

# CHRIST IN OUR HOME

Light for Today

January, February, March 2015  
Volume 62, Number 1

*Rebecca Grothe, Julie O'Brien, and Laurie J. Hanson, editors*

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The Scripture readings for this quarter follow the Revised Common Lectionary, Series B. In addition, texts specific to commemorations and festivals are used when appropriate. For more information about the commemorations included in these devotions, see *Sundays and Seasons*, available for purchase at [www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org).

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# Festivals and Commemorations

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

- Jan. 1**      **Name of Jesus**  
Jan. 2      Johann Wilhelm Konrad Loehe, pastor, 1872  
Jan. 15      Martin Luther King Jr., renewer of society, martyr, 1968  
Jan. 17      Antony of Egypt, renewer of the church, c. 356; Pachomius,  
renewer of the church, 346
- Jan. 18**      **Confession of Peter; Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
begins**  
Jan. 19      Henry, Bishop of Uppsala, martyr, 1156  
Jan. 21      Agnes, martyr, c. 304
- Jan. 25**      **Conversion of Paul; Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
ends**  
Jan. 26      Timothy, Titus, and Silas, missionaries  
Jan. 27      Lydia, Dorcas, and Phoebe, witnesses to the faith  
Jan. 28      Thomas Aquinas, teacher, 1274
- Feb. 2**      **Presentation of Our Lord**  
Feb. 3      Ansgar, Bishop of Hamburg, missionary to Denmark and Sweden,  
865  
Feb. 5      The Martyrs of Japan, 1597  
Feb. 14      Cyril, monk, 869; Methodius, bishop, 885; missionaries to the Slavs  
Feb. 18      Martin Luther, renewer of the church, 1546  
Feb. 23      Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, martyr, 156  
Feb. 25      Elizabeth Fedde, deaconess, 1921
- Mar. 1      George Herbert, hymnwriter, 1633  
Mar. 2      John Wesley, 1791; Charles Wesley, 1788; renewers of the church  
Mar. 7      Perpetua and Felicity and companions, martyrs at Carthage, 202  
Mar. 10      Harriet Tubman, 1913; Sojourner Truth, 1883; renewers of society  
Mar. 12      Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome, 604  
Mar. 17      Patrick, bishop, missionary to Ireland, 461
- Mar. 19**      **Joseph, Guardian of Jesus**  
Mar. 21      Thomas Cranmer, Bishop of Canterbury, martyr, 1556  
Mar. 22      Jonathan Edwards, teacher, missionary to American Indians, 1758  
Mar. 24      Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Bishop of El Salvador, martyr, 1980
- Mar. 25**      **Annunciation of Our Lord**  
Mar. 29      Hans Nielsen Hauge, renewer of the Church, 1824  
Mar. 31      John Donne, poet, 1631

## **Name of Jesus**

**They made known what had been told them about this child. (v. 17)**

Our youth group likes to share “Joy, Junk, and Jesus” moments each week. We take turns recalling high and low moments, and then we tell about times when we’ve noticed the presence of Jesus in our daily living. Our faith grows as we recognize and name our “Jesus moments.” Were Mary and Joseph strengthened by the shepherds’ announcement? Mary “treasured all these words” (v. 19), even though she already knew Jesus was a gift from God.

What a perfect way to begin 2015, in the name of Jesus! Might we make this a daily spiritual practice—to live each day in the name of Jesus? As we grow in noticing and naming our Jesus moments, we will be more gratefully aware of his love in our lives. Jesus is our gift from God, and our faith strengthens as we see and name his constant presence with us.

The shepherds then returned, “praising God for all they had heard and seen” (v. 20). Let’s also remember to share our Jesus moments with others who may not yet know of his love. As we become more aware of Jesus’ presence in our lives, we will have many stories to tell.

**Jesus, remind us to witness to your presence with us every day in this new year. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Youth ministry leaders**

## Praise and perspective

### Praise the LORD! (v. 20)

Although the sun was rising brightly as I began my morning walk, I was soon surprised by a solitary cloud that drenched me in rain. My discouragement ended in laughter when I noticed that the sun was shining everywhere within sight, except for under the small cloud where I was walking. I was walking in someone else's rainbow! My discomfort was another's blessing.

