

# Christ in Our Home

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July, August, September  
2021



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

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## Prayers

### Morning

We bless you, gracious God, for it is your joy to wake us from sleep and breathe hope into our hearts. Come to us in every blessing and challenge this day, that we may share the life you are so pleased to give. Amen.

### Evening

Our limbs fall quiet to our sides as daylight fades. But your arms, unwearied, hold us still. We thank you for the grace of the day now done, and for the assurance that your love watches over us until morning comes. Amen.

### Mealtime

Feed us, Lord Jesus, with the bread of life as you fed the multitude with meager loaves and fish. And as you filled their hearts with gratitude, may our hearts overflow with thanks that we may joyfully share with all in want. Amen.

## Festivals and commemorations

*Bold type indicates a festival. Plain type indicates a commemoration.*

Jul. 1	Catherine Winkworth, 1878; John Mason Neale, 1866; hymn translators
<b>Jul. 3</b>	<b>Thomas, Apostle</b>
Jul. 6	Jan Hus, martyr, 1415
Jul. 11	Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino, c. 540
Jul. 12	Nathan Söderblom, Bishop of Uppsala, 1931
Jul. 17	Bartolomé de Las Casas, missionary to the Indies, 1566
<b>Jul. 22</b>	<b>Mary Magdalene, Apostle</b>
Jul. 23	Birgitta of Sweden, renewer of the church, 1373
<b>Jul. 25</b>	<b>James, Apostle</b>
Jul. 28	Johann Sebastian Bach, 1750; Heinrich Schütz, 1672; George Frederick Handel, 1759; musicians
Jul. 29	Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany; Olaf, King of Norway, martyr, 1030
Aug. 8	Dominic, founder of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), 1221
Aug. 10	Lawrence, deacon, martyr, 258
Aug. 11	Clare, Abbess of San Damiano, 1253
Aug. 13	Florence Nightingale, 1910; Clara Maass, 1901; renewers of society
Aug. 14	Maximilian Kolbe, 1941; Kaj Munk, 1944; martyrs
<b>Aug. 15</b>	<b>Mary, Mother of Our Lord</b>
Aug. 20	Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, 1153
<b>Aug. 24</b>	<b>Bartholomew, Apostle</b>
Aug. 28	Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, 430; Moses the Black, monk, martyr, c. 400
Sept. 2	Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, bishop, renewer of the church, 1872
Sept. 9	Peter Claver, priest, missionary to Colombia, 1654
Sept. 13	John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, 407
<b>Sept. 14</b>	<b>Holy Cross Day</b>
Sept. 16	Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, martyr, c. 258
Sept. 17	Hildegard, Abbess of Bingen, 1179
Sept. 18	Dag Hammarskjöld, renewer of society, 1961
<b>Sept. 21</b>	<b>Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist</b>
<b>Sept. 29</b>	<b>Michael and All Angels</b>
Sept. 30	Jerome, translator, teacher, 420

## Writers

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*July 11–20* Ruth Overdier, a semiretired pastor serving Trinity Lutheran Church in Manton, Michigan, lives in Traverse City. She gives thanks for her husband Fred, children and grandchildren, extended family, dear friends, and abundant grace.

*July 21–31* Jacqueline Rau is a wife, mother, and pastor. She enjoys bike riding, hiking, and taking long walks with her dog. She and her family reside in Livonia, Michigan, where they are active in the congregation in which she grew up.

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*September 1–15* Louanne Isernhagen and her husband, Glenn, a retired ELCA pastor, are members of St. Philip Lutheran Church in Littleton, Colorado. They have two grown children and five grandchildren. She has worked as a teacher, librarian, and TWA flight attendant. She sews quilts for Lutheran World Relief and writes lots of letters.

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*September 24–30* Annabelle P. Markey serves as pastor at Community Lutheran Church, Sterling, Virginia. She lives in Sterling with her husband, Jeff, and their Labrador retriever, Hasper. She enjoys travel, dogs, icon writing, singing, hiking, and crafting. She is also deeply drawn to contemplative prayer practices and is in the process of becoming a spiritual director.



## Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 18

The bread of God . . . comes down from heaven  
and gives life to the world. (v. 33)

Look around at the faces as you take your place for worship. Some chat. Others study their shoes, perhaps praying or perhaps preoccupied with the week that was or the one to come. Others shift their weight, bored or impatient for things to start.

