

Christ in Our Home

October, November, December
2021



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Prayers

Morning

Morning by morning we come to you,
O Lord, little knowing what the day will bring.
Walk with us through the hours of our
waking, that with full and free hearts we may
live without fear, trusting always in
your unfailing presence. Amen.

Evening

Enfold us in the warmth of your embrace,
loving God, that we may rest in peace.
Wake us when morning comes, refreshed
and alive with hope for the dawning of your
eternal day. Amen.

Mealtime

Blessed are you, O Christ, for your kingdom
comes at every table of sharing. Feed us
now with the bread of life that, radiant in your
unfailing generosity, we may reveal the
kingdom of your compassion at this and
every table. Amen.

Festivals and commemorations

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

- Oct. 4 Francis of Assisi, renewer of the church, 1226; Theodor Fliedner, renewer of society, 1864
- Oct. 6 William Tyndale, translator, martyr, 1536
- Oct. 7 Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, pastor in North America, 1787
- Oct. 15 Teresa of Avila, teacher, renewer of the church, 1582
- Oct. 17 Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, martyr, c. 115
- Oct. 18 Luke, Evangelist**
- Oct. 23 James of Jerusalem, martyr, c. 62
- Oct. 26 Philipp Nicolai, 1608; Johann Heermann, 1647; Paul Gerhardt, 1676; hymnwriters
- Oct. 28 Simon and Jude, Apostles**
- Oct. 31 Reformation Day**
- Nov. 1 All Saints Day**
- Nov. 3 Martín de Porres, renewer of society, 1639
- Nov. 7 John Christian Frederick Heyer, 1873; Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, 1719; Ludwig Nommensen, 1918; missionaries
- Nov. 11 Martin, Bishop of Tours, 397; Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, teacher, 1855
- Nov. 17 Elizabeth of Hungary, renewer of society, 1231
- Nov. 23 Clement, Bishop of Rome, c. 100; Miguel Agustín Pro, martyr, 1927
- Nov. 24 Justus Falckner, 1723; Jehu Jones, 1852; William Passavant, 1894; pastors in North America
- Nov. 25 Isaac Watts, hymnwriter, 1748
- Nov. 30 Andrew, Apostle**
- Dec. 3 Francis Xavier, missionary to Asia, 1552
- Dec. 4 John of Damascus, theologian and hymnwriter, c. 749
- Dec. 6 Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, c. 342
- Dec. 7 Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, 397
- Dec. 13 Lucy, martyr, 304
- Dec. 14 John of the Cross, renewer of the church, 1591
- Dec. 20 Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church, 1552
- Dec. 26 Stephen, Deacon and Martyr**
- Dec. 27 John, Apostle and Evangelist**
- Dec. 28 The Holy Innocents, Martyrs**

Writers

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October 16–31 Mark D. Williamson is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, Dodgeville, Wisconsin. He and his wife, Jennifer, a fundraiser, are parents to two young girls. Together they relish being planted in the beautiful Driftless region with all the natural recreation, arts, and culture it offers.

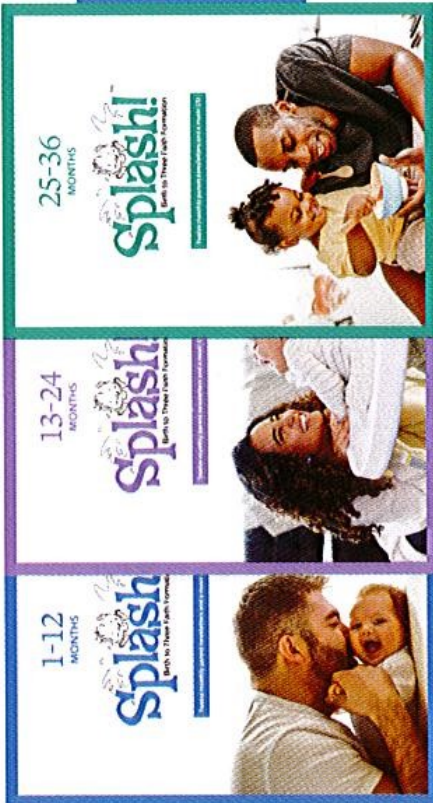
November 1–15 Lisa A. Smith is a pastor serving as ELCA church-wide deployed staff in Anchorage, Alaska, and worships at Amazing Grace Lutheran Church there. With her spouse and children, she loves exploring the wilderness of Alaska by foot, bike, and ski. Lisa blogs at www.pastorlisawrites.com.

