



Daily Prayers for Advent 2024

Community of Christ Lutheran Church + Whitehouse, Ohio

for the people of
Community of Christ Lutheran Church
Whitehouse, Ohio
Advent 2024



THIS COMPILATION IS THE FIRST PIECE OF A YEAR-LONG PROJECT IN DISCIPLESHIP HERE AT COMMUNITY OF CHRIST THAT WE ARE CALLING **LIFE ON THE EDGE: CHRISTIANITY BEYOND OUR COMFORT ZONES**. JOIN US THROUGHOUT 2025 FOR A YEAR OF LETTING JESUS LEAD US INTO NEW DIRECTIONS, TO NEW PEOPLE, AND ON NEW ADVENTURES IN THE REIGN OF GOD.

ON THE EDGE OF HOPE

PRAYERS FOR ADVENT 2024

For centuries, followers of Jesus have set aside time leading up to the celebration of Christ's birth in a series of weeks called Advent (from the Latin for "coming"), intended to prepare ourselves for two kinds of "coming"—the celebration of Christ's coming two millennia ago in the borrowed food trough in Bethlehem, and the promised coming of Christ when all things are made new. Both of those moments have a way leading us beyond our comfort zones, if we are honest. They lead us, like people watching the horizon for the first signs of daybreak, to the edge of "what is" to see coming head "what will be." No matter how many times we have heard the old story with shepherds and angels, there is always something surprising about God's choice to meet those night-shift sheep ranchers out on the outskirts of town and the margins of society. No matter how many centuries we have been waiting for Jesus coming again, there is always something exhilarating about the hope of God making all things new and setting wrongs right at the last. We are always, in a sense, on the edge of hope.

These prayers are a compilation offered to walk through the season of Advent in 2024, paired with readings we will hear in worship throughout these weeks on Sundays and in midweek worship as well. And they are the first piece of a year-long focus at Community of Christ that we are calling Life on the Edge: Christianity Beyond Our Comfort Zones. Throughout this season and then throughout 2025, we'll explore how our faith in Jesus leads us in new directions, to people beyond our usual circles, to adventures outside of our routines, and wherever else Jesus has it in mind to take us. And we can only ever walk that journey of faith by prayer—in the daily surrender of our old agendas to Jesus' direction. So we invite you to make use of these prayers as you watch for Christ's coming, and as he pulls us from old routines to the brink of something blessed and beautiful—to the edge of hope.

The Object of Our Aspirations

a prayer for December 1, 2024

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” (Jeremiah 33:14)

Waiting is hard enough already, God,
when we know the thing we’re waiting for is certain:
the loaf of bread rising in the oven,
the date circled on the calendar,
the baby growing in a womb.

It is so much harder when we struggle with doubt
whether the object of our aspirations really is on its way.
The prophet says, ‘the days are surely coming,’
and he insists you will keep your promise
of a world put right,
of justice replacing crookedness,
of mercy taking root instead of meanness,
of peace instead of cruelty.

The words are beautiful, but we confess, O God,
it is hard to believe that such days are coming
or even on the horizon at all.

It is hard to believe in new creation
when we have been let down by empty talk
and the same old repackaged rottenness
over and over before.

It is hard to trust that You truly are different,
and your word secure.

So assure us, God, that you are worthy of our confidence,
and convince us that your commitments
are not counterfeits.

Remind us of all the times you have come through
for us and for our ancestors in faith,
so that we will risk the courage required of us
to believe that a new day is surely coming,
and that your new creation begins with us.

Amen

We Have Been Misled Before

a prayer for December 2, 2024

"In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." (Jeremiah 33:15-16)

We really do want things set right, Lord.

We truly want to live to see
broken things mended,
wrongs undone,
wounds healed,
and our lives made whole.

We deeply long for the common good to order our lives, as well;
for no one to be cheated or exploited,
for no one to go hungry while others throw away excess,
for no one to be ignored,
for no one to be regarded as less-than.

And so we have nursed a hope
for servant-leaders to guide us with justice,
and for you to raise up people of character and decency
who will shepherd us and help us embody your Beloved Community.

But we should tell you: we have been taken in by schemers in the past.

We have been misled before
by frauds and hucksters selling snake-oil,
insisting that *"This time, things will be different!"*
but never delivering what they promise.