You don't know what is behind those faces, except for one thing. They are hungry, all of them, just like you. So are the millions who are not in any church today.

Every face you meet hides a hunger, whether they can name it or not. The difference is that those sitting around you harbor a vague hope, or even an expectation, that maybe here, maybe today, they will find food for their souls.

We want something to happen. We crave a word, a hug, a handshake, the taste of bread and wine, *something* to fill our hearts with the Love who alone satisfies our hunger.

And so we pray, "Give us this bread always. We are dying without it." It's the best prayer of all, and the most honest. God hears it—and smiles.

**Blessed are you, O Lord. You satisfy our hungry hearts  
with the fullness of your love. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who hunger for food—  
and love*

## Carried away

[The LORD's] steadfast love endures forever. . . .  
The upright see it and are glad. (vv. 1, 42)

A faint breeze embraces early morning on the deck, effortlessly transporting the heart to a different place.

The mind falls silent. Consciousness descends into the heart's inner room, resting in the shimmering stillness of the moment. Every sense now quiet, the heart knows what the eyes cannot see and what the mind cannot discern.

There is love, make that *Love*, at the heart of things, a Love who dwells also in the heart's own depth. Just so, moments come when we experience spontaneous oneness with God and with creation, filling us with joy and love for the simple gift and sheer miracle of being alive.

The steadfast love of God endures forever, which includes this moment, and the next, and the next. And if we stay awake, eyes open and eager to see, moments come when something common—a morning breeze, a child's smile, a cloud against a cobalt sky—will carry us away to see what, make that *Who*, is always there.

**Open our senses to your presence, O Lord, that joy  
may fill us with love for all we see. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who struggle with depression*

**Twice blessed**

**Remember the long way that the LORD your God  
has led you. (v. 2)**

Little do we know what memories will appear in the length of a day. Today, it is Mrs. Moll, the pastor's wife, long since gone to be with the Lord.

It's nearly sixty years since I've seen her, except in my heart, where she is as present as my fingers on these keys. She stood at the head of the pews in our little church and taught us children to sing—a gift for which I will always be grateful. Even now one of her songs comes back, hardly sophisticated or in a theology I fully endorse, but there it is, evoking a tear.

“Living for Jesus, a life that is true,” the song starts, and even now, after all the years and miles traveled, it reminds me whose I am. I belong to a Lord who loves me and whose Spirit pleads in my heart to never forget it.

*Remember*, the scripture says. Don't forget all the ways that the Lord in great love has claimed and blessed you along your journey. It's a gracious command. The things you remember return and bless you again.

**Humble our hearts, O Lord, with warm memories  
of the blessings you have showered upon us. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those with dementia  
and their families*

**On and on**

**Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. (v. 1)**

It's a ten-mile hike around the loop trail at Waterfall Glen, time enough to hear your heart. Approaching the falls you can also hear the heart of all humanity. Distant voices and laughter rise from the ravine, echoing among the oaks over the *shush* of flowing water.

There are always people here on summer days, wading or watching the stream as it runs from an unknown source to its destination in a far-off sea. The flow is mesmerizing, satisfying a mysterious something in the soul while carrying the heart to a place of peace.

The water just flows, on and on. We do nothing to make it happen. It goes where it wants to go. Try to stop it, and it finds a way around the obstacle. Put in your hand, and it caresses your flesh. And it continues, day and night, year after year, one century to the next.

A better symbol for the love flowing from God's heart is hard to find. Maybe that is why people come here, thirsty for a love that has no end.

**Carry us in the current of your all-embracing love, O Lord,  
to rest at home in your heart. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who care for parks and forests*

### A place of welcome for others

**We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak. (v. 1)**

Sooner or later we all fail, and most of us are more acquainted with weakness than we care to say. For every moment of rising to the occasion, there are plenty of others when we were quite happy someone was around to pick us up.

Everyone needs a place where it's okay to be weak, confused, or mistaken, knowing they are still treasured by others who will help them find their way. What are congregations for, if not to provide a gracious space where we can find help when we are troubled, weary, and worn?

