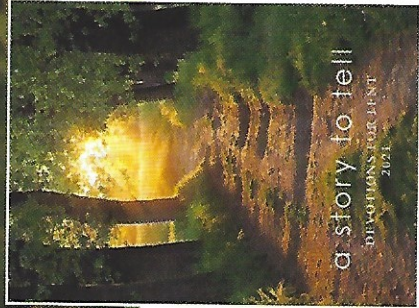


# a story to tell

## DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2021

A *Story to Tell* focuses on texts from the Gospel of Mark that show Jesus' journey from baptism to the cross day by day throughout Lent. Each reading is accompanied by a photo, a quote to ponder, a reflection, and a prayer. Incorporate a simple Christian observance into your Lenten journey this year.



Available in pocket-sized,  
large print, and as an eBook.

Order online at

[augsbu rgfortress.org/lent2021](http://augsbu rgfortress.org/lent2021)  
or call 800-328-4648



AUGSBURG FORTRESS

# Christ in Our Home

January, February, March  
2021



January, February, March 2021

Heidi Hyland Mann, Laurie J. Hanson, and Julie O'Brien, editors

Scripture readings are from the *Revised Common Lectionary Daily Readings* © 2005 Consultation on Common Texts. Used by permission. The texts for Thursday through Saturday prepare for the Sunday readings, while the texts for Monday through Wednesday reflect upon the Sunday readings. Texts specific to festivals and commemorations are used when appropriate.

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked LBW are taken from *Lutheran Book of Worship*, © 1978 Augsburg Fortress. Quotations marked ELW are reprinted from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, copyright © 2006. Cover photo: Begonia in a pot iStock/Liudmyla Liudmyla

---

CHRIST IN OUR HOME (ISSN 0412-2968), published quarterly by Augsburg Fortress, 510 Marquette Ave., STE 800, Minneapolis, MN 55402-1119. Periodicals postage paid at St. Paul, Minnesota, and additional mailing offices. Subscriptions \$8.50 per year (\$12.50, large print). Copyright © 2020 Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A. USPS Publication Agreement Number 1631527. Canadian Publication Agreement Number 40030418.

---

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to CHRIST IN OUR HOME Subscriptions, Augsburg Fortress, P.O. Box 1553, Minneapolis, MN 55440-8730.

## Prayers

### Morning

Your sun rises again, O Lord, embracing the earth and seeking out every corner of our hearts. Warm us with the radiance of your presence. Scatter fear and sadness, that we may live your love today. Amen.

### Evening

Thank you, loving God, for all who till the soil and nurture the abundance we receive at this table. Bless their labor, and strengthen us to care for the goodness of your earth, that all may share the gifts of love we now receive.

Amen.

### Mealtime

Lord Jesus, you slipped into the night to pray, finding rest in the Father's loving presence. Quiet our hearts as evening falls and guard us through the night, that after resting in your love we may rise refreshed to receive the new day. Amen.

## 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

*Prayers (inside front cover)* David L. Miller is pastor of faith formation at St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Naperville, Illinois. Previously he served as editor of *The Lutheran* magazine (now *Living Lutheran*) and as director of spiritual formation at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He and his wife, Dixie, live in Woodridge, Illinois.

*January 1-15* Retired ELCA pastor Fred Fritz leads monthly worship at a retirement community, chairs his congregation's building and grounds ministry, and is a pretty fair carpenter. He and his wife, Kay, worship at a partner Episcopal church in East Lansing, Michigan.

*January 16-31* Shelley Cunningham serves the church bivocationally: as pastor of Zumbro Lutheran Church in Rochester, Minnesota, and as manager of Portico Benefit Services' team of regional representatives. Somehow, her three children are all young adults already.

*February 1-14* Kevin Kretzmann Farrar serves as a pastor at Atonement Lutheran Church in Muskego, Wisconsin. He lives in Milwaukee with his wife, Alissa, who is also a pastor. He is an avid runner, traveler, and movie-watcher.

*February 15-28* Aaron Fuller is a multivocational pastor in the ELCA, a chaplain in the Navy Reserve, and a wrestling coach of over fifteen years. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife, Kelly.

*March 1-15* Stephanie Harper is an author and editor from Littleton, Colorado, where she also works for her home church, Abiding Hope.

*March 16-31* Jennifer Obermueller lives in Georgetown, Texas. She is an ELCA pastor, theologian, and writer who especially enjoys walking her dogs.

