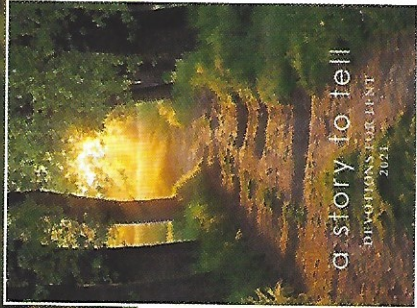


a story to tell

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2021

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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

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.

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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.

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.



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

Homeward bound

People who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. (v. 14)

Right after I finished my master's degree, I got the urge to move. I felt drawn away from my childhood community in Colorado, toward New York City. I'd been feeling stuck for a long time, and thought this was the answer. I was hopeful that such a monumental uprooting of life and the experience of new things would bring about positive change for me.

But I quickly found the bustle of New York overwhelming; the wilderness of skyscrapers and concrete caused a loneliness unlike anything I'd ever felt. I realized that New York couldn't fix me. So after several months of increasing misery, I came home.

This coming home included returning to the church I had left, and which turned out to be the best thing for me, even though I did it grudgingly at first. I needed to be reminded that nothing I could say or do could ever keep me from being a child of God above anything else. I needed to see that within my church community, I had a place. I was home.

Loving God, thank you for giving all of us a place to call home, a place as your children. Amen.

Prayer concern: Refugees and those seeking home

Genesis 22:1-19; Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45

Health and restoration

For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, says the LORD. (v. 17)

Anyone who lives with chronic pain or illness understands that the idea of "healing" is elusive. Many chronic illnesses are incurable and debilitating; I know my own chronic illnesses have been. Those of us who live with such conditions spend a lot of time searching for ways to feel better, sometimes only to feel worse. At times, managing a chronic illness feels like a full-time job.

But I've also learned that God is right there with me every step of the way. God is in the doctors and nurses who show compassion and who work to help me and other sufferers find relief. God is in the friends and family who walk alongside us in our pain and struggle. And God is inside us, empowering our desire to persevere and not let pain or illness define us.

It may not be the longed-for, perfect cure to that which ails us, but there is healing in the experience of God's love wrapped around us like a blanket, making us whole again and again.

Healing Lord, thank you for walking alongside us in our pain. Amen.

Prayer concern: People with chronic illnesses

Psalm 105:1-11, 37-45; John 12:36-43

Following God

Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do. (v. 8)

When the Israelites reach Mount Sinai, God gives surprisingly simple instructions: "Obey my voice and keep my covenant" (v. 5). Sounds pretty easy, right? As it turns out, it's not nearly as simple as it sounds—not for the Israelites, and not for the rest of us.

I've dedicated my life to trying to follow the word of God and the teachings of Jesus, to live a life rich in love and service and community. But there's just so much "stuff" that gets in the way. I get distracted by my desire for success, by money, by politics, by my own self-serving wants, by any number of "worldly" things that don't have very much to do with following God at all.

How fortunate, then, that we have a God of love! Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God showed us that, even when we fall short, there is no end to the ways God creatively loves, cares for, and sustains us. I think I can work with that.

**Forgiving God, thank you for continuing to love us,
even when we fail to follow. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Christians in Australia

Psalm 19; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Sunrise

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun. (v. 4)

I'm not a morning person. In fact, it's pretty rare that I am up early enough to catch the sunrise. So, what a spectacular treat it is on those rare occasions when I am.

I am always in awe of how the light streaks the sky in bands of orange and pink and blue, like swipes of watercolor across a canvas. I like to think of God, our Creator, as an artist. Our great Earth is the biggest, most remarkable canvas, and everywhere I look I see God's creativity at work.

When life drags me down and I find myself in a time of doubt—in troubled times when I wonder if God really exists—all I have to do is look up at the sky, and I find the evidence of God's glory on full display.

**Creator God, thank you for the sunrise and for
every natural thing that reminds me of your glory. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Early risers

Exodus 19:9b-15; Acts 7:30-40

Transformation

And he was transfigured before them. (v. 2)

Many of my friends are starting to have babies. It's such an exciting and scary time for them, and I always feel blessed to walk alongside them on the journey.