We have been fooled too many times
and at our wiser moments now, we should know better
than to follow every pied piper who comes to town.

Our disappointments and past betrayals harden us
into skeptics and cynics afraid of being let down again,
and we do not want to miss your Promised One
because our stony hearts would not dare to believe
when he calls our name.

So keep us wise without becoming jaded,
and keep these hearts willing to hope without being naïve.

Keep us oriented toward your justice and restoration,
and train our ears to recognize your voice above the noise.

Draw us to the child born in David's city,
the one laid in borrowed straw,
so that we will no longer fall for pretenders,
and so that we will spend our lives
following where Jesus leads, for good.

Amen

Because of Who You Are

a prayer for December 3, 2024

*“Show me your ways, O Lord,
and teach me your paths.*

*⁵Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.*

*⁶Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.*

*⁷Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions;
remember me according to your steadfast love
and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord. (Psalm 25:4-7)*

I need your help, God.

Actually, all of us do.

I'm done pinning my hopes on my own greatness
in order to get by.

It was a losing game, and I never measured up
no matter how many times I tried to play.

If I tried to get your attention by saying,

“Look at all the gold stars on my permanent record!”

I would forever fall short of my big talk.

And when I try to puff myself up

by pushing others down,

I always trip over my own insecurities.

So I'm done now with thinking

that I need to impress you.

I'm finished with needing to brag or bluster

or compare myself to someone else.

I am asking, good Lord, for your help,

not because of how great I am,

but because of who you are.

We are seeking, good Lord,

for you to move within history

to set aside our past,

and to remember us all

through the light of your goodness,

and on the basis of your love.

We have never lived up

to our end of the bargain, God;

we know it.

But you are faithful even when we are not,

and so we ask you to be your gracious self

to enter a world full of fickle hearts like ours,

despite our absence of stars. Amen

God of the Failures and the Forgotten

a prayer for December 4, 2024

*“You are gracious and upright, O Lord;
therefore you teach sinners in your way.*

*⁹ You lead the lowly in justice
and teach the lowly your way.*

*¹⁰ All your paths, O Lord, are steadfast love and faithfulness
to those who keep your covenant and your testimonies. (Psalm 25:8-10)*

If you were any other god,
we wouldn't dare to count on your guidance.
The pantheon of idols all around us—
the ones with names like Success and Power,
the golden calves called Wealth and Fame—
they don't offer help to the nobodies,
and they do not hear the prayers of ne'er-do-wells.
If you were any other god,
we would have given up on everything long ago.
But you are different, after all;
you do not operate like the more respectable deities in town.
You are, and always have been,
the God of the failures and the forgotten.
You have a reputation for meeting us in our mess-ups,
and for walking with the lowly.
You have made a habit out of being good to stinkers,
and answering the prayers of the overlooked and undercounted.
You listened to Elizabeth and called to Mary,
even when they had no claim to fame.
You kept your promise to rescue your people,
despite their—and our—record of rejecting you.
You have always been willing
to look for us when we were lost,
to seek us out when we felt invisible,
and to walk with us step by step,
all the way home.
So, because you are a different sort of divinity—
the Real and True among a marketplace full of fakes—
we will dare to ask you to guide us.
Since you are the living God
who sought night-shift shepherds rather than Caesar,
who sent angels to a small-town teenage girl,
and who has never been afraid to share the path with sinners,
meet us where we are once again,
take us by the hand in love,
and lead us on your way. Amen

Grow Our Love

a prayer for December 5, 2024

*“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”
(1 Thessalonians 3:12-13)*

So many other voices around us
are persuading us to want more and more
while feeling less and less satisfied, O God.
They interrupt the evening news;
they find us on our screens;
they promise us happiness is just one click away,
and leave us feeling somehow emptier.
They are especially tenacious these days,
trying to get us to believe
that the right way to honor the coming of Christ
depends upon the acquisition of *More*
and the piling up of possessions.
At our best moments, we know they are lying.
But, dear God, they are persistent,
and, truth be told, we are easily worn down.
We need to hear a different message—
yours, spoken through prophets and apostles—
who will remind us of what we really need.
We need to hear them tell us that our deepest need
is not to increase our assets,
but to grow our love for all around.
Give us, then, gracious God,
not what the advertisers tell us we should want,
but what you see that we need.
Strengthen these hearts of ours
to deepen our compassion,
to widen our embrace,
to make us abound in love like yours,
the unconditional, audacious goodness
that makes us holy like you.
And when the babble of the scrolling ads
threatens to drown out the sound of your voice,
muzzle their sound and still our restless spirits,
so that we will come to desire what is good,
and so that we will find ourselves fuller
from giving ourselves away in love
as our clearest way of worshiping you.