## Name of Jesus

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

When teaching a college human relations class, I asked the students to tell the class how they wished to be called, and what their name meant. Sadly, some students told about hurtful and mocking names others had given them. This led to a discussion about how names convey meaning and identity. To respect the name is to respect the person.

The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Joshua* or *Yehoshuah*, which means “Yahweh will save.” Thus, to the Gospel writers and the early Christian community, the name *Jesus* broadcasts God’s saving the world from sin, death, and the power of the evil one. Every time a believer says “Jesus,” they give witness to the gospel.

In baptism, each of us was named “Child of God.” This name reminds us that our identity is rooted in God’s love and grace and that we are in relationship always with the One who sent us Jesus.

**Loving God, every time I say the name “Jesus,” may it be with love, thanksgiving, and joy. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those hurt by names conferred by others*

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

## Highest praise

**Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted. (v. 13)**

Our modern lives are replete with online surveys asking that we rate our experience at the store, the doctor’s office, the bank, the restaurant. The surveyor hopes we will give a “10” or a full five stars—the highest rating in each category. I suspect that many of us sometimes practice “grade inflation” so as not to put those being evaluated into any jeopardy. Sometimes when asked if we like a new recipe or how a loved one is attired, we pause and wonder laughingly, “Is that a trick question?”

Though many persons and things earn our praise and appreciation, the psalmist reminds us that, in the big picture of all things, God is the one most worthy of our praise—our five-star ratings, our blue ribbons, our “10s,” our highest acclaim. Isn’t it interesting also that when we praise God often, we ourselves are thus reminded of all that God has done?

**Praise to you, Lord of earth, sea, and sky.**

**Praise to you, Creator of all things.**

**Praise to you, Source of my being. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Hymnwriters*

**Proverbs 1:1-7; James 3:13-18**



## Second Sunday of Christmas

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

To be “in the flesh” is to be alive and fully present. To be “in the flesh” allows one to “press the flesh”—that is, to shake hands, to engage in a heartfelt and personable manner. To “walk in the flesh” means to live one’s life even in the face of calamities and challenges. For the Word to take on human flesh means that God chooses the fullest form of self-revelation in order to relate most effectively to human beings. God does not love us from afar but is interested in the “fleshiness” of this world. God shares our pain and despair, our joy and wonder, and invites us too to be concerned for and interested in how this world and our neighbors fare.

The ELCA tagline is “God’s work. Our hands.” We are emboldened by the good news that in Jesus we are saved and given life. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be present in love, forgiveness, and grace to all we encounter this day.

**Loving God, thank you for taking on flesh and walking among us. May we do your will by caring for this world and our neighbors. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who need to feel God’s presence and our love*

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

## Offering our all

Honor the LORD with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce. (v. 9)

The wisdom writer speaks of honoring God by giving one’s very “substance.” What an intriguing way to challenge the faithful not to withhold one iota of our being but completely—without any reservation—to offer our all to God!

In joyful response to Jesus offering up his substance—his entirety, his whole life—on the cross for the sake of the world, we, his followers, “dive in” to the life of faith. What other superlatives can we use? Like Jesus, we are called to be “all in,” to trust God “whole hog”! So **then** we become “little Christs” to our neighbors when **we turn** the other cheek, offer our cloak to one who has **none**, **pray** for those who hate us, and share our loaves **and fishes generously**. By choosing to give our first and best—all that we are—for the sake of God’s world and kingdom, we fully live out the life guaranteed for us by Christ.

**Gracious God, forgive my lack of faith and my shortsightedness. May I honor you with all that I am. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: That our youth might experience the joy of giving*

**Psalms 110; James 4:11-17**

**Do I have to?**

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

I suspect that when young, those of us with siblings believed there were times they “crossed the line.” In our peeved state we vowed never to speak to that offender again. Perhaps we even used tape to divide our shared bedroom in two and instructed the other to stay on their own side. To make things worse, often a parent told us to “give it up” and forgive the offender. “Do I have to?” we whined. “Yes,” we were told unequivocally. “You can’t, and shouldn’t, stay mad forever.” Wise words.

Hatred, enmity, and anger fashion chains that shackle the grudge holder. Such bondage fragments healthy relationships and saps the joy out of living. Ironically, what most holds us back is not what others do to us but how we choose to respond. Then too, the wrongdoing often—not always, but often—goes both ways. Release only comes when we forgive one another and move on. With confession comes absolution, restoration, and the freedom of a new beginning for all.