People sometimes talk about "pregnancy glow"—how you might see a sort of ethereal change in the expression and presence of an expectant mother. I have seen this myself: the signs that someone is being transformed before my eyes. Whatever the outward signs may or may not be (everyone is different!), when one becomes a mother—biologically or through adoption or foster care; legally or "by heart"—she is given a new identity, much as God makes us new every day.

When a glow of divine glory came over Jesus on the mountain, I wonder if a certain transformation started in the three disciples too. Did anyone notice a bit of a change in them when they came down from the mountain? Does anyone ever see a brightness—a glow, if you will—in us, reflecting our transformation as we grow in Jesus?

**Mother God, thank you for the promise that, in you,
we are all made new. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Soon-to-be mothers

Exodus 19:16-25; Psalm 19



Third Sunday in Lent

He was speaking of the temple of his body. (v. 21)

We've probably all heard that phrase before: "My body is a temple." It's been co-opted by fad diets and fitness crazes. If you're like me, this language at first might make you a little uncomfortable. After all, temples are high holy places. My body doesn't feel very holy at all.

Jesus understood that his body was holy. After all, Jesus was the Word of God who "became flesh" (John 1:14). After driving the money changers out of the temple, he foretold his death and resurrection: the destruction and restoration of himself, but also of his body as God's temple.

In the sacrament of Jesus' body and blood, we are collectively "the body of Christ, and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). That means God dwells in us also. We are called to try to make everything we say and do an outpouring of God's love. Our bodies are indeed temples—temples of Christ's presence to our neighbor.

**God, thank you for dwelling in Jesus and in us.
Help us to be temples of Christ's presence to all. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: People who experience body shame
or a low self-image*

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Firm foundations

No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (v. 11)

In the area of Colorado where my childhood home was built, we have a problem with clay in the soil. This wreaks havoc on foundations. The cement cracks and splits, and houses settle. Sometimes a foundation becomes so damaged that it has to be replaced, a costly and time-consuming endeavor.

It's important to have a strong foundation for a house—or for anything. Just as a house built on a weak foundation might crumble and fall, we need a sturdy foundation for living—something we can build on top of, that will hold the weight of our lives. As Paul writes, that foundation is always Jesus. And if I shift off that foundation and my faith begins to crack, Jesus draws me back to his words and deeds, his death and resurrection. Here I find again the strength and support on which to build my life.

Loving God, thank you for giving us Jesus Christ, the firmest foundation of love. Amen.

Prayer concern: Cement masons and concrete finishers

1 Kings 6:1-4, 21-22; Psalm 84

Sacrificial giving

He has appeared once for all . . . to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. (v. 26)

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice when he gave up his life, trusting God's will and purpose for our salvation. Knowing resurrection would come (he predicted his death and resurrection multiple times) didn't make his suffering easy (recall his anguish in Gethsemane, his cries of abandonment on the cross). Sacrifice, by definition, is hard.

Yet we followers of Jesus are called to give of ourselves, after Jesus' example. Sometimes we feel up for the challenge, like during an inspiring worship service. But what happens when we don't?

Even when we don't feel inspired, Jesus dwells in us and goes with us. Transformed by Christ's Spirit, we become as Christ to all we meet. We don't need to dream up huge sacrifices; love and care for the neighbor are the very self-giving to which we are called. Luther says we don't have to go looking for crosses; with so many needs in the world, we all have opportunities to give sacrificially.

God, thank you for showing us that the ultimate sacrifice is to live for our neighbor rather than for ourselves. Amen.

Prayer concern: Biological and chosen families, as they care for one another

2 Chronicles 29:1-11, 16-19; Psalm 84

Singing for joy

My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. (v. 2)

I'm always singing to myself. Sometimes I sing along to a song I hear in the background; sometimes it's something stuck in my head. Now and then I hum melodies without even knowing where they come from. Occasionally, while I'm on a walk or a drive singing away, I look up and, for just a second, it seems everything around me is in sync with me and my music—as though every living thing is moving to the same beat, inhaling and exhaling as one.

For me, this epitomizes joy: my whole body, my whole being, tuned in to the frequency of love, the frequency of God. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, my heart is whole, and I remember why I sing day in and day out. It's my way of searching for and reaching out for the joy of union with God and all creation that Jesus prayed his disciples would experience (John 17). This gift is God's to give—I don't create or achieve it—but when I sing, I open my heart and soul to it, and I know joy.