God is powerful in nature and in our lives. The psalm writer praises God for the time of peace and strength for Jerusalem. And the psalmist beckons us to praise God for everything—the hurled hail as well as the fine wheat; the snow like wool as well as the word that melts it. God has created the world with variety, including bright sunshine, cold rain showers, and rainbows of blessing.

We can praise the Lord for God's power in all circumstances. We observe God's power from our limited view, while God's perspective encompasses the entire universe and all eternity. Knowing that God's vision includes vast love for each of us, we can be trusting and joyful, even when it rains.

**Powerful God, send your Spirit to guide my praise for your infinite love, through Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those recovering from storms**

## God chooses all

**As a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him. (v. 10)**

Paul lists many blessings we have received in Christ, beginning with our adoption as God's children. We have been given such gifts as redemption, forgiveness, and hope. It is God's intention "as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (v. 10). God wants to adopt everyone!

I read a book about the adoption process of immigrant orphans in earlier times. The orphans were filled with hope and anxiety as prospective parents assessed them. If they weren't a desired gender, age, or appearance, they were left behind. How heartbreaking it must have been for those children who were longing for a home to be deemed "not good enough" for adoption into a family.

Because of God's love in Christ Jesus, each of us is good enough to be adopted as a child of God. But there are many who have yet to know God's love. As some of the "first to set our hope on Christ" (v. 12), we are called to help others know that they, too, are chosen.

**Thank you, God, for adopting us as your own through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Orphaned children**

## The Second Sunday of Christmas

**He was in the world...yet the world did not know him. (v. 10)**

I enjoyed getting to know our new neighbor as we talked across the fence one day, but a few weeks later I didn't recognize her when she came into my shop! I was confused because I had not expected to see her outside of our neighborhood.

Perhaps the world did not know Jesus as the true light of God because the world had other expectations. Almighty, incomprehensible God surprised the world with humble, self-giving Jesus. His own people were seeking a powerful king who would free them from oppression, not a lowly servant who freed them from sin.

We may miss knowing Jesus, too. If we place Christ in a far-away heaven, we don't look for him in our earthly lives. If we expect Jesus on our terms, we miss his presence in every moment. Just as I didn't recognize my neighbor in the shop, we may not know Jesus if we do not expect him to be with us here and now.

The Word became flesh. Jesus came for us to see and experience the love of God. When we are open to watching for Jesus' light and love everywhere, we will know Jesus as the light of God among us.

**Holy God, thank you for making your love visible in our world through your Son, Jesus. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Your neighbors**

## Reflecting the light of Christ

**Arise, shine; for your light has come. (v. 1)**

When my husband and I relocated, we were glad to find a city park nearby. We enjoyed walking the park trail. In time, we met a group of walkers who enjoyed nature and conversation as they walked along. Our brief greetings soon grew into friendships. We learned that they have walked together for over twenty years! Their love for the park has drawn them to know and care for one another. Now they know and care for us, too.

Isn't this like the body of Christ, our church community? Our love for God is what first brings us together. We meet regularly to serve and worship God, but also to grow as friends and disciples. We love one another because God loves us, and we invite others to join us.

The walkers gather in their love for the park. Our church gathers in our love for God in Christ. Both groups grow in strength when we include others. This group of walkers is aptly named, "The Day-breakers." Isaiah reminds us that we can draw others in to the light of God's love. We can arise, shine, and gather in, because the brightness of our day has come.

**Radiant God, teach us to reflect your light and gather in love. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Park service workers**

## The Epiphany of Our Lord

**They knelt down and paid him homage. (v. 11)**

Homage is an act of worship, honor, and reverence. The Wise Men sought Jesus in order to pay him homage as King of the Jews. They brought him treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Little else is noted about their visit, except that they soon left by another route. It seems their only desire had been to kneel before Jesus in adoration and present their gifts. We also learn that Herod claimed a desire to pay homage to Jesus, but he had a different motive.