**Forgiving God, grant me a measure of your Spirit to forgive as I have been forgiven by you. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who have offended us*

**Psalm 110; Proverbs 22:1-9**

**Epiphany of Our Lord**

**Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace. (v. 7)**

The campus pastor is privileged to walk alongside young adults as they discover their God-given gifts and skills, and what brings joy and passion to their daily living. Often students asked me, “What do you think I should do?” In return I would ask them two questions: “What brings you joy and purpose for living each day?” and “Whom could you benefit by the exercise of your gifts?”

The Lutheran tradition appreciates that Christian vocation is not embodied in particular professions, careers, or trades. We don’t categorize certain occupations as “holy” and others as “worldly.” Rather, Christian vocation—Christian living—involves using whatever gifts, dispositions, and skills God has given us so as to honor God, the giver of the gifts, in caring for the needs of our neighbors. Our Christian vocation—or calling—is ultimately an unselfish expression of our love and concern for the other.

**Dear Lord, thank you for my skills and abilities. May I use these gifts today to bring joy to another. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Young people discerning their gifts and the purpose of them*

**Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

## Listening is hard to do

Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening. (v. 9)

To listen—really listen—is challenging. Sometimes our preconceptions cause negative biases. Other times we rush to conclusions. Still other times the world's ambient noise drowns out the message another is striving to share.

True listening requires us to be open minded. Active listening calls for our full attention. Sincere listening means to seek learning, not vindication. For listening to happen successfully only one person can speak at a time. Engaged listening involves asking questions to check the accuracy of what we think we have heard.

The call of Samuel is a great listening story. Samuel works at listening. Samuel is alert and attentive, seeks confirmation from Eli, is open to the speaker, and does not tune out God's call. As a result of listening well, Samuel is blessed by God with a call, an identity, and a future. Who knows what God might have in store for you and me if we really listen?

**Okay, God, tune out the noise so I may hear  
your voice this day. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those whose cries are not heard*

**Psalms 29; Acts 9:10-19a**

## Always full of surprises

The LORD does not see as mortals see; . . .  
the LORD looks on the heart. (v. 7)

One's first impressions play an important role. They offer a starting point, a point of comparison that informs learning. However, when one sees them as the *end point*, therein lies a problem. Experience teaches that while initial impressions *can* be spot on, they are often found to be incomplete and lacking. The path to wisdom is found in withholding judgment until one can see the complete picture in a way that can lead to a wonderful discovery.

In today's story of God's choice of David as king of Israel, all present have their ideas as to who should be king. They look to outward appearances, probably nuanced by individual preference and bias. As humans are wont to do, Samuel and those gathered must have been quite surprised that God's choice was a youngster who was not even considered important enough to be invited to the anointing in the first place. Who knows what surprises God has in store for us this day?

**Surprising God, give me insight to not rush to judgment.  
Shed light so I may see things as you do. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: That judges and juries serving today  
may not rush to judgment*

**Psalms 29; 1 Timothy 4:11-16**

## Venturing into deep waters

[Jesus] said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water." (v. 4)

One hot summer day when I was six, I went wading in a swimming hole. Suddenly I stepped into a deep hole, slipped underwater, and began to drown. My uncle, seeing this from afar, swam and pulled me to safety. After sixty years that memory of inky deep waters conjures for me a powerful metaphor for things I cannot fathom or name, let alone face, without fear and trepidation.

The disciples probably thought Jesus was just going to have them cast their nets one more time. "Really? Again?" Perhaps they were so tired that the challenge to put into deep waters went over their tired heads. Yet by putting out into the deep—into the unknown—they were taught the invaluable lesson that when one follows the direction of Jesus, one needs to be prepared to have one's nets filled to breaking.

Each day Jesus challenges us to put out into the deep despite our misgivings and lack of faith and, in the process, to be astounded by a surprising harvest.

**God, things gnaw at our sanity and courage. Make us bold to put out into deep places, with you. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who venture into "deep waters" for the sake of others*

**1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12; Psalm 29**



## Baptism of Our Lord

People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to [John]. (v. 5)

Often people find themselves looking for something—anything—that might offer a word of hope. While Mark does not exactly say what the crowd was seeking when they came to John, to the reader it appears they went out expecting a sign of God's rule and presence, a word to address the uncertainties of their lives. The crowds went into the wilderness seeking good news, hope, and God, and discovered that God was already there waiting for them, ready to redeem, transform, revitalize, and renew them—not least of all through the one God proclaimed "my Son, the Beloved" (v. 11).