This is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he told the "strong," who were troubled about what was proper to eat and which days to observe, to avoid judging the "weak." Welcome them, Paul said. Build them up. They are still feeling their way into the freedom Christ gives.

Since we are all feeling our way into this new life, we'd best cut each other some slack and share the grace and understanding that we all need sooner or later.

**When our hearts fail and strength falters, hold us in the fullness of your love, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Congregational ushers and welcome teams*

### The awakened heart

**Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (v. 2)**

No law can compel us to love. Love rises warm within, filling the heart's inmost chamber when awakened by a word or the splendor of nature, by the sight of suffering or a single breath of morning air, by the innocence of a child and most certainly by the beauty of Christ at work among us.

Jesus blesses a child, touches a miserable soul begging for mercy, or is moved to tears by a restless crowd hungry for something more than bread. Seeing his divine gentleness, the Spirit awakens and fulfills our nature.

For we are made in the image of the One who is Love. The Love who is in Christ is our true nature, our deepest truth, the dazzling diamond at the center of our souls, though hidden and defaced by sin and selfishness, fear and anger.

Freedom to love and fulfill the law of Christ comes as we savor moments that the Spirit uses to awaken love in our hearts. Gaze especially at the beauty of Christ to see the Love who seeks us at every turn, that we may become the love he is.

**Awaken our hearts with your love, O Christ, and move us to bear each other's burdens. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Bakers*

**Taste and see**

**O taste and see that the LORD is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him. (v. 8)**

Words transport the soul to distant times and places. Combine them with melody, and they can carry you into a love unlike any other.

Take these words: "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." Twenty-five years ago a cantor with a warm, confident smile sang this chorus while standing by the casket of a man who had blessed me without ever knowing me. His life was so transparent to divine love that his face glowed with peace, even as cancer drained him of life. Looking at him, you knew all was well because of the Love who filled him.

Decades later, the faintest echo of this song carries me back to that moment so it is no longer past but is a living sacrament of Christ's love filling my heart in the present.

God's love and light shine in our world. Darkness and hate, suffering and sorrow cannot obscure the beauty of faces and gentle graces that surprise and carry us into the heart of God, where joy drives out all fear. Taste and see.

**Let us feel the warmth of your heart, O Lord,  
that we may bless you at all times. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Church choir members*

**Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 19**

**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. (v. 51)**

You are what you eat, which is true of both body and soul. So do not consume the anger and negativity that flow so freely in society. Avoid cynicism and sarcasm. They poison the heart and shrink your soul. You are made for living bread.

The life and words of Jesus, the Love who takes flesh in his every act, is food for your soul. So take it in. All that he is, is yours. Savor his words; hold every story and memory of him in your heart until your sleeping soul awakens and you brim with his love.

Eat this bread, and you will know yourself in his heart and his heart abiding in you. With this holy sustenance, you will know yourself to be one with the love flowing from the heart of God. Tasting this morsel of eternity, you will know how dear you are to God, and the forever that awaits you.

We spend so much of our lives, our time, and our money on a thousand things we imagine will make us happy. But only living bread satisfies the hunger in our hearts.

**"I am that bread," Jesus says, "and I freely give."**

**Turn us from all that distracts from you, blessed Jesus,  
that we may abide in your love. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who suffer addiction*

**Live your joy**

**Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,  
and live in love. (vv. 1-2)**

Imitate God? How can one imitate the inimitable?

The thought is arrogant and absurd. The Holy One commands the morning, rides on the wings of the wind, and yet is closer than our breath. Who dares fathom such majesty, let alone attempt to imitate the unimaginable?

Were that not enough, we know ourselves all too well—the betrayals and falsehoods, the memories that attack in the night, regrets over not being the person we could have been, and the sin we tell no one except God alone.

Knowing all this, know one thing more: You are God's beloved, treasured from all eternity, chosen before the birth of time, destined to be one with the One who is Love and nothing but.

So release every shame, every guilt. You are as treasured as was Jesus when he stood dripping wet in his baptismal waters and heard the voice: "You are my Beloved." Breathe that in every morning. Make it your mantra through the day. Then, dearly beloved, go live your joy, and live in love.

