

Christ in Our Home

October, November, December
2021



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CHRIST IN OUR HOME (ISSN 0412-2968), published quarterly by Augsburg Fortress, 411 Washington Avenue North, Third Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Periodicals postage paid at St. Paul, Minnesota, and additional mailing offices. Subscriptions \$8.50 per year (\$12.50, large print). Copyright © 2021 Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A. USPS Publication Agreement Number 1631527. Canadian Publication Agreement Number 40030418.

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

Prayers

Morning

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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The alternative to lashing back

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. (v. 17)

“He started it!” yells my older child. “No, it’s your fault!” the younger retorts. One hits, the other bites, and soon they are both in tears over a remote-control car.

We know that when we are hurt, hitting back, literally or metaphorically, doesn’t help. More anger and violence make it worse. We still do it. I still do it. A friend makes a rude comment, and I snap back. A driver honks at me, and my hand flies to my horn.

The congregation in Rome struggled with this too. Paul admonishes them: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (13:9). This doesn’t mean accepting bad behaviors; there are times to walk away. Yet loving my neighbor can be an invitation to greater understanding. In my children’s spat, I learned one child was jealous of his brother’s new car. How many unkind acts come from unexpressed and unnamed hurt? Loving my neighbor begins with understanding them—God’s alternative to lashing back.

God, empower us to work for peace by choosing understanding instead of retribution. Amen.

Prayer concern: Nations in conflict

Unlikely heroes

Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. (v. 21)

She's an unlikely heroine. We don't get her name. Yet God's promise is fulfilled through this outsider's act: Pharaoh's daughter adopts a baby found floating down the Nile.

The baby is Moses, who will lead God's people out of Egypt. Pharaoh's daughter knows the baby is a Hebrew, not one of her people, but she picks him up and loves him as her own. What courage! What a surprise! The story of God's people enslaved in Egypt doesn't show much sympathy for ancient Egyptians. If this were an old-time play, we'd hiss when they came on the scene. Yet Pharaoh's daughter surprises us with love.

This section of Acts is a retelling of how God fulfills promises. Those promises are often fulfilled through unlikely heroes and outsiders who prove faithful. God can use anyone to do God's work. An Egyptian woman without a name. A man who thought his speech wasn't good enough. A person like me. A person like you.

**God, we praise you for keeping your promises.
Surprise us by the ways you still do so. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Adoptive parents and children

Walking with God

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (v. 8)

I was determined to make it to the peak. We were running out of daylight, so I pushed my children to hike faster. They dawdled by snacking and tree-climbing. I sped up. Exasperated, my youngest son said, "Mom, I need you to walk *with* me." I thought of the African proverb that says if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together.

This verse from Micah answers the rhetorical question "What does the LORD require?" The instructions are simple, yet easy to sidestep. Do justice, be kind, walk *with* God. Though I'm tempted to walk alone at my frenetic pace, the passage invites me into side-by-side relationships with God and with others.

I slowed down that day to my children's pace. We noticed a striped caterpillar. We picked fat, ripe blueberries. We laughed at my older son's jokes. God takes our pace, walking with us, helping us see beauty and opportunities for kindness along the way.

**God who walks with us, help us to do justice
and to be kind, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those working for racial justice

Skipping over death

**God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners
Christ died for us. (v. 8)**

I tried to skip over the crucifixion story in the children's Bible. It was late. We'd read several stories. My son begged for one more. The death of Jesus did not seem like the best story for a four-year-old right before going to sleep. He begged. I yielded.

Then my son had questions: "Why did Jesus have to die?" "Does he still have the holes in his hands?" "How did the blood get back in so he could be alive again?" Tough questions, important questions. We're still exploring them together. I'm glad we didn't skip over the death of Jesus.

Western culture often skips over death or minimizes it. Youth is prized. Death is handled by professionals. We use euphemisms like "passed away" or "they're with God." But death is real. It is universal. It happened to Jesus, an act of selfless love that served to reconcile, or reconnect, us with God. Jesus died for everyone. Jesus loves everyone. These are truths not to be skipped over!

