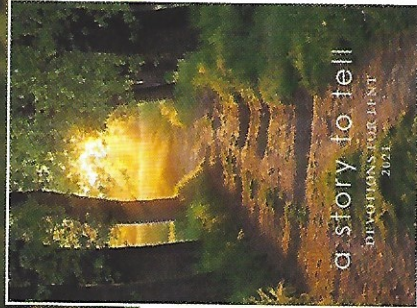


a story to tell

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
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.



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

Presentation of Our Lord

**Simeon took [the child Jesus] in his arms
and praised God. (v. 28)**

The congregation I serve cherishes the children's message as much as any part of the service. I'm certain it's not because I give particularly great children's sermons, but because people love seeing all the children in our community. I have learned that this time in the service is most sacred to the eldest among us. For them, the mere presence of kids in church can be as encouraging as any sermon, song, or part of the liturgy. Children represent vitality and a future, and demonstrate that God acts in surprising ways.

Today's reading refers to Jesus as "the child." His name is only used once in the whole passage. To Simeon and Anna, the name "Jesus of Nazareth" did not yet mean anything, but his being a child did; that the Messiah had come as a child underscored God's tendency to show up in "the least" among us to bring life and hope.

Children are one of many things that bring churches encouragement and comfort. Who or what at church provides you encouragement and comfort?

**Reassuring God, make real to me today that the future
is in your hands, through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: The young people in your community

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

A troubling prayer

**You deliver . . . the weak and needy
from those who despoil them. (v. 10)**

Am I allowed to pray for God to fight against my enemies? This psalmist does so but can I? Is this what God would have us pray, or is it a record of human nature muddying the life of faith, as we know only too well it can do? Furthermore, would God ever answer a prayer to draw a spear and javelin against someone?

Scripture passages like today's reading, depicting God as violent and vengeful, are deeply troubling to me. My initial reaction is to reject them: *We should never pray like this! God is nicer than that!* Yet this reaction risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Scripture also says God's thoughts are not our thoughts; neither are our ways God's ways (Isaiah 55:8). And the last words of today's passage are deeply true: God protects the vulnerable and the weak against those who wrong them. God is fair, just, and full of lovingkindness.

So I will pray and work peacefully for justice where there is hurt and inequity, and lay my honest questions before God.

God our shield, deliver the needy from their suffering. Amen.

*Prayer concern: The ELCA's AMMPARO ministry
to migrant children*

Jeremiah 29:1-14; Mark 5:1-20

All you need (to know) is love

The whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (v. 14)

"How do I read my Bible?" a high school student asked me. I wrestled a long time with how to answer.

People have been asking this question since the Bible was written. The leaders in the early church often advised people to start with the clear and obvious parts of scripture and interpret the more difficult parts in light of those. So the apostle Paul is following a tradition that extends at least back to Jesus' own teaching when he explains that the command to love one's neighbor as oneself summarizes the whole law.

At the core of the Bible is God's love for all, and our call to love one another. If your interpretation of a scripture passage does not increase within you love for others, love for God, and love for yourself, you probably have not yet grasped its meaning. The heart of the law is love; the law simply expands on the command to love. Or in Paul's words, "The only thing that counts is faith working through love" (v. 6).

**Loving God, cultivate love within me today,
 through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Beginning Bible readers

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Proverbs 12:10-21

Encountering Jesus

[Salvation] was declared at first through the Lord,
 and it was attested to us by those who heard him. (v. 3)

Scripture readings like today's that are full of references to supernatural activity and divine judgment can be challenging. I, for example, have never personally seen a miracle, and I rarely think about angels as a regular part of my practice of faith. I also feel uncomfortable with language about divine punishment for drifting away from the faith. So what am I to make of the counsel in today's passage?

Perhaps a clue worth noting is that the author of Hebrews names the witness of those who encounter Jesus as second only to the teaching of Jesus himself. All the supernatural activity, like wonders and miracles, is "added" (v. 4) by God; think of it as icing on the cake.