Our worship and prayer times give us opportunities to pay homage to Jesus as Lord of our lives. We are blessed to be able to pray our requests in Jesus' name: supplications, intercessions, confessions, guidance. But how often do we pray just to worship and honor Jesus? How often do we pray with our focus on Jesus, instead of on ourselves and our needs? When was the last time we knelt before Jesus in worship, honor, and reverence, and offered our gifts for his purpose solely because he is the Lord of our lives? May we learn from the Wise Men and present ourselves before Jesus to honor him.

**Jesus, Lord of our lives, we praise, adore, and thank you.**

**Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Worship leaders**

## Loss of splendor

**Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me. (v. 8)**

The trees at the park are an eye-catching splendor of vivid color in autumn, but when winter winds strip off the leaves, the splendor is gone. When gray trees with empty branches stand on white ground, I enjoy seeing farther into the woods. The trees no longer attract my attention or block my view. I see more of the path winding through the woods and more sunshine beaming through the branches.

As followers of Christ, we strive to live perfectly and obediently. When my first marriage ended, I lost my “splendor” of keeping a strong, faithful family. Like Paul, I felt I was the least of all saints. But my barrenness opened new ways to share Christ’s grace with others who also were feeling barren.

When we lose our sense of personal splendor, our confidence comes in Christ alone. We grow more grateful for God’s grace and hope. Perhaps, in our barrenness, others are able to see beyond us to the One who helps us heal and grow. We offer hope when we allow others to see less of us, and in Christ, to see more of the path ahead, more light shining down.

**God of splendor, may we become less important in order to show more of you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those hurt by divorce**

## Rhythms

**And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (v. 5)**

In the creation story, God first brings day and night into being. In doing so, God sets the rhythm for each original day: “And there was evening and there was morning.” God’s pattern is established for all of life. We find rhythms everywhere: in evenings and mornings, changing seasons, heartbeats, and breathing. Rhythms enrich our lives. The rhythm of an annual vacation can fill us with hopeful anticipation. We may be more productive with the rhythm of regular work routines. Rhythms can give us joy, as found in sabbath rest at the end of a busy week.

The rhythm of regular prayer also enriches our days. Whether we pray in the evening, morning, or throughout the day, consistent prayers help us become more attentive to God and God’s movement in our lives. Establishing a rhythm of prayer can help us tend to our most important commitment—our relationship with God. When we keep a regular pattern of prayer, we are especially helped to remain centered in God daily through all our regular routines as well as the disruptions that come our way.

**Constant God, help me to begin, end, and live each day  
centered in you, through Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those whose lives are in disarray**

## Living truly transformed

The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness. (v. 8)

My husband and I were driving home when we saw ominous clouds swiftly gathering to form a tornado. Jim pulled our truck beside a cinderblock shed, and we held each other as the tornado raged around us. The next moments were terrifying; we wondered if we would survive. When the tornado passed, relief and gratefulness overwhelmed us, especially when we saw the destruction around us.

We are thankful to have more time with loved ones and each other. Our passion to live each remaining day for God has increased, but when I tried to describe our experience and transformation to others, my words couldn't capture the significance. Jim suggested, "If we live as transformed people, others will see the difference God has made in us through this storm."

Psalm 29 has been titled, "The Voice of God in a Great Storm." We may hear God in a variety of ways—in powerful storms or in whispers. We may be eager to tell about God's transforming work in our lives, but until people can see changes in what we say and do, they may not be able to hear our story.

**Powerful God, strengthen us to hear and to live your words  
for us, in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Prayer concern: Victims of natural disasters

## Washed and messy

**They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (v. 5)**

When walking on warm summer evenings, we often encounter lawn sprinklers at work. I prefer to avoid them. The cool water probably would feel good, but I don't want my hair to get wet or my make-up to be smeared or my clothes to be damp. Because I don't want to be "messy," I may be missing the joy of a cool, refreshing treat!

In Baptism, we are washed clean through water and the Word. But our baptism makes us messy, too. The Spirit moves us to live differently in the world. We may find we are less driven to keep up appearances or to find satisfaction in worldly goods. We may make messy choices, such as choosing to give money to our food pantry instead of going out to dinner, or finding joy in loving well instead of maximizing profits, or welcoming friends and also gladly embracing strangers. We may get messy while building homes for those who are homeless. We may choose to leave dirty dishes for a time in order to find space for solitude. We are washed in Baptism, and also made messy. In our messiness, may we find refreshment and joy.