Unifying God, thank you for the joy of glimpsing your design for a world connected. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those in need of joy

Ezra 6:1-16; Mark 11:15-19

Child of God

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ. (v. 5)

I've always taken great comfort in knowing that I am a child of God, but recently I realized I had no idea exactly what that means. My parents became guardians of my three teenage cousins after their mother died and they were removed from their father's care. This is an immense change for all of us as we adjust to having the kids in our daily lives and learn how to live as a family together.

Just as my parents "adopted" these kids, so God has adopted us. We are God's "kids," siblings with Jesus the Christ, and heirs of salvation. Wow! Every day I see the love my parents have for my cousins—their willingness to completely uproot their lives, to sacrifice everything to give the kids a good life—and I can finally begin to really grasp the immensity of the gift God has bestowed upon all of us as children of God. It's a love so great I feel I can't hold it all.

Father God, thank you for loving each of us as your child and bestowing on us the gifts of creation. Amen.

Prayer concern: Adoptive parents and legal guardians

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Priceless inheritance

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance. (v. 11)

My grandfather died recently. One of the hardest things we had to do was to go through all his belongings. So many cherished memories were wrapped up in those objects, those symbols of the man he had been and the life he had lived. It was interesting to see the things that people wanted, the things that meant something to one of us but were junk to the rest of us.

This form of inheritance made me very uncomfortable. It felt like taking something that wasn't mine, that I hadn't earned and didn't have a right to claim. But as I experienced the process, I realized that wasn't it at all. My grandfather left us his belongings because he loved us. It wasn't just his "stuff"; it was a piece of himself, and he wanted us to have that piece with us always.

God's inheritance is like that. We did nothing to earn it, yet God gives us God's immense love through grace alone. May we all treasure and share this love we have been given as God's children.

**Loving God, thank you for making us your children
and inheritors of your love and grace,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Grandparents and grandchildren

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Daniel 12:5-13

Believing without seeing

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" (v. 9)

I envy the wonder children have for the world. I taught preschool briefly and had the fun of performing science experiments with the kids. At their age, the scientific process really goes out the window. You add vinegar to baking soda and simply watch as their eyes grow big with excitement and amazement at what occurs.

It's much harder for me, as it was for Nicodemus, to believe without seeing exactly how something works. I like to know things. I hate the feeling of not understanding. Sometimes it seems online search engines are my closest companions.

Really, I think it comes down to trust. In our world of internet memes and social media, can we believe at face value anything we see or read? The uncertainty of online information has made me more distrusting. But one thing I do trust, and it makes all the difference: The God of love is with me every step of the way, both in what I can see and know and in things hidden and mysterious.

**God, help us continue to learn to trust you and your love
for our world. In Jesus we pray. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Children, with their wonder
at the world*

Numbers 20:22-29; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22



Fourth Sunday in Lent

The light has come into the world. (v. 19)

Children often fear the dark. Emergency room workers often dread the night shift. But do more bad things really happen after sundown? For adults and kids alike, maybe it's more that darkness is visually limiting, reminding us there are things—physical and otherwise—we can't see or grasp. The final limit is death. The scriptures often link darkness and death: "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4 KJV); "The people who sat in darkness . . . [and] in the region and shadow of death" (Matthew 4:16). Yet, the psalmist says, "I fear no evil" because the Shepherd is near. And the people who lived in darkness "have seen a great light" in Jesus' coming.

The hymn "I want to walk as a child of the light" (ELW 815) declares of Jesus, "In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike." We can orient our lives toward Jesus as flowers, and many people, turn toward the life-giving sun. In his light we are safe and can thrive, day and night. As we share the light of Jesus with others, we can all learn that we need not be afraid.

**Lord God, thank you for the life-giving light
of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People who work night shifts

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10

The divine architect

Every house is built by someone,
but the builder of all things is God. (v. 4)

I love architecture. One of my favorite things to do in a new place is to walk around and observe the buildings. Each has a unique design and "personality." The lines and contours become a conversation between me and the architect as I learn who this person is and what matters to them, as I see inside their creative heart and mind.

