

# Worship Book for the Church in Diaspora

## Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

2020 / 2021

*Connecting the people of God in uncertain times*



Artwork graciously donated by JoAnne Wanat of Libertyville, IL

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# Foreward

At their core, the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany are about waiting for – and then realizing – the new and amazing ways in which God has chosen to reveal God’s self to the faithful.

That you are holding this Worship Companion is certainly evidence of God’s unique revealing. What began as a way for one pastor to connect the members of one small congregation in Ft. Collins, Colorado during the national shut down, has expanded to include prayers and sermons from pastors serving all over the United States.

When something this amazing has taken place, it seems that our gratitude should be named, and some thanksgivings should be offered:

First, to the Holy Spirit who spoke to all of us “in many and various ways... but in these last days, has spoken to us by a son...” (Hebrews 1:1)

To my friend, Rev. Dan Hille, who took my “little” idea and made it big, and then convinced me to merge my “little” efforts with his big one.

To our many colleagues who have contributed sermons for this project over these last months – both for the earlier “Colorado” versions of this book, the earlier “Ohio” versions of this book, and most recently for the combined effort – particular thanks to Bishop Dillahunt of the Southern Ohio Synod: it’s a difficult and busy time to be a Pastor, and an even busier and more difficult time to be a Bishop. Thank you – all of you – for taking time out of your other ministries to be part of this ministry!

To my amazing office administrator, Diane Knappenberger who has tirelessly worked to compile these and deal with logistics of distribution. I keep telling her that if she leaves our church, I will be forced to resign my call immediately ☺

To my dear (and deeply faithful) friend JoAnne Wanat who has – twice now – donated her art to make our book lovely.

To the many faithful members of the parishes represented here: thank you for your patience, perseverance, and support of your Church and of your pastors in such an extraordinary season!

While I am not thankful for the reasons that such a book was necessary in the first place and am sorrowful over the lost lives, lost connections, and sense of isolation Covid has brought to so many people – especially those without internet connections – I am amazed, joyful and grateful that such a collaboration has been able to happen. It wouldn't have even occurred to me to attempt to work with my ordained friends and colleagues across the nation in such a way a short year ago but look at us now!

I pray for a rapid end to the pandemic but remain joyfully committed to keeping my heart and mind open to such projects in the future.

In Advent Hope,

Rev. Jennifer S Moser,

Pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Ft. Collins, Colorado

The ELCA ascribes to three expressions of our church: Local, Synodical, and Churchwide. Since the shutdowns last March our church, in all of its expressions, has been forced into nimble adaptation as the world has drastically changed around us. As many of us are aware, words like “nimble” and “adaptive” have not been historically used to describe our Lutheran tradition; though necessity they say, is the mother of invention.

Last spring in a conversation about how churches were adapting in light of the current pandemic my dear friend Rev. Jennifer S. Moser, told me about a project she was working on to create a home worship resource for congregations in her Synod. I loved the idea as congregations across our country were all attempting to pinch-hit in the changing climate. I borrowed her idea, and created a similar resource for my context drawing from a vast number of colleagues in ministry in an attempt to not only provide home based worship resources, but to do so while showcasing the diversity of the church.

What you hold in your hands is another such resource. Contained within these pages are worship notes, prayers, and sermons all arranged to provide a structure for worshiping at home. I am thankful for friends across our church who have taken time out of their busy schedules to provide art, prayers, sermons, insights, and feedback on this project. Within the pages are offerings from 12 contributors, representing 6 Synods, as well as active & retired clergy. A special thanks goes to Bishop Dillahunt of the Southern Ohio Synod who provided the sermon for Christmas Eve.

When I consider the three expressions of the ELCA, I truly believe that this project lives into all three of them. This volume is local clergy, working across Synods, to create a resource for our Churchwide community. Our hope is that this document be shared with all who are looking for worship resources during this time of social distancing. It is a humble gift, created by humble servants, offered freely to our sisters & brothers, as we all journey through these seasons held together and supported by Jesus Christ our Lord.

Rev. Daniel W. Hille,

Pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, Ohio

# Season of Advent

November 29 - December 20, 2020





## **Advent Candle Lighting - The First Candle**

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,

You bless us with so many things, ourselves, our time, and our possessions. In this season we prepare our hearts and minds to receive your greatest gift, Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we light these candles in our homes, may the light burn bright, drawing our attention and focus on you, as we continuing to wait for the return of our Savior, while preparing to remember his birth. Amen.

### **Prayer of the Day:**

Ever faithful God, your prophets foretold the coming of the darkness and of the light. We confidently, faithfully, and with patience, watch for the coming of your Son, and the day when he will gather all people to live in your light. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading from Mark 13:24-37:**

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

***Sermon on Mark 13:24-37 by Rev. Bill Carter (retired),  
Avon, CT:***

"Watching for Advent"

Just after Thanksgiving a few years ago, my wife and I, both native New Yorkers, took a bus to that city, to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue, to see their Christmas Tree. It has been a family tradition (up till the disruptions of this darkening year). It was one of the ways we watched for Advent in our family. Sometimes the streets of the city have been so busy it felt like the End of the World... (these days, talking with friends there, it is so quiet it actually feels the same way to them... something has ended.)

When that tree is all decorated it has 18th century terracotta Neapolitan Angels flying in the boughs and an amazing village scene surrounding the crèche, all the way around the base of the entire huge real evergreen tree; shepherds and Wise Men; a camel, a horse and an elephant! Sheep of course, but also a baker, a goatherd, someone fishing on the bank of a

stream, even a minstrel with bagpipes!

In late November, when we visited, it was still “under construction” with volunteers and museum workers climbing ladders and setting angels in the branches; and others on their knees surrounded by boxes and a jumble of chaotic proportions, working on the beautiful scene, placing a myriad of figures underneath the lower branches. In the center always, Mary and Joseph and, of course in a manger, Jesus in a stable; all placed amid the end-of-time ruins of shattered Roman columns and statuary- because the 18th century artists in Naples knew that Christ will come again, to put an end to what we know as history, as we do; but they also knew, as we do, that Christ came to Bethlehem; but they also believed, as we do, that Christ comes to their own environs in the darkness of their own time. May it be so for you and yours this year. Christmas can sometimes be one of those things that seems to start early, and then take too long to arrive. But when it arrives, it arrives where you are. And we need it. So we watch for it. Watching for Advent is watching for Christmas in the privacy of our homes, our own lives, our own souls.