November 16–30 Jeff Wallager is from Anoka, Minnesota, and attends Zion Lutheran Church. He serves as chaplain supervisor for a regional health system.

December 1–15 Sonia C. Solomonson, of Streamwood, Illinois, is retired and belongs to First Congregational United Church of Christ in Elgin, Illinois. She previously served as managing editor of *The Lutheran* magazine and executive editor of *The Little Lutheran*. She is now a life coach at Way2Grow Coaching and a freelance writer and editor.

December 16–31 Tara Ulrich is a rostered deacon in the ELCA. She currently serves Tri-County Ministry, a parish that includes one Presbyterian and six ELCA congregations in eastern North Dakota. She loves writing, reading, and spending time with her fur babies, Luna and Neville. She is the author of *Living as a Daughter: 31 Days of Mental Illness* (self-published, 2016).

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Wednesday, December 1

Psalm 90

Our true home

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations. (v. 1)

Have you ever wondered where home is? When I first moved to Chicago from Minneapolis and my job required me to return to Minneapolis for meetings, I felt as though I were going home when I landed in Minnesota. On the return from one such trip, however, I landed at Chicago's O'Hare airport and thought, "I'm home now." A shift had occurred. I felt at home in my new surroundings.

In Egypt, God's people were strangers in a land not their own. Then they spent years wandering in the desert. They wondered when they would ever see the promised land. But *God* was a home for them, always watching over them and providing. God was indeed their dwelling place.

So it is for us. God is there when we wander off, there for us no matter what happens, always providing for us. God is our one true home, no matter where we are.

Thank you, God, for being our dwelling place
in all generations. Amen.

Prayer concern: People experiencing homelessness

Bringing light

... to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death ... (v. 79)

Zechariah prophesied that by God's tender mercy, a savior would be sent—a savior who would bring light to the darkness. The many months of the COVID-19 pandemic have been a time of living in darkness and the shadow of death for the entire world. I confess there were many days when I let fear and anxiety rule. Then someone or something would bring me up short so I could remember God's tender mercy, God's promises to be with me no matter what. I would ask myself whether I was bringing more darkness or more light into the world with my words and actions.

This entire reading reminds us that not only did God send us a savior "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" but that we too have a part to play. The last part of verse 79 says that this savior will "guide our feet into the way of peace." We too can bear God's light and peace to others.

**Jesus, help us to be light-bearers and peace-bringers
wherever you give us opportunity. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People struggling with fear

We can't lose

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. (v. 21)

Paul is talking "win-win" here. Life in Christ is so rich. We're God's beloved, and we live in the promise of the resurrection. Yet Paul says that dying is even better.

This reminds me of Mom's final days. Our Lutheran country church was a central part of our life, and Mom and Dad taught my two siblings and me by word and deed about the importance of life in Christ. Mom found joy and peace in her faith, including daily Bible readings and prayer—even when her eyesight made that difficult.

Mom's last days in a care center's hospice program were powerful; she kept describing her visions of Jesus as "brilliant" and "beautiful." With her feet in both this world and the next, she knew the truth of Paul's words: "Dying is gain." On her last day on earth, with a radiant look on her face, she told us that she wanted to go live with Jesus and glorify God. Win-win indeed!

**Loving God, help us know and live the truth of Paul's
words—that, living or dying, we are with Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who fear death

Travel light

He said to them, "Take nothing for your journey." (v. 3)

When my husband and I served as missionaries in Papua New Guinea, we thought we were traveling light and living simply. However, we had a lot of "stuff" compared to those in whose land we were guests. Our house was well outfitted and our closets and cupboards were full. That "stuff" had the potential to create barriers and make those with whom we worked in the villages and areas near us feel less-than.

In addition, we brought mental and emotional baggage about the cultural differences. We had to check our attitudes and beliefs regularly and shed what was unhelpful. We needed to be open and humble. We learned that we were receiving as much as we were giving.