Amen

Lift Up Our Heads

a prayer for December 6, 2024

[Jesus said:] ²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:25-28)

To be perfectly honest with you, God,
we have plenty of reasons to keep our heads down.
We are discouraged
from every time we have seen the world get meaner.
We are afraid
from watching the world push closer to chaos.
We are heartbroken
at wars that seem unending.
We are numb
from the constant drumbeat of news
that overwhelms us with tragedy and trauma
and then moves on to the sports and weather
without a second thought.
And then to hear Jesus warn us, on top of all that,
that the things we count on to stay constant,
the sun and moon and stars and status quo,
will all be shaken to the core,
well, God, it's enough to keep us permanently staring at our shoes.
But you beg to differ.
You speak to us through Jesus,
and you tell us not to be afraid.
You tell us that there is reason for confidence amid the chaos,
and that your faithfulness remains
after everything else has crumbled to dust.
You remind us once again
that empires come and go,
that rulers rise and fall,
and that your love will endure
even when the heavens unravel.
So when we are bowed down
hunched over in fear and in despair,
lift up our heads,
and tell us again what we need to hear:
that our redemption outlasts it all,
and that you are here among us.
Amen

A Durable Promise

a prayer for December 7, 2024

[Jesus said:] “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” (Luke 21:33)

We keep making the same mistake, Lord,
of believing the charlatans will keep their word.
We’ve been lied to—and let ourselves be deceived—
by carnival barkers and people at podiums
who all tell us what we want to hear
but never follow through on what they say.

We have grown accustomed to the dance
of press conference claims trumpeted on one day,
then walked back and erased by the next.

We have gotten used to not caring any longer
whether something is true or false,
only whether it agrees with our side
and fits with our preconceptions,
and we shrug off or wave away
stubborn truths we do not wish to face.

And it is all an illusion,
just so much smoke and mirrors.

Reluctantly we admit, O God,
that we need something of substance.

We need a voice that offers more than bloviating bluster.

We need a durable promise
that will not fall apart on us,
or vanish like the morning fog.

We need the kind of words
you have given us in Jesus.

We need you speak again your unwavering Yes in him,
the Word that comes enfleshed into our midst.

Where we have settled for something less,
make us restless and unsatisfied;
where we have fallen for mirages,
drive us to find something real.

Where we have misplaced our trust
in the things and people who are not worthy,
turn us back to Jesus, whose words remain
when everything else evaporates.

Lead us to place our confidence
in the angels’ declaration:
that there really is good news of great joy for all people,
and that you have given us a Savior
who does not bail out or run away
when the fact-checkers appear. Amen

Ready Our Ears

a prayer for December 8, 2024

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 3:1)

We are not yet ready to listen, God.

It is not something we are proud of, but it is the truth.

We are still so acclimated to the droning

of countless voices all clamoring to be heard

that we can hear the din all around us

without ever understanding a word that’s being said.

What we sense we really need, O Lord,

is a prelude to catch our attention,

a message that will get through the noise.

We need you to awaken us from our autopilot routines,

to send a messenger who will say to us,

“We interrupt your regular programming

to bring you this special message,”

so that we will not ignore the word you bring to us.

We know, deep down, it will mean

the jarring presence of a prophet

to shake us from our sleep.

We know, too, although we do not like to admit it,

that we have never been very good at receiving prophets,

and we are even worse at heeding their words.

We know that your messengers come to stir up holy trouble

pushing us out of our comfort zones,

summoning us back to faithful lives,

exposing our hypocrisy,

naming the vices we dressed up as virtues,

like calling greed “ambition,”

or pretending meanness is “strength.”

We are not quite prepared to have you step into our lives

to rearrange our priorities,

or reorient our love.

But we want to be changed, O God.

We need you to break past our defenses,

and we need you to get through to our distracted hearts.

Raise up the messengers you know we need—

the wild-eyed wilderness prophets,

and the still, small voices, too.

Prepare us, God, and ready our ears,

to listen at last to your in-breaking Word.