The writer of Hebrews likens first Christ and then God to a builder. The first builder of anything is an architect, who must "build" an illustration of what will eventually be. God is the architect of all creation, and God's creative work in Christ builds a space inside our hearts. Christ designed a life of love and service modeled on his own deeds and teachings, death and resurrection. Early Christians called resurrection the eighth day of creation; indeed, through the gift of resurrection, Christ creates new life in us and in all the world.

God designed the plans for our "house." Christ became our model. Now it's our job to live into it—this house of love—through our own daily existence.

**Creative God, you designed a life for us through the life
of Jesus. Help us to live into it. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Architects

Exodus 15:22-27; Psalm 107:1-16

God's holiness

These are the waters of Meribah, . . .
by which [the Lord] showed his holiness. (v. 13)

The water in the wilderness had dried up. The people of Israel were distressed. They assembled before Moses, thinking their quarrel was with him: "Did you bring us out here to die? It would have been better if we had died in Egypt, not in this godforsaken place!"

But God hasn't forsaken the people. Indeed, the Lord heeds their quarrel and appears to Moses and Aaron: "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, . . . and command the rock . . . to yield its water" (v. 8). So Moses and Aaron take the staff and gather the people. But oddly, rather than talking to the rock, Moses strikes it. Nonetheless, water pours forth—God's promise kept.

Like the Israelites, we might sometimes have a quarrel with how God seems to be active, or not, in our lives—when we are at the end of our rope amid challenging circumstances or confused about why life is as it is. During trying times, part of God's holiness is listening to and caring for us. Above all, God shows God's holiness in love.

**Holy God, thank you for heeding the cries of your creation
and showing your love for us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those crying out to God today

Psalm 107:1-16; 1 Corinthians 10:6-13

Call and response

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever. (v. 1)

With the psalmist's first hearers, we are invited into this song from the opening line. God's goodness is persistent—steadfast lovingkindness that responds to people in need.

"[The LORD's] steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so" (vv. 1-2), the song leader calls to those gathered from the four corners of the earth. To those who were hungry and thirsty, whose hearts were weighed down and distressed. Those the LORD has now redeemed from trouble.

"Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind," the song leader invites, again and again (vv. 8, 15). And the people sing their response: the declaration of all who have ever known exile, slavery, oppression, imprisonment, any kind of gloom, indeed the shadow of death.

The psalmist's call prompts the people's response. More significant still, when God's people call, unfailingly God responds.

**O God, thank you for hearing and responding
when we call to you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Song leaders and singers

Isaiah 60:15-22; John 8:12-20

God, our healer

The word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword. (v. 12)

All things are clear before God, the surgeon and healer of the world. The word of God, dancing in the hand of the One who knows what needs to be done, is the finest two-edged scalpel of energy and life.

Such a lively description might not initially bring joy to the suffering patient. I know I was apprehensive when my physician described in vivid detail how he would perform surgery on me. But Dr. P. did the surgery I needed to live. And afterward, he literally danced. Dr. P. galloped into the waiting room and announced to my family, "It went great!" As I was still waking up, he came to my side and said, "Jennifer! You did great! Say something!"—knowing I would.

I did. Satisfied that his work was done, Dr. P. rested. And so did I.

Even more so than my expert surgeon, God the healer works the word so precisely for us that God can't help but rejoice and dance. "You did great!" God says, having done all the work. "Say something!" So we do . . .

**Thanks be to you, O God! We rejoice and rest in the life
you give us by your word. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Surgeons and their patients

Psalm 51:1-12; Isaiah 30:15-18

Christ, our great high priest

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace
with boldness. (v. 16)

Years ago I moved to a new community. I was welcomed by new friends: "When you're done at work, come over."

Work ended late, so I felt I shouldn't impose. But my friends called: "Why aren't you here? Come over!" So I did. We hung out, talked, and ate. My new friends really saved me in those years by understanding the challenges I was facing and my temptation to despair. They wouldn't let me hesitate: "You come in," they urged. And even: "Get in here!"