In our interactions with others it's always important to keep open minds and open hearts—to approach in humility and with as little baggage as possible. Who knows what opportunities God will place before us to learn and grow? May we travel light!

O God, you use diverse people and situations to help us grow. Help us stay open and humble. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA Global Mission



Second Sunday of Advent

Prepare the way of the Lord . . . and the crooked shall be made straight. (vv. 4-5)

Things will have to change as we prepare for God's arrival. No more business as usual. Valleys will be filled. Mountains will be made low. We're talking major transformation here.

One of my coaching clients knew that to prepare for life alone after leaving an abusive marriage, she needed to accept that God really did love her and wanted her to experience peace and well-being. She knew that many changes were ahead—both inner and outer changes. But first she had to believe it was okay to make these changes. With God's help, she let go of old messages of unworthiness and accepted the love that was always there for her.

As you prepare once again for the coming of our Savior, what changes need to occur for you? What is waiting to be born in you? Are there broken places in your life that need God's healing touch? Places where pride needs to be transformed? Are you ready to live in God's promises and prepare the way?

Help us prepare our hearts and lives for your coming, dear God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who doubt that God loves them

Longing for tenderness

**He will gather the lambs in his arms . . .
and gently lead the mother sheep. (v. 11)**

Have you ever wanted, as an adult, to have God scoop you up, hold you tenderly, and assure you that everything will be all right? I've longed for that several times—once, when I was going through my divorce, and another time, when I lost my job after twenty-two years. Perhaps you've lost a beloved family member, faced serious illness, lost your job and wondered how you would manage your next meal or rent payment, dealt with chronic pain, or experienced other fears or losses. Just the idea of being gathered in loving, caring arms is so comforting.

That's why these wonderful images of God as a good shepherd in Isaiah 40 (and throughout the Bible) are so inviting. Imagine being so loved, so desired, so cared for! Believe it. You are!

Does this assurance comfort you? Does it spur you to comfort all the broken hearts you see in those who inhabit your world? May it be so.

Good Shepherd, thank you for your tender care. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those with broken hearts today

A silver lining

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. (v. 5)

The global pandemic that began in late 2019 produced an abundance of tears, fears, and panic. It exacerbated the divisiveness already at epic proportions in the United States, where I live. And we, along with people around the world, grieved the loss of countless lives and the fact that so many died without their families nearby to comfort them. Our hearts broke as well for overwhelmed health-care workers.

In addition to the generalized grief for others across the globe, I felt such a sense of loss at not being able to be with my three sons, daughters-in-law, and nine grandchildren. For months I was unable to visit my brother in the memory-care unit of a nursing home in another state. Each one of you has unique stories to tell about what that time meant for you.

However, in some cases, friendships deepened as we sought companionship and meaning. We learned that worship could happen anywhere. God's care was shown through a wide variety of helpers around the globe. The silver lining.

**Thank you for turning our tears into joy
and for always being with us, O God. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who remain steeped in grief

Who is Jesus to you?

**Are you the one who is to come,
or are we to wait for another? (v. 19)**

Have you ever felt like John in this reading? Have you wondered what Jesus is up to? Why isn't Jesus doing more about the injustice in the world? Sometimes I think about people experiencing homelessness, those who need to flee their countries and have nowhere to turn, victims of human trafficking, those who are unemployed or underemployed, children abused or neglected, people arrested or imprisoned unjustly, and all the other pain around the globe, and I wonder: Where is God? What is Jesus doing?

Sometimes I have expectations that God should rush in and rescue us miraculously. I am not always willing to accept that God sends us—sends *me*—to reach out in God's name with justice and food and protection for the vulnerable. Advent is a good time to reflect on who Jesus is to us and what our expectations are of this God-come-to-earth. We might prayerfully ponder: What is *my* role in bringing justice and peace? And what am I waiting for?

**Dear Jesus, you are the one. Help us to be your heart,
hands, and feet in this broken world. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who suffer injustice

Do not be afraid

I will trust, and will not be afraid. (v. 2)

When I faced divorce I didn't have a career outside the home. I was caught up in the grip of fear. I pictured myself becoming a "bag lady," an admittedly not-nice term commonly used at the time for a woman experiencing homelessness. I wanted to trust God, but I found it so hard to do. How would I manage? What would happen to my sons?