**Gracious God, thank you for washing me clean and making me messy. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Communities in need of clean water**

## The Baptism of Our Lord

**As he was coming up out of the water, he saw...Spirit descending like a dove. (v. 10)**

God sent the Spirit “descending like a dove” after Jesus was baptized. This image reminds me of the dove Noah sent from the ark as the flood subsided (Genesis 8:6-12). When the dove returned with an olive branch, Noah realized that the waters were receding and new life was forming. When the dove did not return after being released again, Noah knew he soon would be living on dry land. The dove guided Noah, giving him hope by helping him see what he otherwise could not. In being set free, the dove discovered new life and a new place to live.

In Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit in Baptism. The baptismal symbol of the descending dove is meaningful for us. We receive an inner “dove,” the Holy Spirit, to guide us and give us hope. We can trust the Spirit to help us see what we may not be able to see on our own. The Spirit helps us to discover new life and new ways to live. In order to find new life, Noah set the dove free to soar to places unknown. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to soar in our lives and set us free in Christ.

**Holy God, send your Spirit to soar in my life, for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who are not baptized**

## Righteousness arrives

Such faith is reckoned as righteousness. (v. 5)

In Paul's day, many believed circumcision was necessary for living in right relationship with God; but Paul knew circumcision was a seal of righteousness that had already come through faith. Today, as in Paul's time, rules may become standards of human judgment, rather than seals of righteousness for the faithful.

Imagine that righteousness is like preparing your home for Jesus' arrival. You're working to make your place perfect; you're excited about welcoming him. You hear a knock, and it's Jesus, earlier than you expected! What do you do? Do you leave him standing on the porch while you run to wipe down mirrors? Do you ask him to come back later? Of course not. You open the door and embrace him! You admit that you aren't ready, but invite him in anyway. You are delighted to have extra time together. The cleaning will wait while you converse. Jesus then offers to help you finish the chores. His death has put you right with God—your place is ready. You will learn from Jesus as you continue to work. That is the righteousness given by Jesus.

**Holy God, thank you for making us righteous through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Houseguests and visitors**

## Led by faith and friends

**What am I to do, Lord? (v. 10)**

Paul's conversion story is powerful. Paul is traveling to Damascus, confident in his mission to arrest Jesus' followers. Suddenly blinded by the brightness of Christ, Paul falls to the ground and hears Jesus speak!

After his initial encounter with Jesus, Paul's story becomes much like any of ours. Paul's story becomes our story when Paul asks Jesus what he should do, and is told to walk a bit further. Paul's story becomes our story when he allows trusted friends to lead him while he cannot see. Paul's story becomes our story when he listens to a devout Christian who gives him vision and prompts him to be baptized and to witness to the world.

In discerning God's will in our lives, we too may ask, "What am I to do, Lord?" We too may be called to let Jesus guide our next steps; to trust faithful friends to lead the way when we are blind to the way of Christ; to listen for God's Word through Scripture or from the wisdom of others who help our clarity of vision; and to serve as witnesses to the world as we remember our baptism in Christ.

**Jesus, be my guide and help me to follow you, one step at a time. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those discerning God's call**

## Desperate for God

**Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. (v. 1)**

Many people have weathered difficult situations. Unemployment, grief, illness, or divorce can shatter dreams and plans, leaving us feeling like the psalmist—“weary with...crying” (v. 3). During one such time, I would awaken each morning with dread. Sorrow and worry threatened to overwhelm me. I would actually extend my hand and ask Jesus to hold it, to guide me through the day.

When we lose the life we have known, we become disoriented. As the psalmist describes, we feel as if we are sinking in deep mire and can't find a foothold. Nothing feels secure except for God. God's never-ending love and healing eventually brought me to brighter days and a new life. With God's help, such a new life can even be better, and we can become finer people.

I am so thankful for God who brought me through those times. I don't miss those difficult days, but at times I miss being aware of my desperation for God. When the floodwaters were overwhelming, my heart found the rock of God's love, solid and strong, and it gave me a foothold on which to stand.