Christ's understanding—his sympathy with our lot—enables our boldness before the throne of grace. God's unconditional love for us is made known by Jesus, our great high priest. And not from a distance: he is right with us in all our trials, closer than our next breath. Before the foundations of the world God determined to accomplish this—to make us bold to trust in God, who lovingly came to us in Christ. When we hesitate, Christ is both warm and insistent: "You come in! Get in here!" We are more than welcome.

**We thank you, God, for Christ, our great high priest.
Help us trust in your welcoming invitation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who hesitate to pray

Exodus 30:1-10; Psalm 51:1-12

Anointing the king

Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it . . .
for the day of my burial." (v. 7)

Mary of Bethany does what John the Baptist says he is unworthy to do (John 1:27): she unties Jesus' sandals. But beyond the usual hospitable honor of washing feet, Mary takes a pound of the most expensive perfume and anoints Jesus, wiping his feet with her hair. It's extravagant. It's fit for a king. When Judas complains that it's unseemly in lavishness and that he can't see any earthly good coming of it, Jesus tells him to step back. "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."

Mary does what not even John the forerunner could. She lifts Jesus up in the manner of a priest. In the manner of God. She glorifies Jesus and anoints him king. She anoints his body even now for burial. And she anoints him for his reign as the crucified and risen one. The one who will be lifted up on the cross will be glorified and will draw all his sheep, his people, to himself. Like Mary, we cannot help but praise.

**We thank you, O God, for witnesses like Mary
to the reign of Christ. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Pastors and other proclaimers
of God's kingdom*

Psalm 51:1-12; Habakkuk 3:2-13



Fifth Sunday in Lent

[Jesus said,] "I, when I am lifted up . . . ,
will draw all people to myself." (v. 32)

When Greek-speaking worshipers show up wanting to see Jesus, he takes the opportunity to point to the cross as the occasion for his glory. Strange victory, that cross: When a seed dies, it bears much fruit. Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Servants will be honored. Glory comes through crucifixion.

"Now is the judgment of this world" (v. 31): "God did not send the Son . . . to condemn the world, but . . . that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). God so loved the *whole world* that God was willing even to suffer death. This is the love—from a cross—to which we can't help but be drawn, to approach and plead: "Please. We want to see Jesus."

And time and again Jesus shows up: in the good news proclaimed, in forgiveness of sin, in the body and blood of Christ "given for you." Joining in the hymn of all creation, we sing: "This is the feast of victory for our God."

**Blessing and honor and glory are yours, O God.
Please grant us this gift: to see Jesus. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who long to know
God's presence*

Psalm 51:1-12; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10

God's unstoppable wonders

I am God . . . ; I work and who can hinder it? (v. 13)

God works wonders no one can stop. Before the whole world God's people assemble. God chooses people whom the powers of the world would never expect as God's witnesses. The speaker imagines those who are blind, those who are deaf, and people of all the nations who, surprisingly, come and bear witness that the ways of God are true. This number might include outsiders and newcomers. Sinners, even! People who look or move or think differently than the powers-that-be. Even us! "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen" (v. 10).

"You are precious . . . , and I love you," God declares (Isaiah 43:4). God is God, and insists on doing God's thing. The Lord makes clear: there is no other god—who can stop this work of choosing and delivering those whom God loves. "No past or future power can stop my love or my choice of you," God declares. "I've got you in the palm of my hand, beloved ones. I will never let you go."

God, you have promised us love and life. Remind us again and again of your care. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who are afraid

Psalm 119:9-16; 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

The future, safe in God

Do not fear, or be afraid; . . . Is there any god besides me?
 . . . I know not one. (v. 8)

"Do not fear," God tells the people. I "formed you" and "will help you." Twice, for emphasis, God calls them "chosen" and "my servant" (vv. 1-2). The creation is the Lord's, and so is its future. The people are the Lord's; their future belongs to God.

But suffering, fear, and doubt creep in. Even when we want to trust God, we doubt ourselves and what's to come. The unjust powers of the world oppress. We lose hope.

So God comes with a renewal of promises: It will be like water poured fresh on a dry land, and the spirit of life in a new generation of children. So powerful will that new identity be that God's chosen will even write it on their hands: "The LORD's" (v. 5).

The future is hopeful, says Isaiah. It looks like strong new shoots and flowering trees (v. 4): generations loved by God even as God loved their forebears. *You* are among those beloved generations; God comes to bring you life.