Early as we were before Christmas that year, Advent watching had just begun of course. The huge Christmas tree and scene beneath it was not yet complete. Screens blocked our view. Though there were some gaps through which you could watch a score of workers. Around back, in the rear, there was a quiet, almost secret opening, and we spent long minutes watching an elegantly tall and poised woman. She was ever so patiently, lovingly, unpacking figures from a huge wooden stenciled museum storage crate, and gently dusting them, one by one, with a small, soft, paint brush. She was oblivious to the chaos around her. She was so attentive to what she was doing that it was absolutely transfixing to watch her.

In the years since, during my own Advent watching, I often remember that scene, especially that woman; and I also sometimes imagine, in my mind’s eye that I can see our grown son, unpacking his family’s Christmas tree in their porch room, miles away, our granddaughter, watching attentively, and

perhaps standing on tip-toe to hang one of her favorite ornaments herself... It is wonderful to watch someone prepare so as to "Watch" for the Lord. It can be especially moving to watch quietly, almost secretly... gently, from a distance, even if the distance is not of our own choosing... even in your sanctified imagination. The preparation you do each Advent is a faithful treasure to be cherished for itself as Christmas nears. You are preparing your hearts, in the midst of watching, as the Advent wreath and decorations are placed in your house or outside, as you decide on a tree or no tree this year... The cards and baking and wrapping, even reading pages in a devotional from Church... These things are all Advent treasures to cherish, even when things around us seem darker than they had been, and out of our control.

When this Christmas finally arrives, and it will, may you recall your Advent watching, your Advent preparing. And in the meantime, may all the preparation you have watched being done, so carefully and lovingly by others over the years, inspire you in the days ahead. May all who gather with you, even if only in your mind's eye, be lovingly present to anticipate real joy as the birth of Christ nears. May Jesus be born, right on time, and fill your heart with the power of his presence, even as you watch, even as you prepare. May you and yours watch for and then receive the presence of God that can feel simply abundant, even when you may have expected less this year; both when the stable looks perfect in its place, and even when the old columns seem to crumble a bit around the edges...

In these dark, shortening days of Advent, may you come to know the light that radiates hope and joy and wholeness and healing, and calls to all flesh:  
"Watch!"

Amen

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Gracious and Sovereign Lord, in you there is salvation, restoration, and newness. As we begin this new church year, may your light shine through our lives, keeping us on your path, and drawing us closer to you.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of All Time, in this season of waiting, we prepare for you coming into the world. Guide us through this season, that we travel through it safely, and arrive in your holy presence.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of healing and compassion, we pray for all those across the world afflicted by diseases, shackled by pain, and held down by addiction. Be with all those who call out to you, bring your wholeness and care to those crying in the night, especially those we name before you now, both silently and aloud.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

## **Closing Prayer:**

Lord, in a year when so many things and so many people have “passed away,” we are reminded that your word remains. As we move into the world in anticipation of the celebration of your birth, help us to remember that you are already with us in every way that matters. Let your word surround us and fill us, that we may live as the people you created us to be. Amen

Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

## **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord’s unending love rest upon you and give you peace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



## **Advent Candle Lighting - The Second Candle**

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,

You have sent us prophets and messengers throughout the centuries; voices calling out into the wilderness, and shining light on the path to you.

As we light these candles in our homes, may they illumine the darkness of our world, shining forth as a reminder of your faithfulness, patience, and love, that we too may share your message of hope with all those that we meet. Amen

### **Prayer of the Day:**

Holy Lord, through the ancient prophets you cry out to us to prepare the way, but our hearts are weary. As we struggle to stay awake and to prepare to receive you, help us to begin to feel your comfort now. Lift up our valleys and make low the mountains that are in our paths. Help us to stay strong and to not grow faint as we wait for you to reveal your glory to us. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen

### **Reading from Isaiah 40:1-11:**

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

***Sermon on by Rev. Jennifer Moser,  
Pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church,  
Fort Collins, CO***

“Lead us in your truth dear Lord, your word is truth, Amen”

This week, we read the beautiful promises out of Isaiah - the promises of deliverance and comfort...the promises concerning the land itself - and, by implication, the people of those lands. Promises that tell us that all will be brought onto even footing...that valleys will be lifted, and mountains brought low, rough places made smooth...we read this gorgeous promise...a promised echoed in the Gospel of Mark.

And I remember, as a new pastor, listening to a much more experienced pastor talk about this passage. “I’ve been in ordained ministry about 25 years,” he said. “And it seems that so much of that time has been spent listening to people crying the words of Isaiah 40 not in joy, but in lament. Oh, they don't use those words, they use other ones. Like “severances” at age 58, or “abandoned by a spouse for a younger model;” they speak of estranged children and siblings and parents, they speak to me of disempowerment of purpose unfulfilled. But underneath, I hear Isaiah 40: when do you

lift up the valley, lord? When do you bring the mountain low? When does your glory come to us?”

Honestly, I hear that cry now, all around us, as we lament on-line church and rising COVID-19 cases. I hear the cry as we continue to argue about our last election. I hear it in the anxiety and in the isolation. When, Lord? When does your glory come?

We are an Advent people. Which means that We are a people for whom the kingdom has come. And yet, we also acknowledge that it is not fully come. That is why we pray the Lord's Prayer. That is what it means to be in Advent. We aren't simply waiting for a festival day and presents...we are waiting for God's kingdom to come again. And again. Until we are finally one flock, with one shepherd.

With all the strangeness of this last year, with all the conflict and contention, with all the negative press and negative news that surrounds everywhere we turn, I've been thinking a lot about what it means to live as an advent person. What it means to hold onto and live into the expectation of this divine promise we've been given of hope, deliverance, and unity. And what does it mean to live into these promises when your heart is breaking, and your blood is boiling.