**God, our refuge and strength, thank you for your constant love. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who are depressed**

## Here I am!

The LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” (v. 4)

“Here I am!” God already knows where we are, but these words may help us present ourselves before God with greater awareness and clarity of purpose.

Here I am—at your service! We surrender our hearts, wills, and lives for service to the Lord. We ask God to show us how and where we may serve best. On this day the church commemorates Martin Luther King Jr., and we remember how he bravely surrendered his will and life for God’s service.

Here I am—to spend time with you! We show up to spend time in God’s presence. With no agenda or prayer requests, we bask in God’s love and return that love to God.

Here I am—attentive and listening! We offer our hearts and our desire to grow as disciples, seeking to learn through Scripture and the Spirit’s leading.

Here I am—just as I am! In humble repentance, we expose our entire beings, flaws and all. We ask God for forgiveness and for healing and restoration.

“Here I am!” Yes, God knows where we are. But these words help us place ourselves in God’s presence.

**I come to you, O God, to surrender, love, listen, and repent.  
Hear my prayer, in Jesus’ name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Victims of injustice and inequality**

## Hemmed in

**You hem me in, behind and before. (v. 5)**

Have you ever been sailing along on the Interstate when traffic suddenly comes to a grinding halt and stretches as far as you can see? Or perhaps you are caught in the midst of a crush of people on Black Friday before the doors open. More seriously, perhaps you are a citizen in a war-torn country and find yourself deprived of food and medicine by a military blockade. All these are ways to think of being hemmed in.

But the experience also can be life-giving. Picture yourself in a garden, completely surrounded by tall flowers and delighted by their color and fragrance. Or imagine that you are inside a cabin nestled within the midst of a verdant forest and the mystery of so many forms of life around you deepens your connection to the created world.

That is how this lovely verse from Psalm 139 invites us to experience God. With masterful stitchwork, God has tucked each of us into a perfectly tailored pocket. Here we discover that perfect obedience is perfect freedom—we are free to love fully and to receive the boundless love poured out from God's heart.

**Steadfast God, grant us the wisdom to place our trust in you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who feel unloved**

## **Addiction and grace**

**I will not be dominated by anything. (v. 12)**

We are creatures of habit. We depend on our morning coffee. We work out each day. We crave chocolate, and we binge on junk food. But when do such attachments become addictions? Paul suggests that this happens when they dominate us and control our behavior: A prescribed pain medication becomes something we can't live without. We squander money on clothes, even though our closets are full. Our newfound power at work becomes a weapon we wield against others. Our gambling drains our checking account and bills go unpaid. We can't stay away from the casino, convinced that a pot of gold awaits us on the next visit. We can't wait for the first drink of the day.

In this state of domination, our attachments become idols. Paul exhorts us to reorient our lives so that God becomes the object of our ultimate concern: "But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (v. 17). The avenue is prayer, the unceasing attentiveness to God's steadfast presence in our lives. When we come to see God at the center of all things, we will not be led astray.

**God of mercy, be known to me in all that I do. In Jesus' name, Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who feel powerless**

## The Second Sunday after Epiphany

He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” (v. 43)

“Buy this, not that!” Every day we find ourselves caught in the crossfire. TV and radio ads tell us what products to use in our homes and what medications to take. Politicians tell us what to think. Self-help books tell us what to do. Friends give us well-meaning advice about our personal affairs. How do we sift through all these words to find what is right for our lives?

Today’s key verse is especially helpful. In just a few words, it sums up the essence of true discipleship. What does following Jesus mean in today’s world, in the midst of competing forces and responsibilities? We can’t seem to just drop everything, as the first disciples did, and not even look back.

Following Jesus is not about endorsing a brand or advocating a position. Rather, it involves the complete orientation of our lives toward God in obedience and trust. Only then may we discern what God, not the world, would have us do. In John 1:38, Jesus clarifies our deep human need: “What are you looking for?” We are then positioned to hear his call: “Follow me.”

**God of hope, give us courage to release our fears and to cling to you alone. In Christ’s name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those oppressed by feelings of futility**

## Confession of Peter

**There is salvation in no one else. (v. 12)**

I vividly remember a student's question that the seminary professor could or would not answer: "Are all religions equally viable, or is Christ the only path to salvation?"