"O God, . . . our hope for years to come," be our help and our rock now, we pray. Amen. (ELW 632)

Prayer concern: Those who wonder about the future

Psalm 119:9-16; Acts 2:14-24

God blesses us by the word

I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word. (v. 16)

Today's portion of Psalm 119 asks how young people can live in the ways of God. This question is actually key for people of all ages. The psalmist argues that God's statutes are true wisdom to help us live into God's word so it forms and guards us.

We are called to seek God with all that we are. That takes the shape of studying God's word, hearing it proclaimed, clinging to God's promises, and keeping God's commands. We pray for God to keep us steadfast in this word and to protect us from the forces of death and destruction.

But it is not rote law-keeping that helps us in our faith life. What is called for is delight in, and living into, those statutes so they become part of our being. In the process, we—young people and elders alike—realize there's always more than we can do. So the God who gives us commands and wisdom so we may live well comes alongside us, saves us, makes us holy, and keeps us steadfast in the word—the promises of God.

**Holy God, help us to trust in your promises
and to be steadfast in your word. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Intergenerational ministries

Haggai 2:1-9, 20-23; John 12:34-50

Jesus is God *for* us

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name. (v. 9)

Jesus poured himself out *for* us. We hear this as we receive the bread and wine of communion: "The body of Christ broken *for you*. The blood of Christ shed *for you*."

Rather than treating equality with God as something to be held onto at all costs, Jesus put that glory aside and became one of us. He became human and loved and worked with humans. Thirsty, he asked a woman at a well for water. Hungry, he plucked grain while walking in a field. Humbly, he took up a servant's towel, knelt, and washed his disciples' feet. Amid the deep grief that only comes with deep love, he shared a final meal with them. Then he gave his very body and blood as food and drink for the life of the world.

For this reason God glorified him—lifting him above all others. Now, with the name above all names, Jesus is King and Lord of all: every knee and fin and wing in heaven and on earth and under the earth—yes, even those who have died—bows in worship of him who is God *for* us.

**We thank you, Jesus, for pouring yourself out for us.
We praise you. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Medical workers

Deuteronomy 16:1-8; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Sure and certain hope**[God's] steadfast love endures forever. (v. 29)**

Ahead of our purposeful steps across rocky ground, the pastor's voice rang out. Anyone walking by the cemetery would have heard it: "I was pressed so hard that I almost fell, but the LORD came to my help" (v. 13, LBW). Then he shouted for joy: "There is a sound of exultation and victory in the tents of the righteous" (v. 15, LBW). Indeed!

As the funeral procession gathered around the grave, the pastor continued: "The right hand of the LORD has triumphed! The right hand of the LORD is exalted! . . . I shall not die but live, and declare the works of the LORD" (vv. 15-17, LBW).

Standing before the grave, the pastor shouted into the void with confidence in the sure hope of the resurrection, and in God, who has declared it so: "Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them. . . . [The one] who is righteous may enter" (vv. 19-20, LBW).

Amid sorrow, suffering, and oppression, God's steadfast love endures forever. Even amid death, God's steadfast love endures forever.

**We thank you, O God, for your love for all people,
and for the hope we have in Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who mourn

Jeremiah 33:1-9; Philippians 2:12-18

Take courage**Immediately he regained his sight
and followed [Jesus] on the way. (v. 52)**

Jesus is a fast walker, and he's headed to Jerusalem. But he doesn't leave the twelve in the dust. He stops and lays out for them the way ahead: "Look. We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over and condemned, mistreated and put to death. And after three days he will rise again."

Jesus is so driven by his mission that almost as soon as he gets to Jericho, he's already leaving again. Bartimaeus, sitting by the road, hears that Jesus of Nazareth is in the fast-moving crowd. He shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 47). Though he's scolded for being too loud, he shouts louder: "Son of David! Have mercy on me!" (v. 48). Though physically blind, he recognizes better than the others that mercy is in the air and that this is what Jesus' story is all about. Jesus stops in his tracks: "Call him here" (v. 49).

Springing into action, the blind man lays it all out for Jesus. And Jesus is, again, stopped in his tracks. "Your courageous trust," he tells Bartimaeus, "has made you well." With new vision, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on his way to Jerusalem—and the cross.