**Grant us faith to trust that we are your beloved  
and to share that joy with everyone we meet. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who feel stuck in guilt  
or shame*

**Just listen**

**I hear a voice I had not known:  
"I relieved your shoulder of the burden." (vv. 5-6)**

Stop. For one moment just stop and listen. Listen to nature. Listen to your breath. Listen to the voices within you. Listen to the person who just happens by. Listen to the world as it stumbles through another day.

You may hear a voice you barely recognize, or one that is so familiar, so near and dear, you cannot imagine a day without it.

God speaks in all things. There is no speech, no words—but the voice of Love speaks every moment, eager for you to hear and know. Love's holy gift in your every breath. The divine voice coaxes you to delight in every beauty and to relish every love, to savor every grace that frees and fills you with joy. Listen to your pain and heartache too, and don't turn from voices that cry for your love.

Don't believe the lie that God is far off or silent. God speaks in the depth and dynamics of every situation to heal and bless, to guide and give life to all creation, inviting us to share this work. Just listen.

**Open our ears to hear your voice, O Lord, that we may know  
you are near and answer your call. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Audiologists*



## Unnameable

**I am the bread of life. (v. 35)**

Understanding your own soul—let alone someone else's—is a lifelong project. Even Jesus searched for words to name the Mystery in his soul.

"I am the light. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd, the true vine, the resurrection, the way, the truth, the life." None of them says enough, and thinking long about any one of them makes your head spin.

At their root is something Moses heard when he took off his shoes and hid his eyes from a burning bush. "I AM," the divine voice said from the fire. "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). Moses pushed but got no further explanation, and there was none he likely would have understood.

Jesus puts a face on this Mystery no eye has seen so that seeing him, we might know there is nothing to fear, ever. For the great I AM loves us beyond all reason, for reasons we will never understand. Even a small taste of this love makes the heart bold.

The other words—*vine, gate, light*—help us a bit, but ultimately no name will do.

**We praise you for the mystery of your unfailing love,  
O Lord, seeking us wherever we go. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Horticulturalists*

## Gazing at angels

**They saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (v. 15)**

For those of us unacquainted with angels, it is hard to know what this means. But the story helps. Stephen was appointed to run day-to-day operations around the early Christian community so the apostles had time to teach and pray.

But Stephen was more than a bean counter dividing up the dried fish. He withered opponents with the power of his witness to Jesus. They, in turn, hatched a pack of lies and hauled him before the authorities to shut him up. The elders were so gobsmacked at the charges that they stared at him, dumbfounded. Young Stephen looked back with the face of an angel.

Suffering lies and accusations doesn't usually awaken our angelic side. But Stephen wasn't looking at his accusers. His eyes were fixed on the glory of the risen Jesus standing beside God, shining with a light that filled him whole. Seeing that, the twisted faces around him didn't much matter.

Maybe what we look like depends on where we fix our gaze.

**Turn our heads from the troubles of the day  
and fix our eyes on you, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who suffer racism  
and prejudice*

## There is always more

Which of you desires life, and covets many days  
to enjoy good? (v. 12)

Scratch the surface of a typical human being and you quickly find a burning desire for life, a passion to feel the exhilaration of being fully alive. We hunger for more moments when “it can’t get better than this.”

No matter our age, we want more years to have and hold our beloved. We want to watch the generations unfold and bless those who carry our blood for their journeys into years and adventures we will not see and cannot imagine. We long to be blessed by their smiles one more time and to celebrate every success that awakens their joy.

Wanting this, how shall we live, except with gratitude for the gift of life and the privilege of loving and being loved?

So seek peace with others, blessing as you have been blessed, thanking our amazing God, ever strong and ever true, who is the mysterious source of all that is good—our hope when threat is near and our joy when the sun shines warm on our shoulders.

And know there is always more.

**Expand our hearts with the warmth of your love,  
that we may live with generosity and joy. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who feel old and tired*

## Let it flow

The water that I will give will become in them a spring . . .  
gushing up to eternal life. (v. 14)

Jesus was tired when he got to the well at Sychar, but the woman he met there was in worse shape. She lugged water from the well every day, week after week, a daily slog. But this only scratches the surface of her deep fatigue. She was also on her fifth or sixth husband or boyfriend or whatever they were.

*World-weary* is a term that comes to mind for her; *burned out* is another, and we’ve all felt it.