Amen

Shape Us On the Anvil

a prayer for December 9, 2024

“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.” (Malachi 3:2-3)

Some part of us wants you to root out the rottenness
entangled deep within us like knotweed, O God,
and another part of us is afraid to let you in so close.
We are all too aware of the way sin eats away at us
from the inside like a cancer,
and still we are afraid
to let you take the scalpel to our spirits.
We want to be whole and holy, pure like gold,
but we are afraid to go into the fire,
even if you are the One holding the crucible.
What we need, if we are going to surrender to your skilled hands,
is the courage to entrust ourselves to your care.
So we ask you, good Lord: assure us of your goodness,
so that we will be brave enough
to let you shape us on the anvil,
to melt away the dirt and dross,
and to allow your artist’s vision
to make a new creation out of us.
Remind us of your promise
that you are making all things new,
including us,
and that you will not abandon us or leave us unfinished.
Kindle our faith
so that we will no longer run away
from the challenges that deepen our discipleship
and that temper our trust to endure difficulty.
Make of us something both useful and beautiful,
strong enough to carry burdens,
and yet capable of reflecting your glory.
Teach us no longer to be afraid of your refiner’s fire,
and remind us that the forge is not a place to punish faulty metal,
but a workshop to make it purified enough
to reflect the artisan’s face in it.
Do that, O God, with each of us.
Make us shine, dear Lord.
Make us shine so that we reflect your glory.
Amen

The Edge of Hope

a prayer for December 10, 2024

*“In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
79 to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78-79)*

Daylight comes without our effort;
we know that much, God, and we won't pretend otherwise.
The sun rises without needing our help or our permission,
and yet we know what it is to keep vigil for brightening skies.
We have sat on dark shores before,
waiting intently as we scanned the horizon
for the first hint of pink and purple.
We have watched for the dawn from front porches,
and we have held all-night vigils in hospitals before.
We know how exhausting it can be to keep watch,
even though our striving doesn't make the sun rise.
So much of our lives, good Lord, feels like waiting for a new day;
so much of our time and stamina is spent
living through hours of darkness and aching for the light;
so much of our energy goes to walking the edge of hope
like the line of a tightrope stretched out between
the world as it is and the new creation.
And it is as exhausting to pay attention in this world
as it is to stay awake all night watching for the sunrise.
For us who keep watch, for all who walk on the highwire
that we call the life of faith,
give us the endurance to keep putting one foot after another,
to keep alert while we look for the light,
and to keep each other company during stretches of darkness.
While the whole world waits for your new day to arrive,
bring its dawning and keep our eyes open to it.
Make us ready for the daybreak of peace
to end our warring ways
and to release our clenching fists.
Train our hands, our hearts, and our minds
for how we will move, peaceably,
in your coming day.
Give us the strength and stamina
to keep watching the horizon
and to live even now in the light of your compassion.
We ask it in the name of the One
who brings your new day, Jesus the Christ.
Amen

Surprised by New Wings

a prayer for December 11, 2024

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

You have known it all along, God,
but it only dawns on us now
that we are not only waiting for
something to happen "out there" in the world,
but for the thing you are going "in here" within us,
as you make us into the likeness of Christ.
Our season of patience is not merely
a matter of nervously tapping our toes
or angrily pacing the halls
while we wait for the world to change on its own;
you remind us from the apostle's words
that you are at work within us,
shaping and transforming us,
and at least some of our patience
needs to be directed at ourselves.
Give us the grace, then, Lord,
to be long-suffering with the faces in the mirror.
You have indeed begun something good in us;
we forget that we are still within our chrysalis,
becoming new creations even as we pray,
like caterpillars about to be surprised by new wings.
So when we are agitated and impatient
that all is not yet how it should be,
that our neighbors still have rough edges,
or that the world still limps along on wounded feet,
call to our minds these ancient words,
and remind us that there is work still to be done
within our callous hearts,
and on our fear-bound spirits,
and to our complacent attitudes.
And then, O God, in your own good time,
complete what you have begun in us.
Make us to be living mangers
in whom the promised Christ may be given place,
so that everyone we meet
will come to recognize the face of Jesus
because they have seen it in our own.
Amen

Honesty Enough

a prayer for December 12, 2024

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:10-11)

As much as it humbles us to pray, Lord God,
and to come to you admitting our needs,
it is even harder, we confess,
to let ourselves be prayed for,
especially if others see different needs
from the things we would have asked for.
And so it is hard for us to take these words to heart,
because some part of us does not want to admit
that we are needy,
and we definitely do not want to concede
that someone else might recognize those needs
better than we ourselves.