At some point we all find ourselves in a "wilderness" seeking hope to which we can entrust our lives. The baptism of Jesus and our own baptisms assure us that our identity, purpose, and very lives are found in God claiming us as beloved. As we have been baptized into Christ Jesus, so we are baptized into his resurrection, and into life abundant. Alleluia!

Lord, remind me this day that in baptism, you call me your child. All my hope lies in your grace. Amen.

*Prayer concern: Those preparing for baptism*

**Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7**



## A promise is a promise

I will make my covenant between me and you. (v. 2)

Okay, I admit it. I am old school and believe that when people shake hands on something, it binds the two parties to whatever they have agreed. No ifs, ands, or buts. No contingencies. No fine print. I will do whatever it takes to keep my word. I value those who also keep their commitments.

God makes a contract, a promise, a covenant with Abram, and you had better believe that God will keep it. All God asks is that Abram (later renamed Abraham) trust in God's fidelity and move out in faith into the new life the covenant offers. And even when Abram falters, straying from his trust in God, trying to take matters into his own hands, still, God keeps God's end of the deal.

It is the same between God and us. The covenant God makes with us in baptism is solid, and God keeps God's end of the deal even when we do not. Goodness, is that not great news?

**O God, help me embrace and live into your promises to me at my baptism, as a way to thank you. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those suffering from broken promises*

**Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; Romans 4:1-12**

## Blinded by the light

I could not see because of the brightness of that light. (v. 11)

Saul had it all: as a learned scholar and agent of the temple, he had a sense of self and purpose, and a seemingly clear future. But all that disappeared in a flash of bright light from the heavens. Saul was left vulnerable, with diminished capacities and an uncertain future. It took another person, Ananias—fearful yet faithful Ananias, who knew that when Christ calls, Christ asks for **one's all**—to go to Saul and baptize him. The rest, as **they say**, is history: Saul—Christ-denier and persecutor of the church—is given by God the new identity of Paul, **apostle** to the Gentiles. With vision restored, Paul leaves **Damascus** and boldly follows Christ's radiance into a **future** rooted in God's promise.

Sometimes we all act like Saul, denying our Lord in **countless** ways. Sometimes we are fearful, like Ananias (**Acts 9:13-14**). But we need only to look to that dazzling light that is Christ continuing to call us and lead us to new life.

**Lord, may your dazzling light dispel our fears and trepidations and illumine the path you wish us to follow. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those held back by fear, hatred, and division*

**Exodus 30:22-38; Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36**

## God does not forsake

**I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (v. 17)**

It's a terrible feeling to believe you have no one to turn to in times of dire need. The prophet Isaiah speaks to the fears and needs of the people of Israel, who seek restoration by asserting that God will not forsake them. God is actively at work making things new by turning the barren wasteland of their exile into the promise of homecoming in a good land that can sustain life.

Yet today millions of refugees crowd squalid camps around the world. Some senior citizens and some who are differently abled live lives of quiet desperation. Many people are in need of a word of hope to tell them they are valued and not abandoned. Who today will tell them of the God of Israel? Who will share the love of Christ with them? Who will offer them a cup of water, a loaf of bread, meaningful work, and the other necessities of life? Perhaps God is calling you and me to this ministry of mercy.

**Compassionate God, even as you do not forsake those in need, help us to stand with them. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who feel forsaken*

**Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; John 1:29-34**

## God really knows us

**O LORD, you have searched me and known me. (v. 1)**

My wife of forty-five years is bright, loving, a good mother, and a faithful companion. One of her best qualities, for which I am extremely thankful, is that, despite how well she knows all my foibles and shortcomings, she stays with me and loves me.

The psalmist tells us that God really knows us. God **knows** our ill-begotten ways, our quick, irresponsible **tongues**, and even what we are thinking. God knows us **so well** because God is always—*always!*—**behind and before us**. As Jesus said, if God sees every sparrow and **can count** each hair on our heads, how can God not also **fully know us**? This simple yet profound truth can carry us **through challenging times**.

**Each day** I begin by reminding myself that while life **is often not fair**, God is present, knows me inside and out, and is gracious. That is enough.