Great strides have been taken in our society to ensure that no persons or groups feel excluded. In the exchange of opinions, our view of the world becomes richer and fuller. We may not agree with others, but we can at least hear them out.

Where faith is concerned, however, tolerance may be construed as a lack of conviction. It is a tricky matter, because we do respect other faith traditions. As Christians, though, are we willing to take a stand when it is called for? Would we be able to proclaim to others, as did Peter, that "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (v. 12)?

Perhaps we will never need to declare this. However, if every interaction with others is rooted in the conviction of Jesus Christ as the way of salvation, through each act of love we will proclaim Christ to all we meet.

**God of grace, help us to bring hope to those who have no hope, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Missionaries**

## The company we keep

**Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. (v. 14)**

Have you ever gone to a high school reunion, reconnected with an old buddy, and then found yourself wondering what in the world you ever had in common with that person? People grow apart as their lives take different paths. The older we get, the more selective we may become about our associations.

Paul's proscription here does not mean that we should not be hospitable to those whose beliefs are different from ours, for that would promote a dangerously insulated society. When we hear what others believe, our own positions become more informed—we evaluate what they are saying and decide whether or not we agree with it.

Paul is telling us that the nature of the fellowship we keep—those whom we choose, as the Spirit leads, to walk with us—will either strengthen or erode our faith. Faith is not a belief system carved in stone; rather it is always growing, changing, and evolving and fortified through Word and Sacrament and in community. Let us choose well our companions along the Emmaus Road, for there we shall also find the risen Christ.

**God of light, bring me into the company of saints in my journey of faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who are easily led astray**

## Our inner child

**For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. (v. 16)**

Are you in touch with your inner child, or have the pressures of the world or cultural conventions drummed it out of you? One study reports that, on average, at age 5 we engage in creative tasks 98 times a day, laugh 113 times, and ask 65 questions. By age 44, we undertake only 2 creative tasks a day, laugh 11 times, and ask 6 questions. By age 60, well, you can figure it out!

Self-help gurus encourage us to translate the valuable qualities of playfulness into adulthood. But there is more at stake here than energy, inventiveness, and curiosity. When Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me” (v. 16), he is speaking directly to us. He is asking us to run to his arms with the simple naiveté of young children, trusting fully that which is spoken to us in love.

Granted, doubt is a vital component of faith; recall what Jesus tells the Pharisees in John 9:41: “But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” However, we will be strengthened and refreshed if we can recover a childlike trust in God as the ground and essence of our life in Christ.

**God of hope, fill us with your Spirit, so we may place all our trust in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those bearing heavy burdens**

## Discerning God's will

**Jonah...went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. (v. 3)**

“Thy will be done.” How many times have we prayed this phrase in the Lord’s Prayer without thinking about what it means? What is God’s will? How can we understand it in our lives?

Martin Luther teaches in the Small Catechism that God’s will is that which hinders evil and “strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in his word and in faith” (ELW, p. 1163). In this sense, it constitutes our fundamental approach to the world. So what happens when we discern that God is calling us to a specific action and we refuse?

This is where the tale of Jonah is relevant. When Jonah ran away from God, the results were nearly catastrophic. At one time or another, each of us has probably refused to do that to which we knew, deep down, God was calling us—and things did not go well. What then? The answer is found in one word: prayer. In his distress, Jonah prayed earnestly. Restored and strengthened, he finally made his way to Nineveh.

When fear keeps us from doing God’s will, let us remember to cry out to God in praise and gratitude; we too will be rescued.

**Merciful God, when I stray from you, put me back on the right path. In the name of Jesus. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Spiritual directors**

## Waiting

**For God alone my soul waits in silence. (v. 5)**

Right now, stop and listen for a moment. What do you hear? Is it the hum of machines, traffic, birdsong, or a TV in the next room? Many of us are uncomfortable with any absence of noise, from a few seconds of dead air on the radio to a few moments of silence in a worship service. So we keep the TV set turned on, we crank up the radio in the car, and we shop to mindless background music.