But here we are, face to face with the apostle
and his perceptive prayer
that what we need most of all
is to grow in love,
in discernment,
in goodness,
and in justice.

We are used to stories of people wishing for fortunes,
or praying for a miracle cure,
and here our older brother in the faith simply prays
that we would grow in our capacity to love,
deepen our commitment to doing right,
and persist in walking humbly with you.

Give us the honesty enough to acknowledge that
no flash of lightning or parting of the clouds is necessary,
just the day by day, steady growth of love
taking shape in a thousand little ways
and endless choices made moment by moment,
as the love of Jesus is brought forth in us.

Give us the courage to allow other wise voices
to ask you for what you see that we need,
and make of us what you will,
until we become channels for your love
flowing outward into the world.

Amen

The Unexpected Right Place

a prayer for December 13, 2024

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (Luke 3:1-2)

We keep turning our attention to all the wrong places, God.

Like generations before us,

we let ourselves be captivated
by the ones with impressive titles,
the ones on seats of power,
the ones whose names get chiseled on monuments.

We allow ourselves to become fixated
on who has sway and who calls the shots.

And for too many times before,

we have been mesmerized and spellbound
by the emperors, the governors,
and the powers of the day.

We have assumed (wrongly, it turns out)

that they were the ones who mattered,
that they pulled the strings and directed history.

We have falsely believed that

their palaces and white marble facades
were the pivot points on which the world turned.

But you keep surprising us, O God.

You'd think we would have caught on by now,
but we are forever dumfounded and awestruck
to see how you bypass the Powers of the Day
and shrug off the Gatekeepers of Respectable Religion,
and show up in the middle of nowhere,
even in the literal desert,
to roll up your sleeves and get to work.

You choose to speak,

less often through Official Press Secretaries,
and more frequently through outsiders in animal skins,
unlikely poets and shaggy-haired prophets,
to announce the inauguration of your Reign.

We don't want to miss it, God,

when you raise up the next voice in the wilderness.

So prepare us to look where you would point us.

Turn our heads to the unexpected right place,

where you are setting up shop
and getting to work.

Amen

So That We Can Begin Again
a prayer for December 14, 2024

John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:3-6)

Sometimes, God,

it feels like we are headed for a dead end
and we can't turn around;
like the world is headed in the wrong direction,
and we are passengers on a train
barreling down the tracks
toward the canyon without a bridge.

Sometimes like our own choices have led us astray
and we wish we could turn back,
but there aren't any off-ramps to be found.

Sometimes we feel so disoriented
we don't even know what direction we should go in,
much less how to find the right way.

But you, God—you know all this already.

You who have shepherded us from before our first memories,
you know our knack for getting lost,
and you have never given up on us yet.

You are the One who keeps raising up voices
to point out an exit where we can turn around.

You are the One who offers the chance to begin again,
after we were on the verge of giving up hope.

You are the One who clears a path
so that we can get out of our dead-end ruts
and go where you would lead us, in peace and in justice.

You are the One who has set aside our past,
forgiven our sins and wiped away our debts,
so that we can begin again.

You did it through ancient prophets in exile;
you did it through holy troublemakers like John.

Do it again now for us on this day,
so that we can walk where you would have us go.

Amen

Safe to Sing Again

a prayer for December 15, 2024

*“¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

*¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.*

*The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.” (Zephaniah 3:14-15)*

Many of us have never gone to bed afraid, O God;
a lot of us only smile when we hear airplanes overhead;
and we take it for granted that our houses will be standing
when we come home from work for the day.

Many of us have never had to rebuild our lives
after a fire, a hurricane, a flood, or a missile;
and we rarely think about those who do.

We complain about how boring our routines are,
how there’s nothing exciting on the television,
and that it’s the same old food in the pantry.

We forget how many, not even far from us,
have no idea where their next meal will come from,
or are living the stories covered on the evening news,
or no longer have a consistent place to call home.