The news of Jesus was—and continues to be—spread by witnesses to his work. We hear about Christ because others share their stories of encountering him. We all have such stories. What is yours? Someone is eager to hear it and to encounter Jesus through you.

**God, thank you for being present with us through your Son,
 who lived among us and whom we encounter still. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA Creation Care Advocacy

Job 36:1-23; 1 Corinthians 9:1-16

The meaning of *sabbath*

They asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" (v. 10)

Today's society has a radically different relationship with the sabbath than did the Pharisees. A day each week dedicated to rest and no work seems inconceivable to many. (Even my recently retired parents often note how busy they are!) In light of our culture's devotion to overstuffed schedules, how are we to understand allegations of Jesus working on the day of rest?

It is worth noting *what* Jesus does on the sabbath: he heals. Jesus recasts the sabbath as a day for finite and fragile human beings to be restored—first, from the burdens of the week, and ultimately, in the messianic age, from all brokenness in this life. Jesus demonstrates that mercy takes precedence over slavish adherence to the law, and in the Son of Man "something greater than the temple is here" (v. 6).

In the face of what the Pharisees perceive as violation of the law, they begin conspiring to destroy Jesus. If anything sounds like violation of the sabbath, it is this plotting. Surely Jesus and the healed man awake the next day feeling more rejuvenated than the conspirators.

**Healing God, restore me and give me rest today,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People required to work Sundays

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Isaiah 46:1-13



Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

The whole city was gathered around the door. (v. 33)

Many in the church today are grappling with a sense of loss and disappointment about its decreased cultural influence. Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings are no longer left open for church participation, and many feel no need to be connected to a church. But this is reality at this time, and there is no easy way to reverse the trend.

Yet today's gospel tells of a "whole city" gathering to see Jesus. He has just cast out a demon while teaching in the synagogue; now crowds come to find him at a private home, seeking the healing he offers. Wherever Jesus goes, people follow; the location isn't the key.

Perhaps we emphasize getting people to a certain location—the church building—to hear about Jesus, instead of noticing other spaces where they might, or do, experience him. Where in your community do people yearn for Jesus' healing? How can you and your congregation "be Jesus" to them? And might you find Jesus already there, waiting to engage with *you*?

**Healing God, use us to reveal Jesus and help us
to recognize Jesus, regardless of location. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Your local hospital
or other healthcare facility*

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Successful ministry

**The residents of the city were divided;
some sided . . . with the apostles. (v. 4)**

Paul and Barnabas were effective evangelists. Their work brought many to Jesus. But not everyone they met embraced their message. In fact, some in the city of Iconium even tried to stone them. There is no indication Paul and Barnabas had said anything wrong—it just didn't work out in Iconium. So Paul and Barnabas moved along and tried again in the next town.

I tend to give up more easily than Paul and Barnabas did. When I see a student looking disengaged in confirmation class or someone sleeping during a sermon I'm preaching, I find it easy to worry that I am failing in my work. In my less-than-best moments, I use church attendance trends as a measuring stick for whether I am doing all right as a pastor. Thank God Paul and Barnabas did not! They knew something we all need to be reminded of:

Wherever you are and whatever you are doing, God is already using you and your ministry for God's purposes.

**God of encouragement, give us eyes to see our ministry
as you do, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Pastors, deacons,
and other church leaders*

2 Kings 4:8-17, 32-27; Psalm 102:12-28

The kids are all right

**You, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations. (v. 12)**

One of the most popular topics at pastor conferences is ministry to Millennials (born roughly between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012). Many lament or fear that younger people seem less involved in church than older generations. As a Millennial myself, I wish I had a simple answer and an easy solution to change this trend.