Whatever you call it, it is not living. Life—eternal life, as Jesus calls it—is about connection with the Love from whom all things come, the Love who is the source of your soul. It is the experience of divine love flowing like a fountain in your own heart, bubbling up, filling every cold and empty place, bursting forth in your smile, in your grace, and in the beauty that lies hidden within, waiting for you to cast aside your fears and let it shine.

That beauty, of course, is the presence of Christ, a living stream of love that never runs dry.

**Awaken your love within us, O Lord, that we may shine  
with the joy of knowing you. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who are marginalized*



## Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 20

**Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me,  
and I in them. (v. 56)**

Eat my flesh? Drink my blood? Really? These are metaphors, of course. *Flesh and blood* is a way of saying “the whole person,” everything that one is.

Yet they are more than metaphor, for we do, in fact, eat Jesus. We take him fully into ourselves so that everything he is may nourish us and be ours—his life, his love, his strength, his suffering, and especially the intimacy he shares with the “living Father” (v. 57).

We are not outsiders, looking in at this mystery. Our fulfillment is to be inside, participating in the unending current of love that flows between the heart of God and Jesus’ own heart. So we eat his words and savor his actions. We hold them in the inner eye of imagination and turn them over in our minds, not so much to understand things about him as to experience his presence awakening within us, illumining mind and heart.

Then, we can sink into our own heart and abide there with him, resting in the love we share. Do this, and after a while, your life, too, becomes food and drink for a famished world.

**Illumine our hearts and renew us, Lord Jesus,  
as we feast on you and abide in your love. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who are hungry  
in our nation and world*

## Mary, Mother of Our Lord

**He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly. (v. 52)**

Sometimes only a song can say it, which is why Mary’s words have been set to music thousands of times: “My soul magnifies the Lord,” she cries out. “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (vv. 46-47). Mary praises the “Mighty One” (v. 49), who lifts the lowly, feeds the hungry, and upsets this world’s order. No longer shall money, power, and prestige hold sway while the humble poor are forgotten, she exclaims.

Her heart is transported beyond the present time to a new world, a transformed reality where God alone rules and divine mercy fills the earth as the waters cover the sea.

That world may seem like it’s a long way off—so far we barely glimpse it, if at all. But as we sing Mary’s song, savoring her vision, the Spirit carries us into that new world so that we are assured of its fulfillment. Tasting it, we long for the day when every loving promise of God is fulfilled and joy lights the face of every soul—as the universe, together, sings Mary’s song.

**Fill us with hope, dear Lord, for the loving future  
into which you are drawing all things. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who have lost hope*

## Family squabbles

**The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt;  
but God was with him. (v. 9)**

Most every family experiences squabbles. At times they become so bad that members treat each other terribly. Maybe you have a story in your family about such an experience.

Stephen, the first follower of Jesus to be martyred, is speaking to fellow Jews who are part of his faith family; they want to silence him. He recalls how the brothers of the patriarch Joseph got rid of him out of jealousy. Though his brothers intended for Joseph to die, he ended up saving them from death by famine. Stephen shares the good news that God can bring good out-comes out of evil intentions.

Unfortunately, that did not happen with Stephen. His witness just riled up those against him even more. He died by stoning at their hands. As he died, like Jesus on the cross he said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Like Jesus and Stephen centuries later, Joseph forgave. He did not hold his brothers’ sins against them but welcomed the offenders as family. May God give us such grace when we are wronged.

**God of mercy, I need help in forgiving. Give me your Spirit  
so I can forgive like Jesus. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Families torn apart by quarrels*

## Focus on God’s steadfast love

**How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people  
may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. (v. 7)**

I hope you have just now read Psalm 36. After the first four verses I want to ask, Who are “they”? Their hearts? Their eyes? Their mouths? Their beds? It bothers me when someone tells me, “They said . . .” or “They think . . .” I ask, “Who are ‘they’?” Finally, the last two verses of the psalm identify “they”—the arrogant, the wicked, the evildoers.

The psalmist shifts focus entirely in the middle verses. “Steadfast love . . . steadfast love . . . steadfast love” (vv. 5, 7, 10)—all and always from God. Boundless. Strong. Saving. Precious. Sheltering. Providing. Abundant. Source of light and life.