**Saving God, thank you for the gift of Jesus,
in whose life and death you show love for all. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Those near death
and their caretakers*

Joyful giving

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so. (v. 10)

I was asked to give \$10,000 to a fundraising campaign. I was shocked. I have a mortgage, student loan debt, and young children; no one had ever asked me to be so generous. I imagined what it would feel like to give that much to a cause I loved. It felt good to imagine myself as a wildly generous giver.

Plot twist: I was in a simulation exercise at a stewardship and fundraising workshop where we were practicing making a big "ask." I said yes when asked; it was just a simulation, after all.

But the exercise gave me new perspectives. First, I could feel good about being generous at any level, whether with time, talents, or treasure. Second, I started to dream and plan for more substantial financial gifts. It brings joy to imagine!

God is wildly generous. We are created to give because God has first given to us. It feels good to give because our brains are wired that way. How are you called to be generous? How will your generosity lead to joy?

**Generous God, thank you for your abundant love.
Show us the joy in giving. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People experiencing homelessness

Receiving grace

Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe . . .
and it will be yours. (v. 24)

I have prayed for things I did not receive. I never got a date with the cute boy in high school algebra class. I did not get the dream internship for which I applied. A friend with cancer did not live to see another Christmas. How do we reconcile Jesus' words here in Mark when prayers seem unanswered?

We might pray more generally. I've heard it said that the best prayer is "Thy will be done." Maybe we can receive that. We could also pray for peace, love, and community and be open to how those are fulfilled.

Yet there's more clarity in the context of this passage. In the portion of Mark our appointed reading skips, Jesus "cleanses" the temple, rebuking the religious requirements for worship and the people who profited from them. Fulfilling religious laws isn't the way to God's heart. God invites us into a relationship of prayer and faith. God does hear all our heart's desires. We can listen for the surprising ways God is at work and is with us. Prayer changes us. We will receive the grace and love we need.

**Loving God, teach us to pray and teach us to listen.
Through Christ we pray. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who feel they lack faith



All Saints Sunday

Did I not tell you that if you believed,
you would see the glory of God? (v. 40)

I approached the open casket, holding hands with my children, then ages two and four. We looked at the body of my beloved aunt and godmother. A retired schoolteacher and small-town museum founder, she had lived a long life and died after a debilitating illness. To see her body and touch her hand made it final, more certain. I believed because I had seen.

My children did not seem afraid; we had prepared for this. I wanted them to see and believe that death is a part of life. Some fear is normal, but we believe in a God who promises life eternal. We have not seen that, yet we can believe.

John's gospel talks a lot about believing and seeing. Those who see end up believing. But those who believe are the ones who can truly see. To embrace the gift of faith is to see things in a new light. We know death is real because we have seen it. We believe death isn't the final answer because of God's great power and love. We see anew.

**Eternal God, we believe; help our unbelief! Give us
the gift of faith to see you in our lives. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are grieving

Welcoming others

There was a famine . . . , and a certain man of Bethlehem . . . went to live in . . . Moab, he and his wife and two sons. (v. 1)

I visited my brother in Kazakhstan when he served in the Peace Corps there. We stayed with his host family, who spoke only Russian and Kazakh. I spoke neither, relying on my brother's limited Russian and many hand signals.

An outsider, I understood little about their lives or what I was eating. But the family welcomed me, asked about my life, and invited me along on outings. When we left, our host mother gave me a hand-embroidered white scarf "to wear at your wedding someday"—a generous act of hospitality.

I had just a glimpse of being an outsider in a new place, dependent on the welcome of others. Ruth's father-in-law and his family were refugees, like so many others in history who have fled their homes due to war or famine. Numerous scriptures invite us to care for those who seek refuge, as God has first given us refuge. God's hospitality is vast. There is room for us. We are invited to make space for others.

God, thank you for caring for us wherever we go. Help us welcome those who are newly among us. Amen.

*Prayer concern: Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service*

Discipline and teaching

**Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD,
and whom you teach out of your law. (v. 12)**

You can read an infinite number of books on child discipline; ask me how I know! As I've read, I have struggled with the word *discipline*. Should I punish my child? How can I balance that with creating a loving home? Am I doing it right?