Amid this uncertainty, it may be helpful to remember Psalm 102: thousands of years ago, the psalmist wrote that God's name will endure to all generations. Think about how many generations have passed since then. God's name has already endured through countless wars, famines, pandemics, and natural disasters. Our continued reading of Psalm 102 stands as proof of God's enduring name.

I cannot conceive of anything more challenging to God than what has already been endured. God's name will continue—even to the younger generations today. God is enthroned forever. Nothing will change that.

**God of all, may your name be a blessing and reassurance
to people of all generations. Amen.**

Prayer concern: ELCA Youth Gathering planners

2 Kings 8:1-6; Acts 15:36-41

Good news

Hearing all that [Jesus] was doing,
they came to him in great numbers. (v. 8)

Jesus had been teaching, healing, and welcoming sinners. Most recently he had cured a man with a withered hand. The news spread like wildfire! Soon people were flocking to Jesus from all over. Why were they so eager to come to him? He filled a deep need in their society and in every one since: the need for good news.

To people across Palestine, news of Jesus' healing work meant hope for a better life. That one could live without a physical deformity or a chronic illness was good news they were desperate to hear. What's more, Jesus' teaching of the word of God, his proclamation of forgiveness, and his call for sinners to join him all indicated a seismic shift for the downtrodden and despairing. Good news on so many levels!

What good news keeps you coming back to Jesus? What good news does your community need to hear? What word of hope would make people come running today? How can you spread the good news of Jesus?

**God, continue to bring healing and hope to our world,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Social Services

Job 6:1-13; Psalm 102:12-28

The fragrance of life

For we are the aroma of Christ. (v. 15)

My brother recently moved from California to Milwaukee, where I live. I love having him nearer to me. I value his companionship.

He's also a great baker, and there are few better surprises than when he shows up unannounced with a loaf of sourdough fresh out of the oven. What better smell is there than freshly baked bread? I am getting hungry just thinking about it.

I have read that smell is the sense most tied to memory, and I believe it. I cannot think of Christmas apart from the aroma of my mom's cinnamon rolls. What fragrances do you most fondly remember? What memories do they bring back?

As the church, we are called "the aroma of Christ." We cannot think of Christ without also remembering people on our faith journey. Who are the people whose very essence reminds you of Christ? What memories come back when you think of them?

**God, may our lives remind others of Christ,
as a pleasant aroma recalls a dear friend. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Bakers

1 Kings 11:26-40; Psalm 50:1-6

A different kind of judgment

**Christ Jesus our Lord . . . strengthened me,
because he judged me faithful. (v. 12)**

After reading verse 12, we'd expect the author to go on to explain how and why God judged him faithful. Strangely, the exact opposite happens. The writer calls himself "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence"—"the foremost" of all sinners (vv. 13, 15).

This doesn't make sense if we think of God's judgment operating like a baseball umpire: "I call 'em like I see 'em." Fortunately for us, God's judgment doesn't find people who are already faithful and declare them such; it finds sinners and makes them faithful. God's judgment doesn't seek value; it creates value through love. The author is strengthened precisely because God exercises judgment through the lens of mercy and love.

God's judgment is creative: it brings good out of things and people that are not. In Luther's words: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it." Where are you eager for God's merciful, transforming judgment today?

God, you called all you created "good." Continue to restore us to goodness through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Artists and others who exercise creativity

1 Kings 14:1-8; Psalm 50:1-6

God is not silent

Our God comes and does not keep silence. (v. 3)

In his book *Discipleship*, twentieth-century pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a startling claim: modern Christians have every bit as much access to Christ's teaching as did his first disciples. This claim troubled many of my seminary classmates, who had assumed that the twelve disciples had some sort of special access to Christ's teaching.

Martin Luther makes the same claim as Bonhoeffer: our access to Jesus' teachings in the Bible is every bit as good as what those who encountered Jesus in the flesh had. Bonhoeffer and Luther realized the important reality of the power of the living Word of scripture: there is no difference between the experience of hearing Jesus firsthand and the experience of reading one's Bible or hearing the preached word.