On what do we focus? We can be overwhelmed by the chaos of the world, the hatred and hurt, the destruction and division we witness, the evil threats to our lives. Or we can look at the gifts all around us that we did not create or earn—nature, air, soil, rain, sun, people, belonging, care, compassion, hope, trust, love. Above all, love—God’s steadfast love. For all people. For you. Now. Always.

**Loving God, may your steadfast love be our focus.  
Gather us in the shadow of your wings always. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who feel overwhelmed*

## Promises made, promises kept

Take good care to observe . . . to love . . . to walk . . .  
to keep . . . to hold fast . . . to serve . . . (v. 5)

I grew up on a farm with livestock, and my dad promised us five children that each would receive a litter of pigs for our tenth birthday and beyond. We didn't receive weekly allowances, but my dad gave us those eight pigs every year to raise and sell on our own. Dad didn't dictate how we should spend our income; we understood he expected us to save most of it for our future education.

God promised Abraham and Sarah's offspring, the slaves now freed from bondage in Egypt, a land of their own. God kept that promise. The twelve sons of Jacob, as leaders of tribes, would each receive some promised land. Joshua, who was now the leader of the freed ones, shared explicit expectations for how the people should live into their new future: "Take good care to observe the commandment and instruction that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul" (v. 5). These are great expectations for us too.

**God of promise, you see a new future for us. Give us the Spirit of Jesus so we may live as you expect. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Young people seeking higher education*

## Living honorably

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and . . .  
live honorably as in the day. (vv. 12-13)

We humans sometimes have different internal clocks from each other. I awaken early, even in retirement. My wife sleeps later. I seem more productive in the morning, she does later in the day. Paul does not focus on our internal *clocks* but on our internal *light*.

When we lack light, our actions—what Paul calls "works of darkness"—harm us and others. These behaviors could include reveling (wild parties or celebrations), drunkenness (habitual overuse of alcohol), debauchery (extreme indulgence in bodily pleasures), licentiousness (lacking legal or moral restraints), quarreling (contending or disputing rudely), jealousy (an envious or resentful disposition, attitude, or feeling).

Paul says to lay those aside—discard them, eliminate them. Instead, we are to put on the armor of light. How? By putting on our Lord Jesus Christ. By following his lead. By living in his light. Then when we awaken, "this little light of mine"—that is, this Christ-light in me—will shine for the good of all.

**God, shine Christ's light in me, and help me use it to brighten the lives of others. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: People living with resentment or jealousy*

## When God's work gets personal

**The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their cry. (v. 15)**

How have your experiences shaped your view of God? Have you told others about them?

The writer of this psalm had no doubt heard much about God as creator, deliverer, promise-keeper. Yet this entire psalm lifts up none of those great works. Rather, the focus is on what God has done in the writer's own life during times of fear and pleading for help (v. 4). God saw the need and heard the cry. Indeed, this is a God who rescues and saves and redeems. The psalmist declares, "God's done great things for me!"

Review your life. Recall times of fear or failure, adversity or illness. Did you sense God's presence? What about today? What would you tell others about God? At times we lament because we feel alone and abandoned; many psalms share that feeling honestly. Other times we feel like today's psalmist: grateful for God's many blessings and supportive presence. At such times it is good for us to share our gratitude with others—our personal testimony to God's great works.

**Caring God, give me a heart to experience  
and share your abundant blessings in my life. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who live in fear*



## Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 21

**Lord, to whom can we go?  
You have the words of eternal life. (v. 68)**

Jesus talks a lot in John's gospel. But he also listens. He heard the disciples sharing with each other, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (v. 60).

Jesus, who had just fed more than five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish, wants his followers to know that mere bread is not the source of authentic life. He says, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (v. 63). The Gospel of Matthew reports that when Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness, he told the tempter, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (4:4). Yet when people heard that God alone gathers us as followers, many quit following Jesus. Couldn't they trust God to welcome them into the beloved community? Did they think they needed to earn their place?

Peter got it. He declared, "You have the words of eternal life."

Do we get it—that Jesus' words alone give eternal life? Let's listen every day.