Because that's really where the gospel meets reality, isn't it? It's the place where faith meets life. Because – honestly - it's easy to love, easy to raise money for, easy help people that seem obviously deserving. People who are willing to display deep gratitude for the little bit we do for them. But what about the people and situations that make us want to lock our doors? The ones that make us want to throw things at the TV...or at the person sitting across the thanksgiving table from us. What about the situations we can't solve? How do we hold onto and live into those divine promises then?

One of the voices I listened to was Louise. A national treasure from my internship congregation in GA. I got to catch up with her recently and, as always, it was a soul-lifting experience. She is 98 years old and still sings in the choir,

but they don't make her crawl up into the choir loft: they allow her to stay on the floor of the chancel. She wears pearls to church and is really into her daily evening drink of Jack Daniels (which really upsets her doctor and her adult kids, but she doesn't care.)

She has five children. Four of whom dote on her, and one of whom wants nothing to do with her...which no one seems to understand. As we visited, she spoke of him - Brian- who after months of no communication, even when she was hospitalized for pneumonia, called her demanding \$1500. Which she chose to send to him. In a moment of frustration, I said to Miss Louise, "I don't know why you don't just hang up on him - much less send him your money." And in her southern way, she said "Darling, I know what he thinks of me, and you don't need to worry. I don't send him anything I can't afford to give.

But listen, I've learned in my life that just because I don't understand someone's anger, just because I don't see the cause of someone else's pain, well - doesn't mean it's not real to them. The things Brian feels, I don't understand them. None of us do. But it's real to him. And so I do my best to accept him as he is...meet him, listen to him where he is. I stay in conversation with him. Because I'm his momma, and that's my job.

But I also do it because I'm the one who taught him about Jesus. And I really think Jesus asks me to live and act in my hope instead of my anger and disappointment. So, before I talk to Brian I think about what I hope will happen and then I pray for a few minutes, just in case Jesus has a different hope. When I talk to Brian, I take a lot of deep breaths...and sometimes, when I get off the phone, my hopes have been realized. More often not. But it's the best I can do. And I trust Jesus to do the rest. And believe me, at 98, trust in Jesus is a lot more real than it used to be. So that's what I do."

Not so easy a thing...to act in hope when you're scared or disappointed or angry. And I don't know about you, but some days in this last year, I'm not sure I felt up to the challenge. But even so: Miss Louise's formula felt like a place to start. It felt like the first brick in that desert highway Isaiah speaks of. The first

step in the journey, as we wait together for the kingdom to come once again - to all of us. Trusting that it will. Amen

### **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Eternal God, you were there before the beginning began, and continuing to be there, holding, loving, and supporting us. As we travel through this season of Advent illuminate our path by the light of your son Jesus Christ our Savior. Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Through out the ages O Lord you have sent messengers to speak words of life, hope, and salvation to all people. Inspire us to take our places in this great cloud of witness, serving and messengers of your love to the world in which we live.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Master of the Universe, you call the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the dead to rise. Be with all those who hunger, hurt, and howl out because of the brokenness of the world. Console those in the sadness of loss, sooth those overwhelmed by the anxiety of life, and bring peace to all who are tormented by things in the darkness.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

## **Closing prayer:**

Holy God, as we journey through this Advent season, we admit that so many of us are struggling with shuttered churches, and limited social interactions, and we yearn for a feeling of stability and normalcy. Your lesson to us today is a sharp reminder that our foundation rests upon you, and you alone. Your words remind us that new birth cannot happen without painful labor. As we move into our week, sharpen our focus so that our labors may be pleasing in your sight, so that all that we do can prepare the world for your kingdom to come. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

## **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord's unfailing love rest upon you and give you peace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



## **Advent Candle Lighting - The Third Candle**

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,

Your prophets spoke of a day when the desert would blossom, and the waters would break forth in wilderness.

As we light these candles in our homes, may they warm our places of worship as we prepare to receive your coming into the world through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **Prayer of the Day:**

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. When John the Baptist pointed the way toward you, he set the example for all of us in living a life worthy of your gospel. Remind us of that gospel every day, and inspire us to shine its light through everything that we say and do, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading from John 1:6-8; 19-28:**

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for

those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

***Sermon on John 1: 6-8; 19-28 by Rev. Eric Wooldridge,  
Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Enumclaw, WA***

People are complex. Sometimes we learn something new about a friend, family member, or someone else that we have known for a long time, and it takes us by surprise. Sometimes, in fact, we can be surprised by something new we learn about our own selves! We are not simple creatures.

John the Baptist is complex. His call is clear: he is the one who prepares the way for Jesus, our Lord. His proclamations can be simplified into a picture of a man pointing toward Jesus and saying, "He is the one you are looking for – not me." And yet John is no simple man.

This prophet that we often associate with grit and boldness also has a softer side. If our picture of John came only from today's scripture, then we might consider him one of the truly gentle and meek men of the Bible.

If we take comfort in the gentle words that John speaks today pointing toward Jesus, are we being deceived? Knowing what we know about John's typically fiery ways, does this reading give us a mistaken impression of who he is? Not at all. Today we see an authentic and true side of a man whose identity and character are not so simple to define.

Years ago I spent the Advent Season in a small city in Northeastern Brazil. I walked daily between a volunteer house and a children's home where I taught classes. One of the people I often encountered on my walk was Car-

los, the town drunk. On his better days, Carlos would stumble around slurring his words. On worse days he would be completely passed out on the sidewalk with a cheap bottle of liquor somewhere nearby.

The absolute worst was when local kids decided to play around with Carlos. They knew that he couldn't walk straight, let alone run after them, so they would sometimes steal his bottle of alcohol or even his clothes and burst into laughter when he ran into things trying to get them back. I cannot think of another time when I witnessed someone's fundamental dignity as a human being so utterly dismissed. It was a truly saddening scene.

One day – and only one – was different. On Christmas Eve, Carlos showed up to evening mass at the local church. His hair was neatly combed. His clothes were clean and ironed. His normally scruffy beard had been shaved, and he didn't have any smell of alcohol on him. I vividly remember the almost sheepish look of pride he had when he took a seat alongside other respected members of the community to celebrate the birth of Christ. For that evening Carlos was a completely different man.