In the words of the psalmist, "Our God . . . does not keep silence." God is still speaking to us today—just as powerfully as ever before.

**God, open our ears and our hearts to your voice today,
through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Theologians and biblical scholars

1 Kings 16:1-7; Luke 19:41-44



Transfiguration of Our Lord

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings." (v. 5)

Many a Transfiguration sermon has scolded Peter for preferring his "mountaintop experience" with Jesus to the vicissitudes of "real life." Such sermons, I worry, obscure the real point.

This story is indeed about mountaintop experiences, but not the kind we usually think of. Mark's story also invites us to recall Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to receive the commandments (Exodus 24:12-18). In each story, a leader and one or more assistants climb a mountain covered by a cloud and hear God speak. The parallels—even down to a six-day wait—are striking!

Mark knows these similarities and wants us to note them. Just as God spoke to ancient Israel through the giving of the law, the Transfiguration mountaintop experience made known to Peter, James, and John that God was now speaking through Jesus, and that they should "listen to him!" (v. 7).

This remains true today. Where do you hear God speaking through Jesus?

**Active and present God, help us listen to Jesus
and so hear your voice. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Christians in Africa

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Pay attention!

How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (v. 3)

I grew up on a farm, and one of the many skills my dad taught me was how to plant corn using our tractor and a mechanical corn planter. He stressed the importance of planting straight rows. If the rows weren't straight, it made it harder to harvest the corn in the fall, and ultimately, the crop yield would be poorer. I was more interested in all the dials and gadgets in the tractor, though, than in hearing about driving straight. About five minutes into my first try at planting, my dad yelled, "Pay attention!" I looked up. The rows were crooked.

I often wonder if we're the same way in our faith. Our intentions are good, but we often get distracted from the good news of salvation—that Christ came for you and for me. What's more, we can't escape the gift of God's salvation. We can't escape God's lavish love! Of all the things vying for our focus in this life, I can think of no better news to pay attention to than the gospel.

**Patient God, help us to pay attention,
and thank you that we can't escape your love. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: For those seeking clarity
amid life's distractions*

Exodus 19:7-25; Psalm 110:1-4

A Redeemer we can count on

I shall see God . . . on my side. (vv. 26-27)

Job has fallen on the epitome of hard times. His health and wealth are destroyed, but worst of all, his ten children have perished in one great disaster. Job's friends do their best for him when they sit silently with him for a week. But then they start talking. Try as they may to explain why Job has met such misfortune and why God might be punishing him, their advice is less than helpful.

Perhaps you've been in a place of suffering, surrounded by people offering all sorts of advice. Truth is, most people mean well; they genuinely want to help. However, they—we—often speak out of the need to feel useful, or to explain why something horrific and inexplicable has occurred.

In times like these, when we feel no one is truly listening, or perhaps that no one really grasps what we are going through, Job's trust in God is a profound reminder: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last . . . I shall see God . . . on my side" (vv. 25-27).

When we feel no one understands, God, help us to remember that you are always on our side. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who feel persecuted

Psalm 110:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:14-16

Ash Wednesday

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit. (v. 17)

For many Christians Ash Wednesday is the meaningful mark of the start of Lent. We receive ashes on our forehead in the sign of the cross, and are reminded, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." The day also marks the beginning of the Lenten disciplines we commit to for the next forty days.

Yet, I wonder if Ash Wednesday and Lent are also largely about mending broken spirits. Perhaps we've become so tragically accustomed to living with brokenness—our own, and the collective fragmentation we share with others—that we don't bring that brokenness to God. We'd rather turn elsewhere, those paths often leading us to destructive ends.

At their core, Ash Wednesday and Lent are about God's desire to heal and restore us. That we would bring our brokenness and a contrite heart into the presence of our forgiving God is the only sacrifice God requires of us.

Heavenly creator, help us to remember not only who we are, but the ways you mend our broken spirits daily. Amen.