**Jesus, open our ears to hear and our mouths  
to share your words that give eternal life. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those discerning their calling*

## Dwelling on God's word

Oh, how I love your law! . . . How sweet are your words  
to my taste! (vv. 97, 103)

Many words have been spoken to me throughout my lifetime. From before I remember, my parents spoke words to assure me of their love and to provide guidance for my growing and living. I've heard words from relatives, friends, teachers, neighbors, colleagues, and strangers. I've also read many words. I suspect you, too, have lived with countless spoken and written words.

The writer of this psalm loves God's law—commandment, decrees, precepts, words—that gives wisdom, understanding, encouragement, guidance, and even ability to discern evil and falsehood in order to avoid them. Indeed, the psalmist uses many words to express the delight found in God's word.

The purpose of God's law is to help us live as God intends. But I dwell more on the words of Jesus because at the transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah joined Jesus, the voice from the cloud said, "Listen to him" (Matthew 17:5). Elsewhere Jesus said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). May Jesus' words—and Jesus *the* Word—be so for us.

**Loving God, may we learn from your whole law, even as we find eternal life in Jesus Christ, your living Word. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Authors, editors, and others  
who work with words*

## Bartholomew, Apostle

I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. (v. 4)

We felt like we were wandering in a wilderness. The COVID-19 pandemic had taken us on an unfamiliar journey. Social distancing. Face coverings. Isolation. Work from home. No work. Online school. Canceled plans. Testing. Tracing. Loss of life. Exhausted medical personnel. Waiting for cures. Longing for vaccines. The path we had known no longer existed. Where, when would this wilderness wandering and wondering end?

The Israelites wandered and wondered in the wilderness after escaping from oppression. God knew their needs. God had liberated them and carried them into that wilderness. God assured them of how treasured they were and that they would now live as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. Likewise, God treasures us so that we can share God's light.

Today the church remembers the apostle Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael, who had his own wonderings: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). When Philip invited him to "come and see," his life as a follower of the Light began.

**Liberating God, your words in our wildernesses  
assure us we are your treasured ones. May we share  
your love far and wide. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Medical scientists*

## Chosen and appointed

**You did not choose me but I chose you.  
And I appointed you to go and bear fruit. (v. 16)**

Ordained fifty years ago in June 1971, I chose this verse to witness to what had led me to that place. I felt God had chosen me. We don't always have choices. We didn't choose to be born or choose our parents. We certainly don't choose to have diabetes or cancer. We don't choose to lose a job or savings or someone we love. But what about the choice to follow Jesus?

Jesus told his gathered friends on his last night with them, "You did not choose me but I chose you." That goes for us too. God's choosing us comes as pure gift, an act of love. Jesus told his friends that he had chosen them right after he told them to love one another as he loved them. God has chosen us too, and has appointed us to love. Knowing God's choosing love, we courageously love others.

God chose you and me in the water and word of baptism. God appointed all of us, no matter our occupation, to bear the fruit of God's love for one another. Thanks be to God for this gift and this appointment.

**Gracious God, thank you for choosing us in love and trusting us to bear your fruit of love in Jesus' name. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Missionaries*

## Praying for wisdom

**If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God . . .  
and it will be given you. (v. 5)**

"Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy" (v. 2). Those words gave me pause as I began reading today's scripture. But reading on moved me to appreciate what James wrote. Trials test us, for sure—illness, unemployment, sudden death of one we love, oppression, rejection, a broken relationship, and more. What will be the outcome? James asserts that for people of faith, trials have the potential to lead to completeness and maturity.

As we face any sort of trial, James admonishes us to pray for wisdom. The trials we face impact us differently. There is no "one size fits all" way to deal with our trials. While my trials may look like those of others, we each bring our uniqueness to the situation we face. We need wisdom, a gift God wants to give. Trusting God to hear and respond opens us to receive wisdom in facing our trials.

Doubts can unsettle us, so as we ask for wisdom, may we also ask for strong, unwavering trust when facing tough trials.

**Generous God, you gave Jesus wisdom as he faced trials.  
Give me such wisdom too. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who are unemployed  
or underemployed*



## Generous giving

... so that we would become a kind of first fruits  
of his creatures. (v. 18)

She had never received anything like it before. When she unwrapped the gorgeous package and removed the gift, she looked puzzled. "What is this for?"

Have you had a similar experience? I think we all have: Each of us has received the gift of life. God birthed us into life. And at some point—perhaps at many points—we have asked, "What is my life for?"

