jesus addresses his disciples with tender affection as his “little children.” Even though it will no longer be possible to follow the *physical* Jesus, he reminds them (and all of us), “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Jesus proclaims a new kind of love, an unprecedented standard, one that is demonstrated on the cross. It's a new benchmark of love that is sacrificial, unconditional, and self-giving. Christ's own love moves us to respond in love. For it is in living out this new commandment that we not only honor Christ but also become his loyal evangelists to a world desperately in need of this new kind of love.

**Immanuel (God-with-us), thank you
for your love that transcends all time
and definition. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those we love

Psalms 15; Ruth 2:1-16