So we confess, good Lord,
that it is often hard to imagine a life
punctuated by enemy fire in our streets,
threatened by incoming bombers or drones,
or lived in fear of being driven from our beds some night.

And so some part of us takes it for granted
that it is always time to sing for joy,
and some piece of us could not imagine
disaster ever touching our lives in the first place.

You, however, know the hurts and heartaches of all of us.
You have heard the cries of people whom you love,
even when our ears have been stopped up from listening.

You attend to the troubled spirits and broken hearts,
and you speak hope and comfort
when we missed that they were even there.

For those who live in fear right now,
make it safe to sing again.

And for the many among us who were not paying attention,
open our eyes to see their faces are ours as well,
and bring us all to peace at last. Amen

For the Least, the Lost, and the Left Behind

a prayer for December 16, 2024

*“¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.*

*And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

*²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.” (Zephaniah 3:19-20)*

All praise to you, O God,
because you care especially
for those the world ignores.
While the headlines go to the powerful,
and influence goes to the well-connected and well-heeled,
you listen closely to the cries
of the wounded, the weary, and the worn-down.
When the pundits call our attention
to the so-called “great” ones in the limelight,
you have always shown concern
for the least, the lost, and the left behind.
And because you care about them,
we are learning to care for them as well,
(even if that were not our first instinct).
You are teaching us to keep our eyes open
and to see the ones the world overlooks.
You are nurturing your own compassion within us,
so that we will long for the outcast and the shamed
to find a welcome at your table.
You are growing your own love in our hearts,
so that we will rejoice with you
when the people who have been stepped on
are lifted up and made whole.
While the world still fawns over big names and success stories,
teach us still to hope for your redemption,
where the ones regarded as nobodies
are treated as children of God,
and where the ones passed over by the world
are gathered to your home.

Amen

We Are Afraid Not To Be Afraid

a prayer for December 17, 2024

*“Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD God is my strength and my might,
and has become my salvation.” (Isaiah 12:2)*

There’s the catch—we see it, God, plain as day:
to trust you will mean letting go of fear.
To anchor our faith in you, good Lord,
will mean unclenching the grip of our anxieties,
and letting you pry our fingers from around our worry.
To recognize you as the source of our salvation
will require that we no longer allow
dread to sit on the throne of our hearts,
and that we no longer listen to the fearmongers
selling us on the next supposed threat
to keep us restless in the night.
And while that does sound wonderful, freeing, and good,
it is also—ironically—frightening to imagine.
We are not used to being released from the grip of terror;
we are accustomed to its weight on our souls,
and our shriveled imaginations cannot conceive
of what it would be like, truly, to be free from it.
We are enslaved to its power, and sometimes we think we would prefer
the familiarity of staying in its chains.
And then you appear, once again,
and you dare us to step into freedom.
You show up, knowing we are afraid not to be afraid,
You sweep into history, saving and rescuing,
pulling us out of the stranglehold of panic,
and casting fear out like a demon,
replacing it with your love.
As hesitant as we are to let you do it,
we need you to, all the same.
So come and move among us in your redeeming strength,
and when you find us, cowering and shaking,
take us by the hand to leave the old tyrant behind.
Be the Lord of our lives once again,
as you were always meant to be,
so that we will not longer be held in its clutches,
but free, at last, to live our lives in trust.
We ask it in the name of the One whose coming
was announced by angels who kept saying,
“You do not have to be afraid.” Amen

Notorious for Our Tenderness

a prayer for December 18, 2024

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” (Philippians 4:5)

It’s funny, Lord—

so often folks assume they’ll know you’re coming
by the panic they expect to see.

So often, even Respectable Religious People think
the way to face the return of Christ
will be survivalist skills and hardened hearts,
as if we’ll be recruited to fight in angel armies
in some cosmic final battle.

It’s funny just how wrong we can get it.

No, the Scriptures remind us,
the victory is not in doubt,
your triumph over death and evil is certain,
and the way we can witness best to Jesus’ coming
is by being gentle, of all things.

How beautifully, audaciously, unexpected—
that the nearness of the Lord would lead us to be
kinder, not meaner;
calmer, not frenzied;
considerate, not crude;
courageously vulnerable, rather than putting up walls!

As counter-cultural and contrary to conventional wisdom
as the way of gentleness seems to the world,
we will dare to trust that you know what you are talking about,
and that your voice is worth listening to, even if
everyone else thinks it looks foolish.