Never could I imagine then that three-plus years later I would move to Chicago to use my journalism degree at *The Lutheran* magazine in my faith tradition's newly formed denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Twenty-two years later, when I lost that job due to budget cuts, I knew I could trust and not be afraid. I knew at a deep level that I'd be okay no matter what. I could "give thanks to the LORD" (v. 4).

The angels brought that message too: "Do not be afraid." In this Advent season, despite turmoil in the world and in our lives, we're reminded that we too can shout and sing, "Great in [our] midst is the Holy One of Israel" (v. 6). We can trust our God.

**O Holy One, help us to trust you and not be afraid.
May we sing your praises and share our joy. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those experiencing work transitions

Live in gratitude

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (v. 15)

It was to be the first home I bought on my own, and I wasn't sure how I would come up with the down payment. I wasn't fully on my feet again, and though a careful spender, I still didn't have a huge amount of money set aside. But my parents were excited to offer their help by giving me an early portion of what they had planned to be my inheritance. I was overjoyed and yet knew this gift wasn't something I could repay (an expectation we often have as humans). It was at the time an "indescribable gift."

As we journey through Advent, we are hyperaware of the indescribable gift God gives us in Jesus Christ. God loves us and desires our reconciliation so much that God's Son is our gift. Grace is our gift—one we can never repay. Oh, the wonder of it all!

Living in gratitude to God and generosity toward others, sharing the good news of this indescribable gift—those are ways we can give thanks.

Thank you, O God, for love beyond measure in the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who feel unworthy of God's gift of a Savior

Life-giving water

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. (v. 3)

We need water to live. Have you ever experienced a time when you were desperate for water? Perhaps you were hiking longer than you had planned to be on the trail and your water supply ran out. This happened while I was on one of my global reporting trips for *The Lutheran* magazine. We went further than we'd planned and also got caught in a heavy storm that came up unexpectedly. Finally, we got back to our vehicles. We were all okay, but it had been scary.

Throughout the Old Testament we find many passages that show how God provided water for the Israelites. God does provide. In this passage we're also aware that the "wells of salvation" mean more than drinking water. God's presence and gift of salvation are deep wells we can count on. We are all thirsty for those life-giving waters, and the wells of salvation are bottomless. There's enough for us all.

Gracious and generous God, thank you for the bottomless wells of salvation you provide. Amen.

Prayer concern: Organizations that build wells so people can have clean water



Third Sunday of Advent

**One . . . is coming . . . [who] will baptize you
with the Holy Spirit. (v. 16)**

Missionary terms were five years when my husband and I served in Papua New Guinea. We really missed our families that first Advent and Christmas abroad. Even God seemed far away for a time, and I felt the loneliness of separation. As we walked through Advent and prepared for the Christmas celebration with the Duna people with whom we lived and served, the promises of these Advent texts began to come alive inside of me. Yes, we are baptized with the Holy Spirit—the One whose coming John the Baptist announces in our reading. That reminder of my baptism and my connection to the whole body of Christ was what I needed.

I remembered that this was also true for our beloved families back home—a salve for my lonely heart. God came near through Jesus, who, being both divine and human, knows full well our pain and struggles.

No matter your struggles, God is with you. Let your baptism come alive in you. Jesus, the one who comes in power, will bring you courage and strength for whatever he calls you to do.

**Such wondrous love is this, O God, that you sent your Son
to baptize us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those missing loved ones far away

A peaceful creation

**The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid. (v. 6)**

In the United States, where I live, we have experienced deep divisions in the last many years. It seemed to reach new depths in 2020, when we lived through a global pandemic as well as a presidential election. Sometimes I found it difficult to hang on to hope—hope that we could mitigate and survive the pandemic and hope that we would ever find any sense of peace and unity. Sadly, many did not survive COVID-19. Our grief made hope that much more elusive.

And yet, I kept looking for “the helpers” (as Mr. Rogers said to do in times of calamity), and guess what? There were so many helpers out there! People making meals to give away. Others driving people to appointments. Folks checking in on one another. Essential workers showing up.