One parenting book gave a new insight: Discipline doesn't necessarily mean punishment. Parents need to find the style that works best for them and their child, but the word *discipline* itself is from the Latin word for teaching or instruction. Suddenly, discipline took on a whole new dimension.

The psalmist writes that those who are disciplined by the Lord are happy. The Hebrew word here also means "instruction." I need instruction on my walk with Jesus. I'm glad I'm not left alone to figure out how to live as God intends. Children need our instruction and teaching; those boundaries create safety and refuge from chaos. God's word, instructions, and even law give us safety in the chaos too.

**God, thank you for your instructions and teachings.
Give us courage to follow, through Christ. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: Parents, teachers,
and daycare providers*

Holy rage

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. (v. 28)

What makes you rage? What makes you so mad you feel like your head will burst into flames like the character Anger in Pixar's movie *Inside Out*? I recently had a bit of rage over the unfair distribution of household chores. I tried to swallow it. Many of us were raised to view anger as bad—particularly those of us raised female.

Anger is a normal human emotion, and not necessarily bad. Anger can hurt others or mask deeper feelings like sadness or shame, but it can also give insight and propel us to action. It's all in how we use it.

The people in the Nazareth synagogue that day may have been surprised by their rage against hometown boy Jesus. Jesus spoke of God's love for outsiders and foreigners, which made them mad. Their rage was misdirected, but ours need not be. We can feel anger about racism, inequality, injustice, oppressive governments, or cycles that keep people in poverty. This is righteous anger. We can use it to change the world!

**God, thank you for loving us in all our emotions.
Show us how to use them for your glory. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People living with violence

Treasures for life

... storing up for themselves the treasure ... [to] take hold of the life that really is life. (v. 19)

A friend in rural Alaska stores up treasure for the future—not in a bank account, but in her freezer. There are gallons of greens picked from the tundra and soaked in seal oil. She puts away dried salmon, seal meat, and whale fat. These treasures connect her to the land, to her community, and to her ancestors. The food is shared with elders and those unable to gather and hunt. These treasures help her “take hold of the life that really is life.”

A while back, I joined a local “Buy Nothing” Facebook group, where everything is free. I'm amazed at treasures given (bikes, sofas, new clothes) that could have been sold elsewhere. Strangers have lifted others through hard times and made friendships. It's life that really is life.

God's economy is based on acts of kindness, generosity, and sharing. This is the way to life that really is life. We can keep practicing, trusting that God is a generous giver and that we will have enough.

God, teach us to trust you and each other, that all may have enough, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Prayer concern: Indigenous communities

Rooted deep

**. . . rooted and built up in him
and established in the faith . . . (v. 7)**

I had a recent peony crisis. These beautiful plants bloom in my yard each summer, evoking memories of my childhood. But this year we decided to expand the driveway. The peonies had to be moved. How? What if I messed up? What if I killed them?

I spent hours researching how to transplant peonies. Gently lift the root ball, I read. I started to dig. Nothing budged. I was hitting, and harming, roots the size of zucchini and they held fast. In tears, I called a neighbor, who came with a pitchfork, a wheelbarrow, and her husband. As we extracted the peony, I was shocked at the root size and quantity. "Oh," my neighbor said, "the first owners of your home planted those peonies thirty years ago!"

We grow best rooted in Christ, though it takes time for roots to become established. Prayer, scripture study, worship, acts of giving and service—these practices help our roots go deep down in Christ. We grow strongest alongside others who can nurture and teach us. We grow deep together.

**God, thank you for creating a world for us to tend.
Help us root deeply in the gift of faith. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Landscapers, gardeners, and farmers

Taking a hard look

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone. (v. 10)**

There is nothing like being called out on your shortcomings by your children. "Mom, that light was red!" "Mom, you're driving 50 but the sign says 40." "Mom, you were late picking me up, and I got worried." It causes you to take a hard look in the mirror.

Jesus' parables explore the complexities of life, which may mean taking a hard look. Parables lack easy answers; rather, we can wrestle with them and "try on" different characters. In the parable of the wicked tenants, sometimes we're the landowner who suffers injustice. Other times we get hurt when we try to do the right thing, like the people the landowner sends. At times we are like the tenants and we harm others.