Yet, perhaps God's voice may be heard most clearly in silence. On Mt. Horeb, the voice of the Lord came to Elijah in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12).

Verse 5 of Psalm 62 tells us two things. First, periodically we need to clear away the aural clutter around us. Second, we need to wait patiently in the midst of silence. But this patient waiting need not be passive. It is in such waiting that we can cultivate hope, for our faith is grounded in the conviction of God's presence, whether we detect it or not. With perseverance, at the appointed time we too may proclaim, "I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry" (Psalm 40:1).

**God, come to me in quiet moments and show me how to open my heart to you, through Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those feeling burned out at work**

## **Fear no more**

**For the present form of this world is passing away. (v. 31)**

Taken at face value, this verse might sound apocalyptic. One might read it as saying, “It doesn’t matter what I do, because the world is about to end.”

In fact, the opposite is at issue. Paul knows that Christ’s resurrection has changed everything. Death no longer has any power over us. As a result, we need no longer live in fear or let ourselves be controlled by worldly forces. Paul is proclaiming the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 43:19: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

This is the central realization of the Christian life. It spells freedom from the “seven deadly sins,” which in the classical understanding of the early church included anger, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. What is the origin of these behaviors? It is fear of death. We are afraid that if we don’t exercise our power and control, we will die. However, Christ’s resurrection victory of life over death means that God’s eternal future is now and that nothing can separate us from God’s love. Thanks be to God!

**God, I praise you for the great gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. Keep my life centered in him. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who have been abused**

## The Third Sunday after Epiphany

And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (v. 18)

“Do it right now!” we order our children, afraid that their chores won’t get done. A similar sense of urgency runs throughout Mark’s gospel. Depending on the translation, the word *immediately* is used thirty-six times. It appears several times in the first chapter: The Spirit *immediately* drives Jesus into the wilderness; Simon and Andrew *immediately* drop their nets; Jesus *immediately* calls James and John to follow.

Why? The source of the disciples’ immediate action is not fear. Rather, it originates in lives that are attuned to God. If only we were that focused on what God wants us to do! Too often we engage in endless indecision, projecting how each course of action might turn out. We may end up doing nothing at all.

How can we learn to discern when Jesus is calling, so that we may respond immediately? We might ask ourselves whether a given action testifies to the “new birth into a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3) that is ours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is it representative of God’s kingdom? If so, then let’s do it right now!

**God of hope, open our hearts to hear your call in every aspect of our lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those looking for a job**

## Conversion of Paul

**For I did not receive [the gospel] from a human source. (v. 12)**

If it were not for Paul's impassioned zeal for bringing the good news of Christ's resurrection to the Gentiles, the story of Christianity may have been very different.

The way in which Paul, formerly a violent persecutor of early Christians, became Christ's most ardent follower is one of the most breathtaking stories in the New Testament. We learn more in Acts 9, which tells how, after his baptism, Paul begins to proclaim Jesus as God's Son. In Galatians, Paul makes a point of telling us that the good news of the gospel came to him not from "a human source...but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 12).

Many of us rely on books to get to know God. Books are instructive, but only through prayer—the cultivation of a relationship with God—do we grow in our faith. This means that revelation is available not only to saints and seminarians, but to all who are baptized. Such closeness with God is available at all times. As we grow in our experience of God through prayer, we find Christ waiting patiently by our side.

**God of assurance, reveal the presence of your Son, Jesus, in our midst. In his name we pray. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who feel abandoned by God**

## Trust

**Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt. (46:3)**

“Do not be afraid.” These words from God resonate throughout Scripture. One oft-repeated saying claims (albeit inaccurately) that the phrase appears in the Bible 365 times as a daily reminder to live each day without fear.

How often do we find ourselves paralyzed by fear? We burn out at work because we're afraid to try a new career path. We get into a rut socially because we're afraid to cultivate new friendships. We stagnate mentally because we're afraid to be creative. We're afraid to fly, afraid to drive—we're just plain afraid!

Imagine the fear that Jacob felt when God told him to pack up his entire family and everything he owned, and move to Egypt to live with Joseph. Scripture does not tell us whether Jacob hesitated. All we know is that he set out on the journey, one from which he would never return.