If a visitor to that church had seen Carlos only that one time, would they have been deceived? Would they have a mistaken impression of who this man is? Not at all. On that Christmas Eve, our community gathered in church and saw an authentic and true side of a man whose identity and character are not so simple to define.

It would be easy to dismiss that evening and declare that Carlos was simply pretending to be something he was not. After all, he spent far more time showing his drunkard side than his dignified side. Only God knows who we truly are, however, and I am certain that God sees Carlos more as the man of Christmas Eve than the man of the streets. I am also certain that Carlos, like John the Baptist, pointed toward Jesus that night. All of us who saw him felt the presence of God in a way we otherwise would not have.

The holidays have a way of bringing out the hidden parts of all of us. People who have been reclusive for months at a time suddenly find the courage to

call up someone they love on the phone. Kids who have had “lump of coal” type behavior all year suddenly find it in themselves to be model citizens just for a short while. It would be easy to dismiss all of these changes, temporary as they often are.

In this season of hope and expectation, I believe God is calling us to look at our temporary flashes of kindness, humility, and dignity in a new way. God is calling us to believe that these temporary flashes are actually tiny glimpses of our truest selves.

No one has ever lived a perfect life, save for the one whose life carried both humanity and divinity. John pointed the way toward Jesus. So did Carlos. In our own Advent journey of 2020, we have the opportunity to live into our truest identity, that of a child of God, and so point the way toward God’s child in the manger. May your true self – the one that God sees – shine through in a special way today. Amen.

### **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

God Almighty, you sent us John the Baptist to be a voice crying out in the wilderness, calling us to you. As we continue through this Advent journey may his words bring us peace and we move forward to your promised future.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Good and gracious Lord through the waters of baptism you have knit your people together in a beautiful tapestry of diversity across time and space. As we continue to feel isolated and separated during the current pandemic, hold us tightly in your arms, and remind us that we are still connected to each other through our faith, and by your promises and love.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Maker of All Things, all you have made is good. Though through the gift of free will evil and sin has made a home in our world. Be with all those who are weighed down by the power of sin, and those who have succumbed to sin's wage of death. Be with all those we know who cry out to you.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Lord, you could have come to us in your full glory. Instead, you were born to a young, impoverished girl, among animals in a stable. You could have chosen a palace. Instead, you became a refugee – fleeing to Egypt to escape violence. You could have revealed yourself as the King of Creation and demanded our obedience. Instead, you presented yourself to John the Baptist for baptism. As we work to prepare your way, help us to remember your humility. Help us to remember that, as we look for your coming, we just might find you among the humble, the poor, and the marginalized in our own society, that our actions might reflect our desire for you – however you present yourself to us. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

### **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord's unfailing love rest upon you and give you peace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



## **Advent Candle Lighting - The Fourth Candle**

Blessed are you, O Lord our God,

As we light these candles in our homes, may they remind us of Mary's faithfulness to your will that moved her from a place of fear to expectant joy.

As we wait with her for your greatest gift to the world, may these candles also remind us of the spirit of faith that holds us together in patience and resilience, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord, albeit from our homes. **Amen.**

### **Prayer of the Day:**

O God, Be with us in our waiting. Gently hold us back from "fastwording" through your story. Help us to learn from your servant Mary, as we ponder the gift of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading from Luke 1:26-38:**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no

end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

***Sermon on Luke 1:26-38 by Rev. Alissa J. Oleson,  
Pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Quincy, MA***

This morning we wait --- we continue to wait even if for just a few more days, when we gather to hear the story of Jesus coming into the world as a squishy, presumably crying, baby. And the world will rejoice. But for now, we wait. Sometimes I think that today we get the cliff notes version – or maybe more accurately the pageant version – of this piece of the gospel and forget about all the innards of the story. We usually hear that the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and that she is pregnant with God's baby (GASP!) .... and then we skip to the end where Mary claims her role in the story as a servant of the Lord and poof...we fast forward quickly through all the growing pains of pregnancy to her riding on a donkey with Joseph to Bethlehem. But, to be able to fast-forward through this story is a bit of a privilege, isn't it? For anybody who has been brought news, news that changes their life forever, knows that fast-forwarding through all the messy mix of emotions isn't really an option. Hearing only about the graceful and faith-filled responses, doesn't do the story justice. In fact, it makes for an incomplete story. I think of all those in my life, in this church, and in our world who have been brought news recently (or over the years) as we wait together on this fourth Sunday of Advent. Maybe it was for the results of a

covid test or for votes to be counted in a close election. My invitation for us all today - in this waiting - is to wonder a bit with and about Mary together. My invitation is to bring your own experiences to this story today, all the news (or lack of news) that might be swelling in your heart today as we wonder about all that Mary felt and experienced.

- I wonder if Mary experienced grief? Grief over the loss of a life she had once imagined for herself?
- I wonder what her body was experiencing? Did she feel weaker or stronger, tired or achy?
- I wonder how her relationships changed with her family and friends? Did she feel support or loneliness? What was her marriage like?
- I wonder how she was personally affected by the politics of her time? Did they make her anxious?
- I wonder if at times she felt like a total Rockstar? Did she feel empowered as a chosen creative force?
- I wonder if she felt overwhelmed by the future?

One of the things that has stuck out to me in reading this Gospel lesson this year is Mary's response in the innards of this story, before we get to her bold proclamation at the end. What we notice is that Mary's first response -- is one of pondering. She takes a moment to take it all in --- the messenger and the message. And the second time she speaks, she asks a question... "how can this be?" And you know what? Her pondering and her questions and well, all of it, are held and accepted. I love that. The angel doesn't chastise her for needing time to ponder, and in a world where women were taught not to doubt or ask questions, the angel let's her speak and answers her. By taking some time to wonder, we get a more complete story of a complex woman, a complex human being. And my guess is, as is often the case, that as we wondered about Mary, you also learned something about yourself, and how you might be approaching the manger this week. We also

learn quite a bit about God. And dear ones, we learn about a God who doesn't fast-forward through the story. But rather, we learn of a God who joins us in whatever mess and mix of emotions - joy, grief, shock, numbness, happiness - we might be experiencing. God slows down, so that we aren't ever left alone, even at our loneliest in these dark winter months. And to each of us, all of us "Marys" sitting and waiting for the birth of Jesus this day, we are sent this message, "Greetings, favored and beloved one. The Lord is with you...do not be afraid."