Parables may help us take a hard look in the mirror, but the point isn't to make us feel bad. The parables are not about us—they're about God. God is the giver. God is the one who comes to us. God is the cornerstone. God is with us, no matter where we look!

**God, we confess we sometimes fall short. Thank you
for your forgiving love, in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Those who are incarcerated



Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 33

**There will be earthquakes in various places;
there will be famines. (v. 8)**

I was alone at home with my two young children when the shaking began. You should stay put in an earthquake, but I panicked. Glass shattered all around as I grabbed my toddler and tried to run to my older child. I could barely move through the shaking, and I stopped when I saw the folly in going upstairs under a swaying chandelier while carrying a two-year-old. I screamed to my child over the rumble, praying he was safe and that it would end soon. The 7.1 quake lasted less than a minute and none of us were hurt, but it took time for the fear to subside.

You don't have to live through a natural disaster to know fear and suffering. We all experience hard times. This style of writing in Mark is called "apocalyptic." The biblical intent isn't to frighten. Apocalyptic writings are for those living in scary times, for people suffering. The message is that God is still in control. God is with us when difficult things happen. We are never left alone.

**God, you are a refuge during hard times. Comfort us
with your embrace. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: People affected by natural disasters

How long?

**How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long? (v. 2)**

I remember exhausting, sleepless nights trying to get a fussy newborn to sleep. How long, O Lord? A friend's five-year-old is going through cancer treatment. How long, O Lord? A clergy friend lives with debilitating depression. How long, O Lord? "How long?" is a universal plea.

In Psalm 13, the resolution seems to come fast, as the psalmist goes from "How long?" to "He has dealt bountifully with me" (v. 6) in just a few verses. In life, that journey may be more complex, but both can still be true.

This devotional was written during the peak of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Many cried, "How long, O Lord?" and yet also noted God's bounty and providence, even in the face of death. Medical professionals were heroes. Strangers helped strangers. Aid poured in from unexpected places. God was at work. We can cry, "How long?" while simultaneously being assured of God's presence and love. The sorrow is real, but God is really there.

**God, thank you for those who show us your loving
and healing presence, through Christ. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Medical workers

Seeing through a new lens

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. (v. 24)

The number of filters available to transform photos is truly amazing. A clear picture of a cat can be changed to appear blurry with just a couple of clicks. An image of vibrant fall colors can be transformed into black and white. Red apples can easily be altered to look blue.

God has given us a filter to understand the world around us in a new way—through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead of sowing distrust and hatred between ourselves and our neighbors, we are urged by the author of Hebrews to inspire one another to loving service and good deeds. This involves a changed way of seeing: rather than looking at life through the filter of how to get ahead of everyone else, we see each person we encounter as a child of God, loved and redeemed.

God, help us to see and then serve one another through the filter of your love, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA New Congregations and innovative mission models

Speaking through the Spirit

Say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. (v. 11)

When I was young, I wanted to be a ventriloquist. Then, I thought, I could say whatever I wanted and blame anything that didn't go well on the puppet. Alas, my plans didn't work out: it was always obvious I was the one speaking the whole time.

But what if we are the ones whose words are directed by another—not as inanimate puppets but as listeners to the Spirit of God? Instead of worrying about what words to come up with on our own, what if we let ourselves serve as the vessels of God's word?

Jesus urges his disciples to preach the good news of his grace and forgiveness—even amid persecution, even when the world refuses to hear. Not everyone will be open to this message, but we are to proclaim it boldly anyway because the words are not ours—they are God's. And if we listen—through prayer, scripture reading, worship, and conversation with faithful others—the Spirit will direct us in how to speak, not as puppets but as apostles, or “sent ones,” in Jesus' name.

May the Holy Spirit speak life through me today, and may the world echo its peace. Amen.