The issue is trust. Our task is to “trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight” (Proverbs 3:5). Our task is to not second-guess what God is calling us to do. When we trust in God, we are free indeed.

**God in Christ, give me the wisdom to go wherever you send me, in Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Second-career seminarians**

## Wisdom and truth

**All the words of my mouth are righteous. (v. 8)**

Wouldn't it be wonderful if this statement by wisdom applied to politics? That every claim politicians made was true? That falsehood had no place in the political arena? Sad to say, we have a hard time trusting what politicians say. We look to the news media to sort things out for us. This keeps groups like PolitiFact.com (whose mission is "to help you find the truth in politics") busy.

How can we learn to discern the truth? Throughout the Scriptures, that which is righteous and testifies to wisdom is representative of the qualities by which God calls us to live. That which is twisted or crooked denies or rejects these qualities.

We can't control what politicians say and do, but we can direct our own words and actions. Are we expressing the love of God to our coworkers? Are we standing for justice in relation to those who are downtrodden? Are we showing mercy to those who commit crimes or wrong us in some way? To live in such a manner requires diligence, but the fruit of such labors is indeed "better than gold, even fine gold" (v. 19).

**God of truth, live in us through Christ Jesus. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who are falsely imprisoned**

## Truth-telling

**I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them. (v. 18)**

Has anyone ever told you that you have a prophetic voice? If so, it may be because you uttered a truth that others were reluctant to acknowledge or address.

In Moses' extended address to the Israelites in Deuteronomy, he says that God explained to him how God will raise up a prophet from among them. In the biblical understanding of the vocation, prophets do not predict the future. Instead, prophets proclaim the message God instructs them to deliver and tell people the truth about their relationship with God. Think of the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12, who told David that he was doing evil in God's sight. This is the task of the biblical prophet.

Prophets in our midst today need not be people of the church, but all who take a stand against injustice, oppression, cruelty, or power-mongering. If we believe that God is at the center of all things in our world, then we know God can speak through a variety of people in ways that are beyond our understanding. Let us discern the prophetic voices in our midst and embrace them as our own.

**God of justice, raise up leaders to testify boldly to your truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those living in war-torn countries**

## Fear and worship

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (v. 10)**

When have you experienced fear? In the face of a natural disaster? When you or your loved ones were in immediate danger? When your child was suddenly and seriously ill? When you were unexpectedly laid off or fired? All these involve fear of the unknown—fear of not being in control, of not knowing what will happen. Such primal terror gripped the shepherds when the angel first appeared (Luke 2). Was the angel about to pronounce their doom?

In Psalm 111 and throughout Scripture, we read of another kind of fear. This fear may be understood as awe, reverence, gratitude, wonder, and/or astonishment. Such fear is the state of mind we bring to worship: “Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth” (Psalm 96:9).

Our life in Christ and our work in worship begin with God’s embrace of us through the transcendence and deep mystery of the triune God. From there we are positioned to move into a deeper understanding of “the greatest story ever told” as we receive God’s love and return it in greater measure. God created us for this!

**God of holiness, draw us into your loving care, in the name  
of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those who are not part of the church**

## Food, fun, and freedom

**We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. (v. 8)**

At the family table as I was growing up, we prefaced every meal with the familiar words, “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let this food to us be blessed.” The prayer helped call to order the clamor of the four young boys and one young girl gathered there. The meal also ended with prayer: “We thank you, Lord, for food and drink, through Jesus Christ. Amen.” It was clear that we were to stay in our seats until this benediction was spoken. Prayer bracketed our communal encounter, gave it a layer of meaning, and shaped our behavior, even if the prayers rattled off our tongues in a rat-a-tat-tat of words.

We do not have to pray at meals, and we can omit prayer at meals especially if it might offend others around us. We need not feel guilty if we forget to pray at meals. Belief and practice are not intended to shackle and shame us. They are meant to point us to the grace and freedom of the abundant life we have in Christ. They add meaning to our experience, help us mind our manners, and bring us to the joy and blessing of life in community.

**Praise to you, O God, for the grace and freedom you give to us, your children, through Christ. Amen.**

**Prayer concern: Those longing for a place to call home**