### **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

King of Heaven and Earth, as our Advent journey draws to a close, help us prepare our hearts for the coming of your son, that his arrival may be a reminder of your hope, love, and life, not only to the world, but also to ourselves.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Almighty and sovereign Lord, we thank you Mary and her example of faithfulness. We also thank you for Joseph and his example of patience and trust. May we live by their examples of faith, patience, and trust all the days of our lives.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Christ Our King, we lift before you all those hurting this season. Be with those the world over caught under the darkness of night and unable to see your light, or feel your care. Be with all those we name before you now, both silently and aloud....

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Lord, it is a source of never-ceasing amazement that Mary's only response to such life changing news was "let it be with me according to your word." As we eagerly await your coming, as we anticipate the ways in which your coming changes us and the world we thought we knew, open our hearts so that our response may also be, "let it be with us according to your word." Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord's unfailing love rest upon you and give you peace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

# The Celebration of Our Lord

## December 24 and December 27, 2020



# A Brief Order of Prayer and Worship for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020



## **Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 96):**

O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.

**Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

**Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it.

**Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.**

## **Prayer of the Day:**

Amazing God, today we celebrate the birth of your son, Jesus Christ, who chose to be born in the most humble of circumstances, to simple people that he might show us that your love knows no bounds. This Christmas, we admit that we are weary from a year of sickness and division, and so we make bold to ask that you come into our lives anew, that we may experience and share this love that knows no bounds all over again. Fill our hearts with your peace and with your joy, that we may properly receive the gift of grace – the gift of your son – that you've given us. Amen

## **Gospel Reading from Luke 2:1-14:**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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 in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

***Sermon on Luke 2:1-14 by Rev. Suzanne Darcy Dillahunt,  
Bishop of the Southern Ohio Synod-ELCA, Columbus, OH***

Grace and peace be with you in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen

I have good news for you, a message that will fill you with JOY and HOPE. Good news at this time of the year, and in this year of 2020, is so longed for, so needed. Today your savior, Christ the Lord was born in David's city, Bethlehem. With these words from Luke's beloved Gospel Christmas story we can hear the angels sing. The angel, sent by God, came from and announced the BIRTH of Jesus. "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace and good will among people."

Jesus' birth was proclaimed to people tending sheep...watching over lambs, innocent and small, new born lambs. It was night, it was dark and they were not expecting anything to happen, but they were watchful. The angel choir broke the darkness, broke into their everyday world and sang a song of HOPE. They broke the silence of the night, brought light out of darkness and surrounded the shepherds with an announcement that shocked them. It was a baby. It was none other than God with Us. Emmanuel.

The Good News of the promise God gives is HERE NOW. The message of THIS good news is hope for us today. Jesus is born for us and no matter what happens in this life, no matter what sorrow, pain, disappointments, disease, hardships, loneliness, isolation, sickness, grief—nothing separates us from God's love in Christ Jesus. THIS savior was born to save us. God's gift of life, love, forgiveness and grace is in this baby, born in Bethlehem, placed in a feeding trough for animals, because there was no room in the inn. THIS IS JESUS, the Savior. Christ is born!

The Good News is that Jesus is born for you and me and your neighbor and friend and people of all nations. Do not be afraid to share this good news with others. The Gospel IS the message of salvation that has to be

shared. Right from the beginning God wanted to connect to God's people. Right from the start there is a relationship and the news of God sending God's Son into the world to save the world is such an amazing message of hope. One that is needed now more than ever.

Notice, once the angels left the shepherds and the night sky was dark again and possibly quiet, the shepherds who were the first to hear this saving news, got up and went with haste, as Luke tells us, to see these things that were told to them. They didn't stay put. They didn't stay silent. They risked the lives of their baby lambs and the herd to go and find the baby Jesus. They went, they saw, they believed and they SHARED what they heard and saw because it was life changing. They told the story.

Sisters and brothers, nothing is the same again because of Emmanuel. Christmas is the celebration of the Good News that God loved us so much that God became human. It is such an extravagant love that cries when we cry, rejoices when we rejoice, calms our fears and dries our tears. And we are reassured: Do not be afraid. You are known, you are cherished, you are sought after and you are never, never, never alone or forsaken. Sins are forgiven, God's grace and love are here now because of Jesus. And we know the rest of the story. Jesus was born to save us in his death and resurrection. We cannot tell the Christmas story without the Easter message. Christ is born, Christ is risen and Christ will come again. It's up to us to invite others who haven't heard God's story of redemption and grace.

Although this year's Christmas services and celebrations at home will be different because of the virus THE GOOD NEWS of hope and love is the SAME. God sent God's SON, as a baby for our salvation. The message of the angels is the message people need to hear, especially today. Don't be afraid, Emmanuel is here! Don't be afraid to share and invite another into the Story of Jesus. The Christmas message had to get out and it did... beyond the shepherds, beyond the stable. IT did get out! We know it because we heard it. Telling the Christmas Story of Jesus' birth and God's saving act for us is so powerful. We as a faith family nourish each other however we gather this Christmas Eve to tell and retell the story of Jesus

and his love knowing Christ is ALIVE. The angel message is our song this year: Glory to God in the highest! We sing the angel's message together, in spirit, in unison, in different locations in different languages around the world, joining with people of every race and nation singing: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere, that Jesus Christ is born!" Amen and Amen.

### **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Almighty God, we thank you for the birth of your son Jesus Christ our Lord. May every heart prepare a place for him to dwell, every soul offer itself as an offering to him, and every person find hope, healing, and salvation through him.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Christ our king, on this evening we celebrate your coming into the world for each and every one of us. Thank you for the gifts of your presence, your perfection, and your promises.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Maker of Heaven and Earth, on this holy evening we join with all creation, lifting our thoughts, prayers, and voices to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. May all of creation sing out with joy to the world that the Lord has come!