Prayer concern: Puppeteers and children's-theater artists

Even in uncertainty, God is with us

He has established the world; it shall never be moved. (v. 1)

The jolt of sudden loss can drastically change our view of the world. What begins as a normal day is forever altered by the news of a loved one's death. Shortly after a routine medical test, the unthinkable: a cancer diagnosis. The employer downsizing takes on a personal edge when you are asked to clean out your desk. Everything that once seemed predictable can be turned upside down, the gentle rhythm of certainty suddenly a throbbing goo of ambiguity.

It seems humans have an age-old preference for certainty. But the words of the psalmist remind us of what *is* certain, even amid the raging floodwaters and the thunderous waves of life. For no literal or figurative storms have the power to change the relationship between God and God's creation. God sits certain and steadfast amid the swirling chaos, holds us in love, calms us with divine peace, and assures us that healing will come for a world of sudden losses.

**God, your love endures through the storms of life.
Grant us your peace, through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: People receiving
troubling news today*

Death destroyed

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. (v. 26)

I've heard many stories of people experiencing what some call "the gray zone," a blurred boundary between life and death. One woman in her nineties described people coming in and out of her nursing-home room as she was swinging on her mother's lap. It was difficult for her to tell which visitors were alive and which had died. Another woman had a visitor she called her "angel" who entered her room every night and sat silently on a chair in the corner. The presence of this angel comforted the woman as death drew closer. The precise line between life and death—where God's new life awaits us—may not always be easy to recognize.

Perhaps this is the reason Paul describes death as the last enemy to be destroyed on the road to the certainty of the resurrection. We are strengthened through faith and the constant presence of Jesus as we move past all the gray zones of life to the light of Christ's resurrection, which is ours as well.

**Lord Jesus, keep me strengthened through faith in you
for whatever comes my way today. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Hospice caregivers

A bright vision

**Look! He is coming with the clouds.
Every eye will see him. (v. 7)**

As farmers, my grandparents were shaped by the land around them. Plans for each day revolved around tasks on a schedule, like milking the cows or feeding the horses. My grandfather had a mysterious sense of the location of any weed trying to invade his fields. My grandmother could forecast the weather by how bad the arthritis felt in her knees.

It's not surprising that people in the ancient Mediterranean world, many of whom worked the land, were also guided and shaped by nature and the weather—so much so that visions of the second coming of Christ were informed by the weather. John of Patmos here describes Jesus as “coming with the clouds.”

But we need not assume storm clouds, terror, and violence. I envision bright clouds in a fair-weather sky ushering in the peace of Christ. The end of time as we know it will be marked by the coming of One who loves us and has freed us from the power of our sins. We can trust that all will be well.

Comforting God, teach us your ways of love, that we may love you, our neighbor, and ourselves through Jesus. Amen.

Prayer concern: The safety and well-being of farmers



Christ the King

My kingdom is not from this world. (v. 36)

Christian places of worship have been built in various locations and styles throughout the ages. From wooden huts to stone cathedrals, the buildings bring worshipers a sense of the mystery of faith. Architectural details like stained glass and décor such as candles instill awe and transport us, at least to some degree, from the physical world to the spiritual realm.

As Christians, we live with this sense of two worlds—one foot in this life and one in the promised kingdom. Jesus names this distinction of the two kingdoms as he is interrogated by Pilate. We live in the earthly kingdom while awaiting the full arrival of Jesus' kingdom that “is not from this world.” It can be complicated to be in both at once. But as we struggle through the chaos of earthly life, we are reassured that Jesus lived in this kingdom too—and even died at its hands—so we are never alone. Jesus still walks with us in this world, and we can bask in his promise of new life in the kingdom to come.

Whatever space you worship in, may it remind you of Christ's love for you, now and forever.

**Christ, as we wait for the fullness of your kingdom,
keep us mindful of ways to care for one another
and the earth. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Refugees

Known by many names

In Judah God is known, his name is great in Israel. (v. 1)

I can tell you that my name is Jeff, but that is only part of how I am known. I am also a husband, father, son, and brother. Remembering who I am in connection with other people helps me remember the importance of relationship. It is especially important for me in my relationship with God to remember I am also named child of God, redeemed, lost and found sheep (Luke 15:3-7), lost and found coin (Luke 15:8-10). We are named both according to who we are and based on our connection to others. Relationships are central to the life of faith.