God’s promise of a peaceable kingdom where harmony exists isn’t yet a perfect reality. But we can choose now to move toward that vision. We can care for one another, for those in need, and for all creation. We can be part of God’s promise.

**Faithful God, thank you for your promises, in which
we may play a part. Through Christ our Savior. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who are serving as helpers

Be not afraid

**. . . teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ
with all boldness and without hindrance. (v. 31)**

Advent reminds us all to act boldly. Mary is told to not be afraid, and she finds her voice to speak the hopeful words of the Magnificat. The shepherds are told to not be afraid, and they make haste to go find the Savior of the world. No hindrances. No excuses.

Have you ever felt unable to share the good news of Jesus? Perhaps you thought you needed to have all the answers. You expected resistance. You worried about what people would think.

When I was a young adult, I had some of those fears and feelings. What did I know? How could I be a good witness to share with others God's gift of salvation? But then my husband and I were called to Papua New Guinea. I wondered what role I could play. I saw needs to be met—teaching the Duna women to read, sew, cook nourishing meals for their children. In the process, we talked about Jesus, and I realized that teaching also happens through relationships and in conversation. Nothing to fear! I could act boldly. And so can you.

**O God, grant us a spirit of boldness to share
the good news. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are silenced by fear

Live in hope

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor. (v. 4)

It's clear from this Isaiah text that God promises completely different standards under new rule when the "shoot" comes "from the stem of Jesse" (v. 1). A new order. Stability. Peace. "The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (v. 2).

This is the same message we hear from Mary in her Magnificat: the powerful brought down and the lowly lifted up.

When I hear promises from politicians, no matter what side they're on or what office they seek, I turn a deaf ear. I think, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've heard this all before." I have come to expect, rightly or not, that most say what they think we want to hear, so I don't hold out much hope for real change. Sadly, I've become suspicious and distrustful.

God's promises are different. God is always faithful. God delivers on promises. We can live in the hope that new rules apply. And we can do our part to help bring this about.

**Faithful God, may we be part of bringing your promises
to life. Through your Son, Jesus. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Modern-day prophets

Restoration of hope

Let your face shine, that we may be saved. (v. 3)

Our world is deeply divided. One does not need to look far to see that. In fact, my country, the United States, seems more divided these last few years than any other time in recent memory. There is so much hatred, evil, and racial injustice. In addition, as I write at the end of 2020, we have just experienced one of the most contentious political election cycles ever. Some are grieving while others are celebrating. And even though the results are in, many are still questioning their validity.

In a world that often feels hopeless, this psalm gives me hope. God, “enthroned upon the cherubim” (v. 1), is far greater than our political systems, our complaints and disagreements with one another, and the mutual scorn of enemies (v. 6). God calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, which often seems impossible. But when we fail, God’s face shines forgiveness upon us. With words the psalmist repeats three times total, like a refrain, we trust that God will, finally, “restore us”—this entire divided world—“that we may be saved” (vv. 3, 7, 19).

**God of peace, in our divided world,
by your saving power and grace help us
love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Elected officials

At the top of our lungs

**Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise
from the end of the earth! (v. 10)**

I worked at a Bible camp for seven summers. It was a joy to see and hear the children sing at the top of their lungs. They were definitely not afraid to worship God! When they sang as loudly and exuberantly as they could, it reminded me of one of my favorite Christmas movies, *Elf*, and of the character Buddy’s line: “The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear!” The campers’ actions taught me what it means to spread the news of God’s love to all the world.

God is at work all around us and has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). God opens our eyes and our ears (v. 18), as well as our hearts, to the many ways divine love is active in the world. May we follow the examples of Buddy and the children at camp and spread the love of God loudly and exuberantly.

**Thank you, God, for continually working for good
in the world. Teach us to sing new songs
amid the world’s brokenness. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Lutheran Outdoor Ministries

Like a mother hen

Jerusalem, . . . how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. (v. 34)

Have you ever watched a mother hen care for her offspring? Some of the volunteers at the camp where I worked told me I looked like a mother hen with her chicks when I was leading my young campers from one activity to another. The image has stayed with me. A mother hen wraps her chicks under her wings and protects them from danger. She does everything in her power to keep her little ones safe.