So focus our hearts on the coming of Christ,
and let that sure promise lead us, surprisingly,
to become notorious for our tenderness,
and to be known by all for compassion that looks like yours.

Give us a well-earned reputation
for being gentle like Jesus,
as our way of witnessing
to his glorious—and gentle—presence
in our midst.

Amen

Our Way of Peacemaking

a prayer for December 19, 2024

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)

The problem with our way of peacemaking,
we confess, O God,

is that all too often we want *your* kind of *shalom*
to fit into *our* categories of common sense,
and you stubbornly—blessedly—refuse to let us
force you into our molds.

We are used to talk from podiums
about “acceptable levels of collateral damage,”
and the standard “logic” of mutually assured destruction.

We are accustomed to thinking that peace for “me and mine”
can only come by aiming weapons at “them and theirs.”

We have been taught by talking heads on television
that the most we can hope for in life
are temporary truces and partial cease-fires,
and that it is foolish to imagine true reconciliation
between sworn enemies.

We have been told all of this is perfectly reasonable,
and for a very long time, we have believed it.

But then you speak,
through the strange blessing of an imprisoned apostle,
who invokes your peace as the kind
“which surpasses all understanding,”
the kind that breaks apart our rigid systems,
the sort of peace that explodes our logic,
the inconceivable *shalom* we cannot build with bullets or bullying.

And in that utterance, we realize what we have needed all along:

we need the wholeness only you can give,
where wolves and lambs lie down in safety,
where swords are beaten into plowshares,
where we imagine a new future
beyond the bounds of what we were told was “reasonable.”

Give us, then, the courage to envision such a peace,
and to dare to believe it is possible
by your graceful, creative power.

Let that kind of harmony,
which transcends conventional wisdom,
be given to us today,
and then let it flow through us into a world
still afraid to imagine peace without fear.

We ask it in the name of the One who is called Prince of Peace. Amen

With Our Actual Lives

a prayer for December 20, 2024

“And the crowds asked [John the Baptizer], “What then should we do?”¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?”¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” (Luke 3:10-14)

Some part of us, dear God, is certain
that we could do great deeds of devotion for you.

We imagine ourselves being willing
to embark on impossible quests for heavenly treasure,
to fight in a bloody battle in your name,
to climb mountains or cross steep gorges,
and we tell ourselves we would do it all
for your glory.

But, as you keep sending messengers to remind us,
you do not need to be impressed,
and you are not recruiting crusaders
to conquer some distant land.

Instead, you keep insisting, you are asking us
to love you with our actual lives,
with these real selves,
in all their ordinariness,
through the routine of work,
by means of small acts of decency,
committing to the practice of justice
in a hundred unnoticeable choices.

You remind us over and over again
that you are not anyone’s prize to be won over
like some love-interest in a movie,
and you are not interested in
grand romantic gestures,
in spectacles, or in stunts.

But rather, you meet us where we are,
as we are, without needing us to pretend
to be more heroic than we are.

Help us, at last, to hear you,
and to respond to you on your terms,
rather than on ours, then.

Here, O God, take our real lives—
our words, our habits, our pocketbooks, our work.
Make of us what you will. Amen

Who We Are and Aren't

a prayer for December 21, 2024

"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'" (Luke 3:15-16)

Lord, so often we picture ourselves
as the main characters of history,
and we are ready (we think)
finally to concede we've had it wrong.
With so many voices around us
all telling us we are the center of the universe,
like customers who are always right,
we have believed for too long
that we are the lead part in the play,
and that you are only our trusty sidekick,
a divine helper to get us through sticky spots,
while we remain in control.

We admit it: we have been wrong.
Rather, you have called us to be pointer-people,
messengers and mirrors who reflect you,
rather than getting to cast ourselves as saviors.
So often we want to swoop in and fix people,
to anoint ourselves as your messiahs,
and crown ourselves as bosses of the world.
And you—we now realize—are simply uninterested
in baptizing our egomania
or deputizing us to accomplish salvation.

Only Jesus gets to be Jesus,
and we, like John, get to be witnesses, disciples, and signposts
calling attention to the One who truly is the center of the Story.

Help us to be clear on that,
so that we do not try to usurp the place of Christ
only to be crushed under the weight of that responsibility.