The people of Israel celebrated their relationship with God with divine names such as defender, judge, and peacemaker. In addition to names for who we are, God celebrates relationship with us by naming us based on what we do: We can be known as helpers as we tend to the needs of our neighbors. We can be known as visitors, checking in on those who are imprisoned or sick or homebound. Finally, we can be known as thankful for the abundant life made possible only by God's love and grace.

Savior, you are known by many names. Help us serve you and others so your name may be praised. Amen.

Prayer concern: Those in the process of name-selection for self or another

Even God can be angry

Your wrath has come. (v. 18)

It can be unsettling to imagine God angry. We readily know God as forgiving when we have done something wrong; patient when we just don't understand God's message; rejoicing when we gather in praise, prayer, and thanksgiving. But the image of an angry God can be a quagmire. Where does an angry God fit into the pastoral image of a gentle shepherd leading sheep through a tranquil meadow? Yet surely the shepherd gets angry if a wild beast threatens the flock. Such anger—and the fierce, protective actions it prompts—would, in that case, be good.

Anger is often minimized or hidden. But as with all feelings, burying anger can make things worse. Perhaps this image of an angry God can help us know that anger has its purpose. In particular, anger at injustice can prompt us to advocate for those who are vulnerable. And when we get angry without cause or act out our anger inappropriately, we are grateful that we do also know God as forgiving, as patient, and as one who rejoices in showing us love.

Merciful God, show us how to use all our emotions appropriately to further your message of love. Amen.

Prayer concern: People who struggle with addiction, and their loved ones

The prison of isolation

**You will be scattered, each one to his home,
and you will leave me alone. (v. 32)**

Being alone is not always bad. For example, solitude brings us the opportunity to hear things normally muffled by noise, like the beat of our heart or the gentle sound of birds or fluttering leaves. But for all the good it can bring, being alone can also make us feel lonely.

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, we quickly discovered the pain of isolation. People who were separated from one another yearned for a simple touch—a hug or handshake—or just the physical presence of someone they missed. Separation from loved ones was foretold by Jesus as his crucifixion drew near: The community of believers would soon be scattered from one another. Even Jesus would be alone.

But Jesus knew he would never be completely alone: “Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me,” he told his disciples (v. 32). God would be with them too, and is always with us. And of course, the story would not end at crucifixion but would lead to resurrection. Jesus would soon walk among his followers again in new and surprising ways.

**God, when we feel lonely, help us trust
in your constant presence, like Jesus did. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Prison ministries

Thanksgiving (USA)

**Strive first for the kingdom of God
and his righteousness. (v. 33)**

Are you a list-maker? One way I used to try to manage worry was by making a list. I'd jot down things I needed to get done and then prioritize them by rearranging the items into a whole new list.

We are confronted with a list of worries in our scripture reading today: food, water, clothing, life. Jesus tells us not to worry about these because “your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (v. 32). Instead, Jesus gives us a new list of priorities. First on this list is the kingdom of God, and then, says Jesus, the other needs will be met along with it.

We give the kingdom priority by loving and serving our neighbors while proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. This combination of service, love, and proclamation draws our focus to the well-being of others, ensuring that their needs are met for food, water, clothing, and all else required for abundant life.

**God, may we be bold proclaimers of your kingdom
through loving care for our neighbors. Amen.**

*Prayer concern: People going hungry,
even as many feast today*

Enveloped in peace

Be at peace among yourselves. (v. 13)

We once noticed that one of our kids was missing from the group while we were taking a family walk. A quick check of the shoreline revealed our son sitting on a large boulder near the water. His arms were outstretched in the lotus position—at age four, no less!—and he was repeating, “Inner peace, inner peace.” We guessed he had picked up the move from one of his favorite movies. Whatever the source, our son reminded us of the importance of times of inner peace—that sense of contentment and serenity.

Judging by Paul’s letters, the early church was not all contentment and calm. It turns out church conflict isn’t unique to the twenty-first (or even the twentieth) century. Paul effectively tells his listeners to stop what they are doing, take a deep breath, assume a restful posture, and concentrate on inner peace—not just for their own sake but for the benefit of other believers. Peace in ourselves flows outward, prompting us to remember the community and mission we share in Jesus.