Just as a mother hen protects her chicks, Jesus longed to shelter Jerusalem and longs to protect us. Indeed, in his death and resurrection Jesus gathered the whole world under the wings of divine love. God wraps us in continual care, not preventing evil from ever befalling us, but promising to hold us close amid any trouble and to comfort us with peace that passes all human understanding.

Protecting God, help us cling to you when we are fearful and when evil lurks nearby. Amen.

Prayer concern: Childcare providers



Fourth Sunday of Advent

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. (v. 41)

Ever since I was a little girl I have yearned to be a mother. However, at forty-two, that has not yet happened for me. I am always in awe when I observe the movement of a baby in a pregnant friend's abdomen. There is something so incredibly holy about life developing inside a womb.

If you have carried a child, do you remember what it felt like the first time your baby moved inside you? Was it your voice or your spouse's voice that prompted the movement? What joy Elizabeth must have felt when she sensed her son move upon Mary's arrival! Little did they know what an impact Mary's precious boy would have, not only on Elizabeth's son but on the whole world. He would bring hope amid despair, joy to counter sorrow, and comfort during times when tears flow down our faces. Above all, Mary's son, who would be announced by Elizabeth's son, would bring life out of death.

God of life, help us share, especially with those on the margins of society, the love you have given us through the birth of Jesus. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those who yearn to be parents

The church: the people

In him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church. (vv. 17-18)

“Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people.” Perhaps you remember this little rhyme from childhood. Today’s reading from Colossians, though, reminds me that the church is much more than a building. The primary definition of *church* is God’s people sent out to share God’s love, grace, and forgiveness with all the world. Which is exactly what we have worked to do during the COVID-19 pandemic. With church buildings closed to the public, the *people* who are the church have served and worshiped all the more and in new ways.

The pandemic has also taught us, more than ever, that we can trust in Jesus as head of the church, the one “in [whom] all things hold together,” even when it feels like our world is falling apart. Jesus reconciled the world to God by coming into the world to teach us about God’s love, even to the point of being put to death on a cross. But God’s love overcomes death and the grave. As God raised Jesus, we too can trust in life, even amid disease and death.

God, help us to be the church, sharing your love, grace, and forgiveness in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Prayer concern: Ministries that reach beyond church-building walls

Feeling grateful

Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time on and forevermore. (v. 2)

Today’s psalm makes me think of a Bible camp song that goes like this: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Praise the Lord, give thanks to the Lord. Our God is good. His steadfast love endures forever, for God is good. We will tell of the mighty deeds of the Lord and show for all God’s praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.”

We sang this song often at Camp of the Cross, near Garrison, North Dakota. It became for me a beautiful reminder to praise the Lord and give thanks for all that God has done. I am writing at the close of 2020, a year that has shown us how worthy God is to be praised. Through the tears and love of friends and strangers, God has wept with us in our losses. God’s presence has been made known in the form of health-care workers, caring neighbors, community food pantries, and more. Through digital worship or drive-up communion, we have been reminded of God’s goodness and steadfast love.

Blessed be the name of the Lord who provides all we need. Blessed be the One whose name is worthy to be praised. Amen.

Prayer concern: Food pantries

One climbs, one sees

**Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, . . .
that we may walk in his paths. (v. 2)**

A few summers ago I took on the adventure of climbing a 13,000-foot mountain in the Colorado Rockies. I was determined to reach the top, but halfway there I felt defeated. My friends encouraged me to put one foot in front of the other. Because of their support, I got within three hundred feet of the summit.

After we got back down, a friend shared a quote: “One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up” (René Daumal).

If I had not tried to reach the top I would have missed all the glorious views I saw along the way. I would not have experienced the holiness of that hike. God was with me the entire way—not least of all through my friends. In the ups and downs of our daily lives, too, God gives us strength—through friends, scripture, prayer, song, sacraments—to walk in God’s truth and love. May we trust the One who calls us by name and invites us to “walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever” (v. 5).

**God, provide us the strength for all of life’s journeys,
confident that you walk beside us. Amen.**

Prayer concern: National parks and park staff

The continuing story

**His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation. (v. 50)**

My great-aunt Claudia died at age 101. For as long as I can remember, she made the best honey cookies and gave them as Christmas gifts to those she loved. In memory of her, one year I decided to bake honey cookies. After I posted a photo of the results on my Facebook page, my aunts told me our honey cookie recipe has been handed down from generation to generation.