**Gracious God, thank you for sticking with me always, even knowing me so well. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Our friends and family who know us best*

**Judges 2:6-15; 2 Corinthians 10:1-11**

**Not me!**

[John said,] "I am not he.  
No, but one is coming after me." (v. 25)

In our socially networked world, people are fascinated with celebrity. Many devote countless hours to following online posts, gossip publications, and TV programs offering the latest tidbit on this or that actor, sports figure, or politician. John the Baptist was a megastar in his own day. John's devoted followers believed fervently that he was the long-awaited Messiah. Yet John eschewed notoriety by stepping aside and pointing to Jesus as the promised Savior.

As followers of Jesus, do we keep our focus on Jesus and not fall captive to self-promoting messiahs? Do we aspire to be like John—and like the apostle Paul, who in this reading recounts John's witness—and give unambiguous affirmation that it is Jesus who has ushered in the rule of God? Do we have the faith and courage to say that Jesus alone is Lord?

**Dear God, this day may I put aside my pride  
and point clearly to Christ and his love. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those chasing after things  
that are not eternal*

**Judges 2:16-23; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18**

**Eyes wide open**

For you know neither the day nor the hour. (v. 13)

Experts agree: one of the best ways to reduce morning stress is to get your stuff ready the night before. Choose your outfit. Make your lunch. Put coffee grounds and water in the machine. Pack your briefcase or backpack. Find your car keys. Taking care to be prepared can set you up for a successful day. But taking this action might be most helpful because it frees us to be more present. When we're less worried about meeting our own needs, we can better see the needs of those around us.

After all, Jesus' instruction at the end of the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids isn't "Be prepared." It's "Keep awake." That sounds less like "Plan ahead" and more like "Pay attention." Have your eyes open for signs of Jesus in your midst—and more importantly, for the people Christ loves who need your love and care.

Who will you encounter today who needs your full attention? And what can you do to make sure you are ready to give it to them?

**Make me watchful today, Lord, and ready to offer  
compassion and help to those who need me. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those awaiting medical test results*

**1 Samuel 2:21-25; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18**



## Second Sunday after Epiphany

**You will see greater things than these. (v. 50)**

When was the last time you experienced something so compelling that you couldn't help but share it with others? We talk about sporting events in this way, or a great vacation to a faraway place, or a really good book we've read. The question is: Can we also find the words and enthusiasm to describe our relationship with Jesus like this?

Three little words in the Gospel of John encapsulate this idea: "Come and see" (v. 46). With that invitation, Jesus pulled Andrew and Simon from their nets; now with that invitation, Philip convinces Nathanael that this new rabbi from Nazareth is worth checking out.

For John, pointing to Jesus is the heart of discipleship. We call it "testimony." We invite people to come and see Jesus when we describe how our hearts were touched by an unexpected moment of grace, or when we give witness to an extravagant act of generosity. The stories we tell change lives. They inspire action. And they might even lead to transformation.

**Thank you, God, for those who have pointed me to Jesus.  
Give me courage to do the same for others. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: New believers in the faith*

**1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;  
1 Corinthians 6:12-20**

## Confession of Peter

**[Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" (v. 15)**

If you wanted to learn to play the cello, where would you start? Go to a concert hall and listen to the finest orchestra, or sign up for lessons at a local music school? Here's the thing: You might get inspired at a concert hall, but until you learn to hold the instrument, and move the bow over the strings, and risk playing some **bad notes**, you won't get very far on your quest to **become a musician**.

The same is true in the church. If we always leave **the theological wrestling and praying and Bible-study leading to trained professionals**, we won't get very far **on our own journey of faith**. We learn as we discuss **hard questions** with other Christians. We grow when **we make time** for spiritual practices that keep us close to God.

Still, if we aren't always able to answer Jesus' query **with confidence and enthusiasm**, that's okay. Jesus **commended Peter** when he got it right, and continued to **love him** when he didn't. He promises to do the same for us.

**For moments of clarity about who you are,  
Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Christians in Asia*

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

## Going the distance

Teach me your way, O LORD,  
that I may walk in your truth. (v. 11)

Not far from my house is a trail that goes along a river. I love it because the view changes with the seasons. In the winter the trail is often icy or drifted over. As I trudge along, bundled up against bitter Minnesota winds, I have to dig deep to keep moving forward. But on days when ice crystals sparkle in the morning sun or I catch a glimpse of animal tracks, it seems the walk takes no time at all.

Psalm 86 is a reminder that we all have seasons when the going is easy, when we are joyful and lighthearted. And we have seasons when we are weighed down with grief or anxiety or fear. Life, the psalmist might say, is a marathon, not a sprint.