Prayer concern: For all Christians beginning the Lenten journey

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21;
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10**

Confession

If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (v. 9)

When you hear the word *confession*, what feelings or thoughts does it stir in you? Perhaps this seems like an odd question, but I've often found that *confession* conjures up negative feelings in people. This frequently has to do with the desire to cover up sin or explain it away, to make it seem like their burdens don't actually weigh on their souls. The real tragedy isn't that they're being dishonest; it's that they're missing out on the liberating, joyful experience of being cleansed and healed that comes from true confession.

It is hard to fully admit the weight of our sins. Yet consider the greater weight we bear by not confessing. God urges our full confession so we might experience the fullness of divine love and grace. Such powerful forgiveness frees us to live in fellowship with one another through Christ.

Forgiving God, give us courage to confess our sins fully to you so we may know the joy you desire for us. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are burdened by guilt

Psalm 25:1-10; Daniel 9:1-14

God's healing for our shame

In you I trust; do not let me be put to shame. (v. 2)

Brené Brown is a licensed social worker who has been studying shame for over a decade. What has made her research so popular isn't that she's discovered a new phenomenon but that she voices publicly how shame diminishes our lives. Brown states that shame thrives on secrecy, our hiding of things we believe will make us unworthy of love. Shame loses its power when we are honest about what we have been holding in secret.

We talk about casting our burdens and sins upon Jesus but often cling to them, not trusting God to love us if we reveal all. Yet God *already* knows us fully and loves us! Our worth isn't about *us*; it's about *God* choosing us and loving us. Nothing we've done or experienced will take God's love from us or set us outside of God's love. We have seen God's love most profoundly visible in Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. As a result, we can trust that God is faithful and will never put us to shame.

Holy God, cast your healing light on me and deliver me from shame. Amen.

Prayer concern: People seeking mental and emotional health

Daniel 9:15-25a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5

A gospel for all

I have come to call not the righteous but sinners. (v. 13)

Over recent months and years inequalities are becoming in some cases more drastic and in other cases more apparent. So the good news that Jesus cares for the most vulnerable and for those treated as lowest in status is as important as ever. As followers of Jesus, we are called to stand up for people who are poor and marginalized and to serve their needs in love. Most of us get that quite readily.

But what about those “other people”—those who are crooks, corrupt, or greedy, the “tax collectors and sinners” (vv. 10, 11)? Perhaps we’d like to believe the gospel isn’t for them, or at least that it comes with conditions. Yet Jesus heals the paralyzed man and dines with tax collectors and sinners practically at the same time. A gospel for *both* the vulnerable and the corrupt says no one falls outside God’s grace. And for those of us (which is really all of us) with strains of both vulnerability and corruption, that’s a gospel worth believing in.

Remind us, God, that no one stands outside your love.

In Jesus we pray. Amen.

Prayer concern: Christians in Europe

Psalm 25:1-10; Psalm 32



First Sunday in Lent

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (v. 12)

Baptisms are among the most special events of the Christian experience. Whatever the age of the one being baptized, the joy shared in the community of faith is holy and deep. Yet baptism, for us as for Jesus, marks not the culmination of a faith journey but the beginning. And parts of that journey will not be joyful.

Today we’re reminded that right after his baptism, Jesus was “driven” into the wilderness. So perhaps are we as we begin the Lenten journey. And so are we at other times in life. Yet God does not call us to live in the wilderness to pass a test and prove our devotion so much as to fully know what it means to trust God’s promises made in baptism. If the baptismal covenant were only for good times and happy days, it wouldn’t mean much. But even—and especially—amid our trials, God claims us, shelters and guides us, strengthens and sanctifies us. In the wildernesses of life we learn firsthand what God proclaimed in our baptism: “You are my beloved child.”

God, help us find joy in your presence as we journey in the wildernesses of life. Amen.