Our reading today reminds us that the story of Christ begins generations before his birth: “[God] has helped his servant Israel,” sings Mary, “according to the promise he made to our ancestors.” And the story continues “to [Abraham’s] descendants forever” (vv. 54-55). We remember and share the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We know the story well, yet sometimes we forget that it is not just a story in the past; it continues now and will go on until Jesus comes again.

**Jesus, thank you for coming as the living story of
God’s love for the world. Help us to share this precious story
from generation to generation. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those passing the faith
to the next generation*

Christmas Eve

**For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us; . . . and he is named . . . (v. 6)**

Do you know what your name means? My name, Tara, is Gaelic for “rocky pinnacle.” There is power in knowing the meaning of our names. Jesus is born into the world with many important names: He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” He is the Messiah, “the anointed one.” He is God’s Son, sent into the world for all of us.

In today’s Isaiah reading, which Christians have long heard as testimony to the coming of Christ, we hear still more names describing Jesus’ all-important roles in this world. He is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (v. 6). He comes with God’s authority to bring about peace in a broken world. Jesus comes to flip the world upside down—or, indeed, right side up—through God’s love.

Tonight we celebrate Jesus’ birth in a stable to parents of low status, a reminder that God often uses the ordinary to do extraordinary things. The name *Jesus* was itself ordinary in those days, but it carries this extraordinary meaning: “God saves.”

**O God, help us trust in your Son, the Prince of Peace.
May we share his holy story, not just today,
but all year. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Newborns and their families

Christmas Day

**Do not be afraid; for see . . . to you is born . . . a Savior,
who is the Messiah, the Lord. (vv. 10-11)**

It’s been said that some form of “Fear not” appears 365 times in scripture: once for every day of the year. Whether that’s literally so or not, Jesus came into the world to be Emmanuel—“God with us”—always.

I write at the end of a year that brought much fear, but also taught us to trust in God’s promise of good news. Our Savior came as a tiny baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger—not amid the trappings of earthly kingship but in vulnerability so we need not fear divine condemnation, wrath, or abandonment.

“For God so loved the world,” proclaims the Gospel of John, “that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (3:16-17). Merry Christmas!

**God of love, help us trust in the infant king you sent
not to condemn but to save the world. May we share
this good news with all. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Giving thanks for Jesus,
who swaddles us in God’s love*



First Sunday of Christmas

**The boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem,
but his parents did not know it. (v. 43)**

Have you ever lost a young child, or even an older one—say, around twelve years of age—while you were out at a crowded event? If so, can you remember the sense of panic you felt? What did you do to make sure the child was found quickly? As I read the scripture for today, I imagine the fear and worry racing through Mary and Joseph as they searched for their son.

When Jesus' parents finally found Jesus, he was sitting in the temple among the teachers, listening and asking questions. He couldn't understand why his parents were so worried about him. We know this because of the way he responded to them: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (v. 49). Of course Mary was worried—Jesus was her son! However, in this story Jesus reminds us that he is also the Son of God. From this time on, Jesus will continue in obedience to his earthly parents, but will also grow in divine wisdom, teaching and sharing God's good news with the world.

**God, when we get lost, you, our heavenly parent,
seek us out. Make us eager learners, like Jesus. Help us
grow in wisdom and share your good news. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Teachers and students

John, Apostle and Evangelist

**This is the disciple who is testifying to these things . . . ,
and we know that his testimony is true. (v. 24)**

Assuming that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (v. 20) is John, there seems to be rivalry between him and Peter. We see it as they race each other to Jesus' tomb, and now, when Peter sticks his nose into John's business and Jesus says, "What is that to you? Follow me!" (v. 22).

Jesus calls all of us, with Peter, to follow him. At times we have a hard time trusting. I am the daughter of a woman who lives daily with a mental illness. Many times I have questioned my faith and asked, "Why our family?" I'm sure you, too, have questioned your faith. Yet one way God reassures us we can trust the Savior is through the testimony of John's gospel. As the evangelist draws his account of the good news of Jesus toward its close, he declares: "There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (v. 25).