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Lord, your coming moves the world out of the shadow and into the glow of your grace and truth. Help us to step into that glow that we, also, may be transformed by your love. Let our words and actions bear witness to your transforming love to all with whom we interact that the peace of this Holy Night may become the norm instead of the exception. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And may our Lord, whose star shone in the night sky and whose birth filled a world with peace, shine his love into your heart and mind. May you also find peace this day as our Lord reveals himself to you all over again, and may his revelation be transforming. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen



## **Prayer of the Day:**

Lord God of our salvation, grant us persistent faith like Simeon and Anna to wait for the full revelation of all your promises through coming of Your Son. Move our hearts to joyfully proclaim His life, death and resurrection and to praise You, all our lives long, through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Lord and Savior of all. Amen.

## **Gospel Reading from Luke 2:22-40:**

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.

At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

***Sermon on Luke 2:22-40 by Rev. Wendy Kalan,  
Pastor of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, LaSalle, CO***

Do you remember when a US Senator attempted to silence Senator Elizabeth Warren when she protesting the appointment of Jeff Sessions to US Attorney General back in 2017? It happened right when she was reading a statement by Coretta Scott King, the daughter of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., how Jeff Sessions had used his authority to diminish the hard-fought free exercise to vote by black citizens in his district.

Following the ordeal within the Senate hearing, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, intending to chastise Warren's repeated attempts to make her case, said these famous words: "Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. **Nevertheless, she persisted.**"

From there #neverthelesshepersisted went viral. For every great protest of famous women whom others tried to silence, memes were created with the words: "nevertheless she persisted", including Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Rosa Parks and Malala Yousafzai....even Princess Leia. (Wikipedia, n.d.) Soon women could be seen wearing t-shirts and drinking from coffee mugs bearing the inspirational words.

Well, if I had to characterize the key players in today's gospel, it would be with this: "Nevertheless, they persisted."

First, we have the parents of the Christ child piously adhering to Jewish tradition. Despite their harrowing trip to Bethlehem for a census and the birth of

Jesus in the stable, they still have Jesus circumcised and named eight days later. Then, they travel to the temple in Jerusalem for Mary's post-child-bearing purification and sacrifice and for Jesus to be presented. These weary parents overcome many odds to reach this moment. Like many parents who do everything they can for their child, this much can be exclaimed: ***Nevertheless, they persisted!***

Then there is Simeon filled with the Holy Spirit. He's like a great-grandparent who wishes to live to see one more important milestone reached, for the Spirit has told Simeon that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. His arms now reach for the small child while declaring that he has now seen, with his very own eyes, God's salvation. Ahhhh! Lord, let your servant now depart in peace. **Nevertheless, we could say, Simeon persisted.**

Finally, prophetess Anna, has been hanging around the temple day and night...perhaps since widowhood—which would mean she was that devoted to God for decades! There she has worshiped, ritualistically fasted, and prayed constantly. But at the moment of Simeon blessing the parents and Jesus, she begins to praise God, telling everyone about this child to all who were looking for redemption. Ah, dear Anna. **Nevertheless, you persisted!**

In these days it might be tough to persist with hope for what is next. For nearly 10 months, we've waited for a man-made salvation from this pandemic that threw off course all holidays in 2020 since Passion Week and Easter. How have you persisted in faith? Where have you seen that God, indeed, has been faithful? If we live to see the day when life might return to some semblance of normal, what will your rejoicing look like? How do you see yourself praising God?

The voices of Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, beckon to us from the past: Persist in being who God is calling you to be no matter where you are in God's history! Persist in trusting God's hand to guide you, your descendants, the nations and all creation toward God's final vision of Christ's reign.

Persist, my friends, I feel like I hear them whispering.

Though we more rightfully ought to claim that as the Holy Spirit's whisper to us through their story, reminding us that God is persistent keeping those divine promises of salvation.

Indeed, whether you languish or remain firm, this much is true. The Lord God has persisted. Ah, from creation to the raising up of a people over thousands of years to the ushering of the kingdom of God through a tiny child 2000 years ago as a light to all people, to Christ's light shining in you, **God alone persists.**

It is a persistence of grace that knows no bounds. It can come through the smallness of a little baby 2000 years ago. It can come through deep suffering of that same child in the midst of division and chaos and death on a cross. Death could not be held within in a tomb, for God's persistence for life and resurrection would prevail over death that once seemed so certain.

And though the excitement of past Christmases have gone by, most notably the moment of the angelic chorus which was huge but seen only by few, we await with hope for the signs, big and small of the beautiful ways God's love through Jesus persists, most notably the way that we have yet to see. We shall like Simeon say, "Lord, let your servant now depart in peace, for my eyes have seen and can't wait to see again Your Salvation."

And on that day we shall say together, "**Nevertheless, God persisted!**"  
Amen.

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Help us prepare a place for him in our hearts, in our minds, and in our souls, as we share the good news of his birth with the whole world.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Master of the Universe, on this day we gather with Simeon and Anna, and all the great witnesses of your salvation across time. During this season of social distancing, hold us close, and remind us that though loneliness runs rampant, we are never alone, but knit together with all believers across time and space.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of tenderness and mercy, amid the joys and festivities of the holy season, we continue to pray for all those who hurt. Be with people across the world who suffer or are in pain, those who feel disconnected from your care. Be with all those we remember before you now.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Holy God, we give thanks that you have revealed your salvation to us, as surely as you revealed it to Simeon. Like Simeon, may we be comforted by your promises and find peace in your presence. Like Anna, may we praise you with our words and actions and bear witness of your saving grace to others Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And may our Lord, whose star shone in the night sky and whose birth filled a world with peace, shine his love into your heart and mind. May you also find peace this day as our Lord reveals himself to you all over again, and may his revelation be transforming. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

Season of Epiphany  
January 3 - February 2021





**Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 72):**

May all kings fall down before God, all nations give him service.