Prayer concern: Courage for those experiencing a wilderness time

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22

Amazing grace

For by grace you have been saved. (v. 8)

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound . . .” We know the first verse, and maybe more, of this hymn by heart. It is sung frequently at Christian worship services and other gatherings, but it is also known and loved by many who don’t claim to be disciples of Jesus. The question is, Why?

I think the answer is quite simple. Human beings live in a world marked by fear and striving. We often end the day wondering if we’ve done enough: Enough to survive. Enough to earn and maintain our livelihood. Enough to avoid insignificance. From our ancestors to ourselves today, the burden of doing enough has left us exhausted, both physically and spiritually. This is why God’s grace is so amazing. It reminds us that we are never insignificant—not in the eyes of God. In the face of all the burdens of this life, our standing before God and our assurance of life eternal in God’s presence are never left in doubt. Amazing grace, indeed!

**Gracious God, we give thanks to you for counting us
always precious in your sight. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Youth who struggle
for a sense of self-worth*

Job 4:1-21; Psalm 77

The complexity of faith

Your way, O God, is holy. What god
is so great as our God? (v. 13)

Nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed, “God is dead.” Today, those who are “spiritual but not religious” don’t assert that God doesn’t exist; rather, they are skeptical of any single religious tradition that claims its god is the only one. We can understand this caution, given the violence, prejudice, and abuses of power that have marked the history of religions—including Christianity.

So why do we follow the God of this ancient psalmist? Why amid distress did the psalmist “call to mind the deeds of the LORD” (v. 11), wonders and works that were ancient even then? And why worship a man attested as God-become-flesh from two thousand years ago?

I don’t pretend to have answers to satisfy everyone. But we can take a cue from the psalmist and “meditate and search [our] spirit” (v. 6). We can wrestle with questions and sit with uncertainty, even as we testify to God’s actions in our lives. For such a mix as we hear in this psalm is exactly what faith is.

**Help us to meditate on you, O Lord,
and trust in your presence every day. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who feel cynical and hopeless

Job 5:8-27; 1 Peter 3:8-18a

Who do you worship?

Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. (v. 10)

The familiar phrase “You are what you eat” means that if I eat only junk food, I will be unhealthy; if I eat lots of veggies and whole grains, I will surely have better health and more energy. The same is true of our spiritual lives. What and whom we take into our lives; on what or whom we depend for well-being; indeed, where we direct our worship—all of these will be reflected in what we become. For example, we may dedicate heart, mind, and energy to achieving a certain standard of living. That’s not necessarily bad, but along the way we may miss out on time for family or rest.

When Jesus faces hard choices in the wilderness, we see he has already been living “by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (v. 4). He has entrusted his life to God. His responses to temptation reflect his assurance and devotion.

As we choose the object of our worship, trust, and service, we do well to ask, Is it life-giving? The resounding call of scripture is to choose to worship God—the ultimate life-giver.

**Lord, remind us often to worship only you,
for you alone are life-giving. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All held captive by life’s “idols”

Psalm 77; Proverbs 30:1-9

The purpose of the law

On the contrary, we uphold the law. (v. 31)

Many people struggle with the concept of discipline in their faith life. While freedom is restricted in some parts of the world, in most of Western society people can live as they wish as long as they don’t hurt others. Yet individualism can also be our downfall. When we equate God’s gift of salvation through love and grace with unconstrained freedom, we miss God’s true desire for the world.

It’s no wonder we get confused; Paul writes to early Christians who were also unclear about the relationship between justification by faith and God’s ancient law. “Does salvation as a free gift of God through Jesus’ death and resurrection mean we can now toss out the law altogether?” they might have wondered. “By no means!” says Paul (v. 31).

In light of faith, we are neither saved nor chained by the law. Disciplined adherence to the law guides us in living out our salvation as God has always intended: as God’s children in community, with compassion and justice for one another.