In the verses of James we read that being rich is not our purpose. Rather, generous giving that imitates God's perfect giving is our purpose.

James states that big purpose—the "so that"—in the last sentence of today's reading: God "gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." James's letter goes on to describe some of the many actions that are examples of these "first fruits" of God's creatures. Paul also wrote of these gifts: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

**Giving God, you birthed us by your word of truth.  
Help us share your fruitful love freely. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Retail workers*

## No entry requirements

O LORD, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill? (v. 1)

Psalm 15 raised questions as I pondered it. The opening queries apparently came to a priest, who then listed what he understood to be the requirements for entry into God's presence. I had one big question: Could *anyone* abide in God's tent? Did *anyone* meet the standards listed? And several other questions followed: Who kept account of what someone seeking to approach God's tent had said, done, or held in their heart? Did another person need to attest to the individual's integrity?

I have never participated in a congregation with entrance requirements anything like these. I rejoice that Jesus did not demand lives already pure and guilt-free before encountering people, welcoming people, healing and feeding people, inviting people to join him in loving service.

Try this new question: Who may abide with God? Those whom Jesus reconciles and calls to follow him.

**Jesus, thank you for coming to us as we are  
so we can come to God, reconciled and free. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who work in hospitality*



## Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 22

**For it is from within, from the human heart,  
that evil intentions come. (v. 21)**

As usual, Jesus is engaged with many people in this story from Mark—Pharisees, the disciples, the gathered crowds. With ulterior motives the Pharisees begin asking questions, seeking to discredit this Jesus whose actions seem to them to violate Jewish law.

Jesus knows that keeping the law is not a matter of external actions, but of the heart. Jesus knows their hearts and their agenda, and he calls them out.

Has Jesus ever called you out? Have you felt that you knew all the right answers, were living the right way, walking the correct path? Can any of us claim innocence of all the evils Jesus names in verses 21-22? Who among us has never acted in deceit, envy, pride?

Jesus knew his questioners. He knows us. He wants us to recognize that evil lurks within each of us and that we cannot make or prove ourselves worthy. Jesus invites us to listen to and follow him into living and loving as God wants: forgiven and free.

**Jesus, you tell the truth that exposes our hearts.  
Give us your Spirit's power to overcome evil. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Law enforcement officers*

## Listening . . . and beyond

**I will let them hear my words. (v. 10)**

My parents wanted me to listen to them because they wanted to guide me. “Do this . . .,” “Don’t do that . . .,” and many similar words came from them because they knew what would help me grow in my relationships, in my work, in my life.

Moses told the recently liberated Israelites that God had directed him to assemble them so they could hear God’s words. God wanted this liberated people to remember these words so they could live in a trusting relationship with God and others. God gave the commandments so the people would thrive in their freedom in the promised land. God expected them to pass the commandments on to their children.

You and I have important words to share with family and friends, with children and older adults, with strangers. We can share how deeply God cares for each one, how God guides us to live in God’s love and to share it with others. God “will let them hear” these words through your words and deeds, and through mine.

**Speaking God, your words guide us to live in freedom  
and love. Help us hear and observe your guidelines. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Adults passing faith on to children*

### Sharing in Christ's suffering

**Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. (v. 21)**

I suspect you have suffered illness or stress. I have. I suffered from appendicitis in sixth grade. I suffered the death of a friend when he was twenty-two. I suffered surgeries for colon cancer. I suffered bacterial meningitis. I suffered agony over work responsibilities. But Peter here is writing about a different kind of suffering—suffering experienced unjustly or for actions done for the sake of others.

Christ Jesus suffered because he took on the suffering of others. Lepers could not participate in the religious community; Jesus went to them. Women were not allowed to talk with men outside their family; Jesus struck up conversations with them. Tax collectors and sinners were not expected to share meals with respectable people; Jesus ate with them. Jesus suffered arrest and torture because he loved those who suffered.

Following in Jesus' steps takes us to people suffering hunger and homelessness, illness and injustice, exclusion and emptiness. Following Jesus calls us to pick up the burdens and suffering of others. We suffer with and for them. It costs. It gives life.

**Jesus, you never shied away from suffering.**

**Give us your courage to suffer with and for others. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those who suffer alone*

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