Give us courage, O Jesus, to trust and follow you. Amen.

Prayer concern: Travelers

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Jeremiah 33:10-16



Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday

The centurion . . . said, "Truly this man
was God's Son!" (15:39)

The Gospel of Mark's first verse—its title, really—is "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mysteriously, surprisingly, the good news, for Mark, is precisely in the events we read about today: in the Son of God forsaken, dying on a cross.

All of Jesus' ministry has led here. The Son of Man and Son of God—healer of the world and preacher of God's goodness—told his friends early on that he would be put to death. And at dinner he said, "All of you will desert me."

And they did. Judas betrayed him. The disciples abandoned Jesus so fast that one left his clothes behind. Even Peter, who had confidently guaranteed his steadfastness, denied Jesus three times.

Mocked and tortured, Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34) and with a loud cry breathes his last. In response to *this*—this abandonment and death—the centurion declares Jesus "God's Son." What strange—and transforming—good news.

**Proclaim the mystery of our faith to us, O God,
in your crucified and risen Son. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Prison guards and wardens

Psalm 31:9-16; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11

Old patterns, new forms

New things I now declare; before they spring forth,
I tell you of them. (v. 9)

In today's reading, we hear first of all how God chose the people Israel to be light for the nations: "My servant," God declared, ". . . my chosen, in whom my soul delights" (v. 1). And then: "I have put my spirit upon him."

As Christians, we find a double layer of meaning here as the words about Israel also anticipate God's choosing of Jesus: "He will not shout and condemn, nor extinguish any dim hopes. Rather, he will bring forth justice." God declared that the chosen one, this light, would give sight to the blind, set captives free, and proclaim good news.

To this day, God keeps promises and remembers covenants made, saying, "I have called you in righteousness . . . and kept you" (v. 6). God does new things in new ways for new times, but God's overarching pattern of love, promise-keeping, and goodness repeats across time. For the God who chose and fulfilled promises to Israel—the God who gave us Jesus—now chooses and calls *you*.

**Thank you, God of all, for calling us to be your own.
Make us a light to the world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Christians in Latin America

Psalm 36:5-11; John 12:1-11; Hebrews 9:11-15

God our strength

Yet surely my cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God. (v. 4)

It's unclear at first whether Isaiah speaks of himself or of Israel as he recalls a strong beginning: "The Lord called me before I was born. I'm a sharp, bright arrow bearing God's word. In God's quiver I am hidden for just the right moment." Either way, now it seems things have gone awry: "Have I labored in vain? All this work for nothing? What good am I? Was all that 'chosen' stuff meaningless?"

Perhaps we've lamented in this way too. All our work, our dreams, even the ministry for which we've poured out our heart—sometimes it seems it's been in vain. We lose hope.

But God responds with a resounding *No!* God has not abandoned the people. God renews the promise: "I will give you as a light to the nations" (v. 6). Here is where it becomes clear that this is not just about Isaiah; it is about God's chosen people. And we claim that also includes us: chosen and given as a light to the world so God's salvation can reach to the ends of the earth.

**Send us out, O God, with courage to share your love
and the good news of your salvation. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those discerning their future

Psalm 71:1-14; John 12:20-36; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Spy Wednesday

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified,
and God has been glorified in him." (v. 31)

Sometimes called Spy Wednesday, Holy Wednesday recalls Judas's betrayal of Jesus. Even Jesus has a hard time bearing what he knows is coming, so he declares sorrowfully, "One of you will betray me" (v. 21). John asks the question for all the disciples: "Who?" (v. 25).

"The one who shares a dish with me," says Jesus. "Who shares bread with me. A companion." Then Jesus hands bread to Judas. "Go do what you need to do."

God, though, is the one most significantly on the move. In John's story, when Judas leads soldiers to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, it is part of Jesus' way to the cross, and the cross will reveal God's glory. Glory shown through love so great that one would "lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

In the night in which Jesus was betrayed, Satan may have entered Judas, but God was at work to accomplish God's purpose. In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus showed the profound depth of God's love—for you, and for the world.

**We thank you, God, for loving us and accomplishing
our salvation. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are brokenhearted

Psalm 70; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Hebrews 12:1-3

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