**Dear Lord, help me to discipline myself
according to your word. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who work within
the justice system*

Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18; Psalm 22:23-31

Evangelism 101

**Future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim his deliverance. (vv. 30-31)**

This psalm could easily sound like reading material from a course on evangelism. First, we are reminded of how much we love God and value our faith relationship. Second, we hear how that should compel us to share the good news with all nations and generations. Not an unimportant sentiment considering the messages we hear these days about declining church attendance.

Yet I'm not sure attendance figures are what evangelism is really about. Telling future generations about God is less about convincing them to attend church, and more about their becoming a living message of God's goodness. We tell others about God by not giving in to our fears because we trust the power of divine love. We tell about God's goodness by walking alongside people even in uncomfortable situations—disaster recovery, illness, advocacy for human rights—and serving those in need. We “proclaim [God's] deliverance,” which as Christians we know in Jesus, by practicing forgiveness with the same abandon he did.

Holy God, let my life tell the story of your great love. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those hurt by the church

Genesis 16:1-6; Romans 4:1-12

Perplexing silence

**[Jesus] sternly ordered them
not to tell anyone about him. (v. 30)**

I have always been mystified by Jesus commanding his disciples to keep silent about him. Of course, biblical scholars and theologians have proposed explanations for this theme in Mark's story, the most satisfactory ones having to do with the central focus on Jesus' coming passion and death. Still, I remain captivated by Jesus' cryptic words.

Then I listen to all the voices telling us who Jesus is—or, rather, their idea of who he is. We are told in many different ways what Jesus truly stood for, what his life was about, and what it means to follow him. Yet when Jesus asks us directly along with his disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?” we are not being called to answer with only words. Rather, Jesus is calling us to follow him on the way to the cross, to respond with the way we live for God and for others. As a saying attributed to St. Francis urges, we are to “preach the gospel at all times, [and] when necessary, use words.”

**Lord, let my actions speak who you are to those in the
world who need to hear the good news of salvation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who lack basic needs for living

Genesis 16:7-15; Psalm 22:23-31



Second Sunday in Lent

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering. (v. 31)

Suffering is one of the most challenging aspects of Christian life. Conceptually, we understand that suffering is an unavoidable part of the human experience. Yet we live in a world that likes to avoid acknowledging that suffering exists. The events of war get depicted without showing the cost to both civilians and soldiers. Commercials convince us that we need the luxuries they sell without showing the impact on the environment and the most vulnerable who produce them.

The Son of Man doesn't undergo suffering for suffering's sake. The Son of Man undergoes suffering because, as the story of the good news tells us, it is part of God's design that the Son of Man should come to serve and give his life for all. Suffering is never an end in itself; it is what happens in the way of God's love that reaches through suffering and the cross to the glorious resurrection of Jesus. We are Easter people. The last word of the story is that in Jesus' death and resurrection God promises us life.

Lord, help me to trust you amid life's suffering, and to trust your promise of life eternal. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who suffer from trauma

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25

Sing praises

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name. . . . Sing to him, sing praises to him. (vv. 1-2)

I have been a worship leader at my church in Colorado for about fifteen years. I grew up singing in children's choir, then high school show choir—even taking voice lessons. I find it a tremendous blessing to be able to use my passion for music to sing praises to God in worship.

It's also a lot of work. With weekly rehearsals, weekend worship, and then a whole slew of special events like Lenten services and a Palm Sunday musical, sometimes I feel like I live at the church! When I'm feeling a little stretched and tired, I can become resentful of the time I have committed.

If I start to feel bitter about my responsibilities, I stop myself, take a deep breath, and remember just how lucky I am for the opportunity to sing and make music, fill people's hearts with joy, and let my own joy flow out of me, all in thanksgiving for the God of love who connects us all.

What forms of praise bless your life as you bless God?

God, help us sing your praises with whatever gifts we have been given and with joy in our hearts. Amen.

Prayer concern: Worship leaders

Genesis 21:1-7; Hebrews 1:8-12