**Give the king your justice, O God,**

For God delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

**Give the king your justice, O God,**

From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

**Give the king your justice, O God.**

**Prayer of the Day:**

Unpredictable God, as you reveal your Son to all nations by the leading of a heavenly phenomenon, so lead us now into his presence. Open our hearts and minds to be inspired by his brightness that we may open and share our gifts for a world that hungers for healing, grace, and peace.

**Gospel Reading from Matthew 2:1-12:**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means

least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

***Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12 by Rev. Will Rose,  
Parish Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and Lutheran  
Campus Ministry, in Chapel Hill, NC***

In the name of the Father, +Son, and Holy Spirit

Now I know there is a Star in our gospel reading, and it appears there is a small band of rebels who resist against an Empire by “going home by a different road”...

But, I’m not going to do a deep dive on Star Wars today, however I do want to go down the road of the vital topic of “faith and science.”

Allow me to share a little background info.

Around five years ago, a long time member of my congregation and Professor Emeritus of Physics at Duke, Dr. Al Goshaw, heard an interview with Jesuit Brother and Astronomer Guy Consolmagno on the NPR podcast “On Being”. On the podcast Brother Guy talked about the main questions at the cross-roads of faith and science (notice we use “and” not “or”) in his book Would you baptize an Extraterrestrial? ...and other questions from the Astronomers’

in-box at the Vatican Observatory.

(I can not recommend this book enough!)

Al shared this interview and book with me and other members of our congregations who are scientists and we agreed that this would be a great book to study together at Holy Trinity.

This book then inspired us to go deeper into the topic of faith and science that eventually lead us to receive a grant from Fuller Seminary to explore and break down the stereotype and myth that one must pick one OR the other, that one must choose faith OR science.

We have discovered over and over again that there are plenty of scientists and people of faith, and people of faith who also happen to be scientists, who believe that it can be faith AND science working together to explore the mysteries of life and our existence in the cosmos.

So, we sought to build upon what others have done in creating a healthier conversation between the work of science and the work of faith. As well as bring to light the many resources out there that contribute to a healthy conversation between the two.

In preparing for this message, reflecting on Christmas and Epiphany, and re-reading today's gospel lesson from Matthew, I was drawn again to Chapter 4 in Would you Baptize and Extraterrestrial?, entitled "What was the Star of Bethlehem?"

Brother Guy shares that since they oversee the Vatican's Observatory, and they look at stars and the cosmos all the time, this is one of the top email's and questions they get on a daily basis. He and his colleague at the Vatican Observatory, Father Paul Mueller, share that this short story in the gospel of Matthew is a great icon revealing a healthy dialogue between faith and science because it has elements of both.

They lift up the important questions of...

Was it really a star?

Was it a miracle, or some natural phenomena? Or both?

And more importantly, why did the author of Matthew choose to place this story in his story about Jesus?

Brother Guy and Father Paul share that the top candidates for what the Bethlehem Star could be are...

\* A star that went Supernova.

A star that goes supernova is a star that gets super bright right before it explodes. These events can even be seen during the daytime. But these events are super rare, and stars tend to be orderly and predictable and evidence of their explosions can be traced 1000s of years after they take place. So, most astronomers, including Brother Guy and Father Paul rule this one out.

\* Maybe it was a Comet.

Again, they share that Comets are very predictable and easy to find their evidence... so it was most likely not a comet.

\* Perhaps it was an unusual configuration or alinement of planets that when stacked near each other in the night sky they look like a bright star.

This is a leading candidate. Kepler even noted that in 7 BC Jupiter and Saturn aligned with each other that made a pretty bright light in the sky that most people noticed.

But the question still lingers...

Why were the Magi the only ones who noticed it in Matthew's story about Jesus?

Brother Guy likes the theory that connects the Magi themselves with the "star". You see the Magi were not necessarily "we three kings from orient are" (there were three gifts, but it never says there were only three magi).

These Magi were pagan astrologers who studied the stars so they could make predictions... horoscopes... for Kings and rulers. They were the ones looking at the stars and the configurations of the planets doing their best to make meaning from those alignments.

It was widely known that Caesar Augustus claimed that a certain planetary alignment with the sun predicted and confirmed his royalty.

So around the time of Jesus' birth (give or take a few years, we really don't know the exact time and date Jesus was born, the Church set the celebration around the Winter Solstice to make the theological point that Jesus is the light of the world)... around that time that was a particular configuration and alignment of planets; Venus, mercury, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, that had a particular alignment with the sun at the same time of a new moon.

Interestingly this was very similar to Caesar Augustus' claim, and an alignment that these wise men, or Magi, would have noticed.

The author of Matthew would most likely have known Augustus' claim and perhaps wanted to say, "well guess what, we can make that claim too!"

So, is this 12 verse story, only found in the gospel of Matthew, a scientifically provable story – OR – a theological point Matthew wanted to make for his audience and readers? ...yes

Does it have to be "either, or"?

Maybe it was a configuration of planets, or some object in space that shined a great light just at the right time.

But whether the "star" can be scientifically proven or not, there is the radical move Matthew makes by hanging a star in the sky and bringing the Magi into the Jesus narrative.

The first people in the gospel of Matthew who recognize Jesus for who he is were pagan foreigners who used astrology to find him.

Wow

Horoscopes and Astrology are frowned upon in the Hebrew scriptures and in Jewish culture because it is seen as breaking the first commandment, “you shall have no other gods.” The stars and planets do not control or direct our destiny, only God does.

And yet, in this “so strange it just might be true” story, Matthew sets up the premise that perhaps God revealed what the Divine was up through the tools the Magi worked with to share with his readers and community that Jesus is Lord and King, not just of Israel, but for all nations and all people.

People then and now, look to the stars for hope and signs of life and meaning. God knows this.

A common ground faith and science can stand on is the human condition and ability to wonder and dream, to be in awe of the heavens asking questions and searching for meaning and purpose.

God uses this all the time to reach out to us to let us know that there is a bigger story we are a part of.

Advent is a time when we wait and long for a savior.

At Christmas we celebrate the gift that God is with us, in the flesh and blood and breath of Jesus born in Bethlehem.

Epiphany is a time when God shines a spotlight on Jesus revealing to us what kind of Savior and King this Messiah truly is.

2020 was a rough and scary year.