Peter and John each had a unique call to discipleship. So do you; so do I. May we strengthen, rather than compete with, one another as we follow the Savior.

**God, help us support one another in following Jesus,
especially when we have a hard time trusting. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who live with mental illness

The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

**A voice was heard in Ramah, . . .
Rachel weeping for her children. (v. 18)**

The pain of losing a child is excruciating. As I have walked alongside a number of friends and parishioners who have laid children to rest, I have seen how unbearable this loss is. When I read this passage from Matthew, so many emotions come over me: anger, frustration, sorrow. Why must Herod call for every child under two to be killed? But he is power-hungry and will do anything to try to ensure that Jesus does not reign.

Christmas is, of course, just the beginning of the story of Jesus' life on earth. Not long after we follow the holy family from the stable to Egypt and back, we will journey with Jesus through his ministry, to the cross, and eventually to the empty tomb. The power-hungry ways of the world will threaten the reign of Christ at every turn. But in the words of Clarence W. Hall, "Easter says you can put truth in the grave, but it won't stay there." For all who have lost loved ones to violence, disease, or any form of destruction, God comes alongside in Jesus, the Truth, with understanding, love, and the promise that life will finally reign.

**God, we don't understand why great loss happens,
yet we know you mourn with us. Help us reach out
to all who grieve. Amen.**

Prayer concern: All who have lost a child

Stephen, Deacon and Martyr (transferred)

**[Stephen] knelt down and cried out in a loud voice,
"Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (v. 60)**

As an ELCA deacon—a minister of word and service—I appreciate this story from the book of Acts. Stephen is the first deacon recorded in scripture, as well as the first individual martyred for his faith in Jesus. Stephen is a faithful servant of God who serves the community willingly and shares God's message of salvation, even in the face of danger. His model of commitment challenges and encourages us to be faithful servants of Christ too.

Like Stephen, ELCA deacons are called to serve all God's people. But the truth is that every one of God's children is called to serve—to wash the feet, literally or figuratively, of all people. We are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. May we follow Stephen's example of faithfulness and servanthood to God and all those around us.

**God, help us to be your faithful servants. Teach us
to be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: ELCA deacons (ministers of
word and service)*

The blessing of wisdom

That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him,
"Ask what I should give you." (v. 7)

If you have ever watched a celebrity red-carpet event, you have heard the stories of how much money is spent to get ready for that event—the exorbitant price paid for dresses, suits, jewelry, limousines. I find it almost sickening. Our world is continually telling us we should have more possessions: buy a bigger house, a faster car, more toys.

The story of Solomon told here reminds us that life is not about how much power, wealth, or status we have in this world. God cares more about how we treat others. From the earliest teachings of the Torah, and echoed by Jesus, we are called to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Because Solomon asks for knowledge and wisdom, God blesses him. We too find that as we follow Christ the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) and bless our neighbors—whether with food or friendship, advocacy or random acts of kindness—we experience blessing in the process. So how will you bless someone else this holiday season?

Gracious God, help us bless others by our words and actions, in response to how you have blessed us with the gift of Jesus. Amen.

Prayer concern: People seeking wisdom in a particular matter today

The promise of light and peace

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me . . .
will have the light of life. (v. 12)

During the Christmas season, one of my favorite pastimes is to sit in the dark with only the lights of my Christmas tree glowing. This light reminds me that Jesus comes as the light of the world even, and most especially, when we are grieving.

My grandpa died December 23, 2018. That Christmas was so hard. How were we to celebrate the birth of Jesus after a death in our family? However, God showed up. On Christmas morning I woke to quiet at my aunt and uncle's house. Some people were still sleeping, others out feeding the cattle. As I gazed outside, I spotted, fastened in the window, a piece of art with one simple word: "Peace." It was a reminder that in time the grief would not be so heavy. God would bring peace.

Despite our sorrow, that Christmas we celebrated Jesus born as Emmanuel, "God with us." God promises to be with us always. I can—and do—lean into that promise every day of the year.

Loving God, in times of grief, remind us that you sent your Son as the light of the world and that we are never alone. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those in need of a reminder of God's peace

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