So how can we find stamina to keep going no matter what season we find ourselves in? The psalmist's prayer gives us a hint: Turn to God for protection when trouble is near. Lean on God when we are weary. Trust in God when we cannot see the way forward. And thank God for walking with us always.

**When the way is difficult, O God, keep me moving forward.  
I trust in your strength and grace. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those for whom walking is difficult*

1 Samuel 15:10-31; Acts 5:1-11

## A giant-sized welcome

Let the little children come to me. (v. 16)

Barefoot, I am six feet, one inch tall. Put on a pair of Sunday heels and I really get up there. Still, most of the time it doesn't occur to me that I'm significantly larger than the average human being. Then one Sunday I was shaking hands after worship like usual. A family came by—mom, dad, and their three-year-old little boy. I greeted the parents, and then looked down and said, "Good morning, buddy!" Now, I was just being friendly, but the poor kid looked up at me, burst into tears, and grabbed his dad's leg like it was the last life preserver on a sinking ship. In that instant, I saw myself through his eyes: I was huge! Scary huge. And he was absolutely terrified of me.

Since that day, I've made it a point to kneel down and greet kids at their eye level. Because if you're going to share the love of Jesus, you probably shouldn't make people cry.

How might you "get down at eye level" and let a kid know they are part of God's family?

**Lord, help me see value in every person I encounter today,  
no matter how big or small. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Children in foster care*

Genesis 16:1-14; Psalm 86

## A strong foundation

**[God] alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress;  
I shall not be shaken. (v. 6)**

My congregation entered a building project last year. One goal was to increase accessibility by converting an existing stairwell into an elevator shaft. It was exciting to watch a giant crane haul the metal stair frame through a hole in the roof. Then, surprise! Four feet into the excavation for the elevator hydraulics, the construction crew hit bedrock. The project was put on hold until special equipment could drill the rest of the way. It was loud and messy. We all cheered when the crew foreman said, "We're through."

At times in our lives we hit bedrock—an unexpected obstacle, a period of depression, an intense interpersonal conflict, a serious illness. The way through can be messy and painful.

The psalmist trusted that the same God who promises to be our firm foundation is also the one who can get us through when we encounter those bedrock moments. When this happens in your life, trust that God will get you through.

**God, may my faith in you be strong and sure—and when  
it is not, may I trust you to have faith in me. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Construction workers*

**Jeremiah 19:1-15; Revelation 18:11-20**

## A heavenly chorus

**With the Lord one day is like a thousand years,  
and a thousand years are like one day. (v. 8)**

Isaac Watts wrote more than six hundred hymns, almost a dozen of which are still in worship books used across the church. Legend goes that as a young man he was uninspired by the songs sung in worship. At the time, it was considered proper to use only the exact words of scripture in hymns, but Watts found the meter and rhyme hard to sing. His father challenged him to "write something better." By turning scripture texts into poetic verse, Watts created favorites like "Joy to the World" (Psalm 98) and "Jesus Shall Reign" (Psalm 72).

One of his most beloved hymns is "O God, our help in ages past" (ELW 632). While much of this hymn builds on Psalm 90, the fourth verse ("A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone . . .") echoes a key theme of 2 Peter 3:8—that God's sense of time transcends our human understanding.

We may not know the mind of God, but we can be confident God welcomes our songs of praise. In the spirit of Watts, what hymn can you sing with joy today?

**Lord, give me a song to sing that draws me closer to you  
and fills my heart with joy. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Church musicians*

**Psalm 62:5-12; Jeremiah 20:7-13**

## Don't shoot the messenger

**Cursed be the man who brought the news. (v. 15)**

If you've ever had to be the bearer of bad news, you may have uttered (or at least thought) the phrase that serves as the title of this reflection. Few people delight in delivering a hard word. It's not easy to tell an employee that they're being let go, or a patient that they have cancer, or your children that you're getting a divorce.

Jeremiah had a lot of bad news to deliver to the exiles. Still, he felt compelled to share the hard word God had laid on his heart. And while on occasion (like in this passage) he cursed God and regretted having been born, he did not shy away from the task before him. Even when the people did not receive his message graciously, Jeremiah did not abandon them.

So what makes it easier to deliver a hard word? Speaking with compassion? Getting straight to the point? Trying to point out the silver lining?

Maybe the best thing is sticking around after that word is delivered. And in so doing, we change roles from messenger to minister.