Compassionate God, through your wisdom plant in us your peace, which passes all understanding. Amen.

*Prayer concern: Pastoral counselors
and spiritual companions*

Waiting for God

**You are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long. (v. 5)**

Sarah didn’t feel well upon getting up in the morning. Her son took her to the emergency room, where they waited two hours to be seen and another three hours for a room to open up so Sarah could be admitted. When the nurse told her the doctor would stop by about an hour later, Sarah replied with a smile, “What’s another hour, when I’ve been waiting all day?”

Our reading reflects the reality of waiting as people of faith. We wait for God in a variety of circumstances: upon receiving a scary medical diagnosis, searching for renewed hope amid a divorce, navigating a spiritual dry spell, wondering how best to support a troubled teen or a grieving friend. We yearn for God to be present in tangible ways. As we wait, we keep busy through prayer, lament, and thanksgiving. We find in this psalm words to ask God for patience so we too may respond like Sarah: “What’s another hour?” And like the psalmist: “You are the God of my salvation.”

Lord, we ask you for the spirit of patience as we discern your presence in our lives and your will for us. Amen.

*Prayer concern: ER staff serving people
who are sick or injured*



First Sunday of Advent

Be alert at all times. (v. 36)

It seems our two dogs have teamed up to make sure we know when anything—real or imagined—is happening in our backyard. One whines at the back door to be let in when something is not right outside. The other scratches on the door to let us know about the one who is whining. Our dogs are always on alert.

With eyes searching and ears attuned, Christians “team up” during Advent to keep watch for the coming Christ. We encourage one another to look past the sale ads and listen beyond the Santa-themed music on the radio to catch glimpses of the kingdom breaking into the world. Yet, gazing far out toward the horizon can cause us to stumble over the Christ trying to make himself known right under our noses and before our eyes. As the church, together we redirect our vision to see Jesus, Emmanuel, in those who are in need. We serve, we proclaim, and we love as Christ taught us—and the kingdom comes.

Jesus, make us alert to your coming among our neighbors in need, that we may respond in service and love. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA campus ministries

Building community

Beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. (v. 17)

I don't take stability for granted after falling and tearing my rotator cuff. Our driveway was icy, and I had other things on my mind—a combination that proved immensely painful in the end. Instability caught me by surprise. I was caught off guard, and I lost my footing.

Our reading today is like a big sign with blinking lights and loud music warning us of instability. Such a shift can be caused by our leaving behind the rules or guidance we've been taught—becoming “lawless,” as Peter writes—and choosing, rather, to go our own way. We can easily slip into the pattern of looking out only for ourselves and then fall on our own good intentions.

Instead, may we look to what builds up community, strengthens relationships, and fosters our faith in God. May we look outward to balance our own ego. An important part of the equation is being open to receiving help from others. This stability benefits the whole people of God.

Lord, as we seek to serve one another, may we treat friends, family, neighbors, and strangers alike with caring compassion. Amen.

Prayer concern: ELCA World Hunger ministry

Andrew, Apostle

What are you looking for? (v. 38)

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks Andrew as they meet through their mutual friend John the Baptist. In response, Andrew and an unidentified individual accept Jesus’ invitation to “come and see” (v. 39)—to see where he is staying, and so much more.

“What are you looking for?” is a good question to ponder amid the anticipation of Advent. When I head out to buy the perfect gift for someone, I sometimes arrive at the store without a clear idea of what to buy. What am I looking for? I will know it when I see it.

We may not know exactly what we are looking for in the Messiah. Take a moment to imagine what it was like for the shepherds or the wise men, for Simeon or Anna, as they learned of the coming of Christ. They couldn’t know ahead of time exactly what to look for, but they trusted God’s word and that they’d know the gift of salvation when they saw it. As did Andrew. As do we.

And in the end, it’s not actually about us figuring out what we’re looking for—or finding it. The Messiah, Jesus Christ, has found *us*. The search is over.

God, as we journey to Bethlehem, may our hearts trust your word and be open to being found by Christ. Amen.

Prayer concern: Travelers

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