Speak to us again who we are and aren't,
so that we can be ready to step up as witnesses,
and so that when others do look to us,
we will know to reflect your light
and point beyond ourselves to you.

We ask it in the name of Jesus,
who truly is the Savior
at the heart of your Love Story.

Amen

Not So Much A Surprise

a prayer for December 22, 2024

*“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*

*⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;*

^{5a} and he shall be the one of peace.” (Micah 5:2-5a)

You have always been the God
who brings somethings out of nothings.
You first spoke to the emptiness at the first
and summoned the light from the darkness.
You blessed the childless couple with a promised son,
and you have made a habit of choosing the left-out
to be lifted up and to fulfill your purposes.
It is not so much a surprise, then,
but perfectly fitting with your character
that you chose to lift up a place like Bethlehem,
hometown of a famously last-born king,
remembered as a little clan in the middle of nowhere
rather than a booming metropolis
or a center of power.
You are always doing that sort of thing, God;
we are just usually slow to recognize the patterns
of blessing shown to the nobodies,
and favor for the overlooked
at the heart of your designs.
Help us to recognize your way
of overturning expectations
and making the last into the first,
and then, we dare to ask,
let us be a part of your work in the world,
raising up the lowly
and bringing light to dark places
out of nowhere. Amen

The Borrowed Song

a prayer for December 23, 2024

*“And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
 ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’” (Luke 1:46-55)*

At last it dawns on us, O God,
 that we didn't need to compose a speech
 or write a treatise of our own
 to get your attention.
You have invited us into praying
 the borrowed song of Mary
and to learn the cadence of your ways
 and the rhythm of your movements
in these ancient words of hers.
You never needed us to perform a soliloquy
 or put on a show of original phrasing.
You have always welcomed us into
 the new thing you are doing,
bringing us up to speed with your plans
 and teaching us the direction of your ways
 as we go along the way.
So, listening to the lullaby of the Messiah's mother once again,
 and letting her words become our own,
we pray for you to let your Reign become real
 in every corner of creation
 where we cannot yet see your presence.
Turn the tables as you will, Lord God,
 and move us to rejoice as you do. Amen

Ours to Receive

a prayer for December 24, 2024

*“For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)*

After all the preparations that have kept us busy,
all the items we have crossed off our to-do lists,
and all the worries whether we have
bought enough,
done enough,
cleaned enough,
or cooked enough,
you break into our frantic busy-ness
to remind us of what was always true:
This is the moment for you to act,
and for us to watch in awestruck stillness.
This is the time when your role is to give,
and it is ours to receive.
This is the axis on which
the story of the universe turns,
and it happens, not through our commotion,
but by the delivery of an infant
in whom you yourself, O Mighty God,
have come to be with us.
Your coming among us
at the meeting place of heaven and earth
happens without our efforts,
apart from our striving,
beyond our busyness,
simply by your giving.
Still these restless hands of ours, then,
and quiet these anxious hearts,
and grant us the calm enough
to let ourselves receive the gift
that you alone could give—
the gift who is your Child for us.
Amen

God on the Margins

a prayer for December 25, 2024

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them..." (Luke 2:6-7)

Even when we do not set aside a special place,
you come into our midst anyway.
Even when we made no room for you,
you chose to be with us all the same.
Even when the emperors and kings
and all the other powers of the day
have convinced themselves they are the center of everything,
you show up at the edges of things, right where we are
at the periphery, on the edge,
among the unrecognized and unnamed.
You are the God who meets us on the margins,
even when the only accommodations offered
are a repurposed food trough
and a bed full of straw.
You have never let our poor hospitality
stop you from breaking into our world
and setting up shop among the godforsaken,
with the lost and with the lonely.
Open our eyes again, O God,
to recognize your presence
where we least expected it.
Train our vision to seek and find you
away from the centers of power
and yet at the heart of human life.
Share our fragile humanity,
and make us to be more fully human
toward the neighbors we meet on the margins as well.
Once we have spotted you in the makeshift shelter
of a secondhand manger in a borrowed room,
grant us the vision to see you among all who seek refuge,
and to welcome you in the faces of those who need a bed for the night.
All praise to you, O God,
for crashing our party
and breaking into the world,
when we were busy with other things.
Now, let us be changed by the encounter,
so that we will not overlook your arrival again,
and so that we can meet you, as you have promised us,
among the least of these. Amen