**Lord Jesus, we pray for compassion and grace for all people who hear a hard word today. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who are unemployed and underemployed*

**Psalm 62:5-12; Luke 10:13-16**



## Third Sunday after Epiphany

**Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." (v. 17)**

The calling of the disciples always gives me goosebumps. It's inspiring to think of the potential Jesus saw in them, and to know of the amazing transformation that lay ahead. Simon, Andrew, James, John, and the rest of the twelve are the model for what it means to give up everything to follow Jesus.

But here's the thing: The vast majority of people who heard Jesus and believed in him stayed home. They continued their daily work—raising children, tilling the land, caring for those who were sick, selling goods. While some are called to fish for people, more are called to fish for fish. And that's okay. The world needs people who commit their lives to raising up followers of Jesus—pastors and deacons and youth ministers and faith formation directors. But just as much, the world needs people of faith who quietly use their gifts for the good of their neighbor as they strive "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [their] God" (Micah 6:8).

**Wherever I go today, O God, may I shine your light through all I say and do. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Seminary students*

**Psalm 62:5-12; Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31**

## Conversion of Paul

God . . . set me apart before I was born  
and called me through his grace. (v. 15)

If you think about it, Paul's claim is pretty audacious. After all, he took great pride in following Jewish law to the letter and in persecuting anyone who claimed that the crucified rabbi from Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah. But after an encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, which completely turned his life around, Paul's mind was changed. He came to believe he was part of God's great plan to include the Gentiles in the family of God. Who would have guessed God's grace could do such a thing?

So, do you see changing one's mind as a positive or a negative trait? Politicians whose voting records show contradictory positions are often derided as "flip-flop-pers" by their opponents. But being open to different perspectives can be a sign of humility and growth. Sometimes an encounter with someone different than us helps our viewpoints evolve. Perhaps that's God's grace at work in us too.

God, keep me open to new ideas,  
especially about people different from me. Amen.

*Prayer concern: Advocates for justice*

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

## A safe place to hide

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble. (v. 1)

My son was having a hard day. His sister had accidentally stepped on his Lego ship and broken it. We only had strawberry jam—not grape jelly, his favorite—for peanut butter sandwiches at lunch. The friend he was supposed to play with was sick and had to cancel. I could see storm clouds rising in his eyes, so I sent him to his room to settle down.

For a while he made a ruckus, throwing toys and moving things around. When it finally got quiet, I peeked in. He'd taken pillows and blankets and made a fort between his dresser and his bed. There, clutching his favorite stuffed animal, he'd fallen asleep. Later, day righted, I asked him why he'd done that. "I felt bad and needed a safe place to hide," he said.

Little kids aren't the only ones who have bad days. At times we all need a place of refuge, somewhere we feel safe and secure when troubles arise. If you can't build a blanket fort, perhaps reciting Psalm 46:1 can still your storms.

Sheltering God, when I need a place to find peace,  
may I seek it first in you. Amen.

*Prayer concern: Victims of domestic abuse*

Genesis 45:25—46:7; Acts 5:33-42



## Chosen

[Jesus] went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted. (v. 13)

Modern pop culture blockbusters celebrate the idea of a “chosen one.” Think *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*. In these stories, heroes are set apart from birth, gifted with extraordinary talents, and destined to do incredible things. But on their way to greatness, they often have to overcome internal conflict and self-doubt. Just because you are chosen doesn’t mean you always believe it.

A ragtag bunch of fishermen, laborers, and even a tax collector went up the mountain with Jesus. They had been chosen, but I’m not sure they believed it either. They certainly didn’t *look* like they were destined for greatness. All they seemed to have going for them was one thing: Jesus had called them. He saw things in them that they probably never imagined of themselves.

Like those disciples, you have been chosen, called, and claimed as part of God’s family. Do you believe it? And if so, what great things might Jesus have in mind for you?

**Jesus, I am humbled to be counted among your disciples.  
Help me to follow faithfully. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: ELCA missionaries and their families*

**Psalm 46; Proverbs 8:1-21**

## Crisis management

But charge Joshua . . . because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people. (v. 28)

One of my life mottos is “Don’t waste a crisis.” That’s because I believe nothing is beyond God’s redemptive power. When things seem to be at their worst, God does God’s best work. For me, that has meant having to let go of familiar habits that just aren’t working anymore. Or finding courage to take creative risks. I’ve even had to set aside my own ego and control issues so someone else could rise to the occasion.

For Moses, drawing near to Canaan was likely a personal crisis. He knew he would not be the one to lead God’s people into the promised land. But he also knew that for God’s people to see that journey to completion, they would need to trust and obey their new leader. So instead of turning inward and focusing on his own disappointment, Moses graciously reinforced that Joshua would be assuming the role of leader in his place. This probably wasn’t easy for Moses—but it did ensure a future for God’s people. Crisis averted.

**Lord, when a crisis comes, fill me with your wisdom,  
compassion, humility, and peace. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those in leadership positions*

**Psalm 111; Romans 9:6-18**

## Dance away the blues

**I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart. (v. 1)**

When my children were younger and occasionally out-of-sorts, there was one surefire way to cheer them up: a dance party. We'd put on their favorite *Veggie Tales* or *KidsBop* CD, turn the lights down low, and jump and shimmy and sing out loud until the crabbiness was gone. What I knew (but they didn't) was that music and movement produce serotonin, the feel-good chemical in the brain. They didn't care. They were having fun.

When my faith life gets out of sorts, a good dance party can usually turn it around. I listen to some of my favorite church music, sing as loud as I can, and try to let go of whatever is holding me back from loving God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength.

And if you're not a dancer? Try reading Psalm 111 out loud with your best dramatic rev-it-up voice. There's something about hearing line after line of praise of God's amazing mercy that might spark joy and gratitude in you too.

**Lord God, you're the best! I love and praise you  
with all that I am. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: People living with depression*

**Deuteronomy 12:28-32; Revelation 2:12-17**

## Pushed too far

**When they saw [Jesus], they begged him  
to leave their neighborhood. (v. 34)**

The Gadarene townspeople were afraid. They had heard the fantastical tales from swineherds who witnessed Jesus' power over the demons who had terrorized their community. The people had no reason to trust or even thank him. They wanted him gone.

We might be amused or impressed by Matthew's tale. We can't imagine wanting to push Jesus away. Or can we? Have you ever felt uncomfortable with something Jesus said or did?

Occasionally in the gospels Jesus' words seem to go a step too far: When he calls the Canaanite woman a dog. When he says, "Love your enemies." When he commands us to forgive people who have hurt us deeply. When he instructs us to sell every worldly possession.

Like those Gadarenes, we can always push Jesus away when he makes us uncomfortable. But fortunately, we know he speaks out of love and can be trusted. That just might be enough to make us willing to stick around and learn from him.

**Hearing an uncomfortable word from you, Jesus,  
is better than not hearing your word at all. Help me listen  
and obey. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those incapacitated by fear*

**Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Psalm 111**



## Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

**They were astounded at his teaching,  
for he taught them as one having authority. (v. 22)**

Of all the titles Jesus carries, I feel the most affection for “teacher.” Perhaps it’s because my mother spent her career in the classroom. Also, I can still recall the educators who stretched, challenged, shaped, and believed in me. I bet you can too.

Each time Jesus began to teach, whether in the synagogue or on a lakeshore, people paid attention. His words carry a certain sureness. In a worldly sense, Jesus didn’t have any power. He didn’t lead a battalion of soldiers, or rule a province, or have training as a priest or scribe. All Jesus’ authority came from his relationship with his Father. It gave him confidence to speak, teach, and serve. And it changed the world, one life at a time.

Teachers don’t just exist in the classroom, of course. We all teach by the things we say, the way we treat people, and how we spend our time and money. By virtue of our baptism we have been given the authority to love freely, serve joyfully, and speak a word of grace. As we do, we just might change someone’s life.

**Thank you for showing me the way to live, Jesus.  
Use me to teach others your ways, too. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Teachers and student teachers*

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

## Tell me what I already know

**Say to my soul, “I am your salvation.” (v. 3)**

By the third verse we can sense that the psalmist already knows that which this prayer requests. The psalm writer instructs God exactly how to declare the assurance that God is the way of salvation. Despite knowing this already, the psalmist already needs to hear it again. It is like that mix of faith and uncertainty when a man tells Jesus, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

I venture that you wouldn’t be reading this devotion if you had never been told that God is your salvation. Yet having heard this proclamation before doesn’t mean we always get it or remember it.

I am married to a wonderful human being, yet I still need her to tell me regularly that she loves me. That I am loved is more than just a fact to memorize; it is a truth that affects my entire being—something I need to hear again and again. The truth that I am saved is like this. The message that God is our salvation is not just information to understand but an assurance that empowers us to live out of God’s love.

**Encouraging God, remind me today that you are  
my salvation through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Married couples*

**Numbers 22:1-21; Acts 21:17-26**