We all have been through a lot and here in the new year we are still in the midst of it.

We still wait and long for healing and wholeness.

We still wait and long for a Savior.

And yet, God continues to reveal to us the Savior of all nations and all people and how this Savior continues to break down borders and walls, and bring wholeness into unnoticed spaces.

In the midst of a world that still longs for healing, good news, and peace, what is our purpose and posture moving forward?

Do we abandon all hope, vent on message boards, and attempt to keep God small and in some box we have constructed?

Or do we take the purpose and posture of the Magi...

Who look to the heavens, and with awe inspiring stars and orbiting planets, we come to understand that there is something larger, and a greater story of love and grace we are a part of.

Like the Magi, we too can go outside of our comfort zones and territory, and routines, and search for a Messiah, the Christ, who beacons us into unexpected places.

Like the Magi, we too can resist listening to the powers that be with their political self-serving agendas and who rather once encountering the Christ we set out on a journey and a different road than what they demand or expect.

Perhaps our posture can be that we love even harder, and like the Magi, we bear and give our gifts to a world that is hurting and longing for wholeness and peace.

In this new year, in this new liturgical season, what is God continuing to reveal to us?

Where is God showing up in the unlikely of places?

Where can we as Christ followers create better and healthier conversations in the areas we inhabit?

Wow, can you tell how much I love this story?!?

And that verse, “and having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,

they left for their own country by another road.” A different road.

Christ is the ultimate epiphany of God’s love and grace for ALL, and this is the road we are called to travel and journey.

AMEN

### **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Holy God by the light of a great star, you showed the Wisemen a path to the Christ child. As we enter into this season of Epiphany, may your light also illuminate our paths to you.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Master of the Universe, after meeting the Christ child, and hearing your wisdom, the Wisemen returned home by a different road. May the truth of your love for, us embodied in Jesus, so change our lives that it moves us down new roads, changing our behavior and inspiring us to spread this good news with all of creation.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Christ our Lord, on this day when we remember the journey of the Wisemen to you, we also remember those calling out that need you to visit them. We pray your spirit of healing, wholeness, and restoration, on all those tethered to pain, suffocated by sadness, and made immobile by fear and loss.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Holy Lord, you came into our world to transform it and to fill it with your glory. But we confess that our human vision of transformation and glory is vastly different from yours. Help us to honestly desire your vision for us and for the world. Help us to recognize you wherever and however you show yourself to us. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And may our Lord, whose star shone in the night sky and whose birth filled a world with peace, shine his love into your heart and mind. May you also find peace this day as our Lord reveals himself to you all over again, and may his revelation be transforming. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen



**Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 29):**

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

**May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!**

The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty

**May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!**

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

**May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!**

**Prayer of the Day:**

Dear Jesus,

You came to the waters that day to show us the power of water and word together. May we live into the baptism we were given. May we look with hearts open and eyes seeing so our lives might be lived with you – in the midst of the world’s chaos, stirring up something new. In your name and power, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

## **Gospel Reading from Mark 1:4-11:**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

## ***Sermon on Mark 1:1-11 by Rev. Jane Jebson, Pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Golden, CO***

Traditions – some I love and others I don't. Christmas traditions of my family – cookie baking, sitting in a dark room with just the tree lights, singing Silent Night...I love those. Family vacations every summer – yep, love those too. And Easter just isn't right without a sunrise service somewhere. Whatever your traditions – you like them...or they wouldn't be traditions.

But this past year so many traditions have been upended. Even traditions as simple as gathering together to worship or eating with friends at a restaurant – have taken on new looks. And because we are people designed to love rhythms, pattern and consistency in our lives...this year's upending of traditions has seemed intrusive...and not at all to our liking.

But what if God is trying to show up in new ways, help us understand new things in the midst of the upheaval? Will we miss God at work because we

are longing backwards instead of stepping forwards?

Today's text from Mark is the baptism of Jesus. Now baptism was not an uncommon thing in the ancient world at all. Many pagan rituals used water as a purifying ritual. The word itself – *baptizo* in Greek simply means to “immerse”. So it was a familiar word and a familiar practice. Even in the Jewish world – baptism was used in ritual purification. It was also used as part of the ceremonies one went through to convert to Judaism. So the idea of baptizing – immersing a person in water – was a well known tradition.

But John comes along and puts new meaning to it – instead of purifying the body – John is teaching a purifying of one's soul – a baptism of repentance. John takes the old tradition and upends it a bit – calling people to repent (literal meaning to “turn around”) and be baptized. But even John recognizes his baptism is only a precursor to something even greater. Jesus. And the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And this is where Mark starts his gospel. With a well known tradition and right off the bat changing it into something new. Mark signifies the world is changing – and so are lives. When Jesus comes to the water to be baptized by John – it was like putting his stamp of approval on this new way of doing things. And God – as Jesus rises from the immersion – goes even further to show up and claim Jesus as Son of God. The world is really turning upside down now!

John was not an expected leader of the day – camel hair clothes and a diet of locusts and honey – yeah no thanks for me. But he signified the change that was coming. The old was being replaced by the new. And as we know – throughout the Biblical story, the people then just as many of us now, clung to the old ways of doing things – the familiar and comfortable ways of doing things. But the world was changing then and it is now.

We dare not miss what God is up to here.

These days are unprecedented for all kinds of reasons and I know, you're tired of the pandemic and life being not what you want – me too. But what if in the midst of this world changing, God is showing up for you in new ways? What if God is calling us to be the body of Christ in new ways? What if traditions are morphing to reach new people?

My friends, we dare not miss what God is up to...in us as well as through us!

I love The Message's bible translation (using modern ways of speaking) of this passage – and leave you with these words – words that call us to the truth that life following Jesus should always be life changing!

### **THE MESSAGE – Mark 4:1-8**

*<sup>4-6</sup> John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey.*

*<sup>7-8</sup> As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out."*

Dear Ones of God – let us pray this is so. That we will allow Jesus to come and turn our old lives into kingdom lives. Let us not become so attached to traditions that we miss God showing up in new ways. Let us not be so comfortable we miss God's calling us into a world – a world who needs to love of God to show up. Let us not despise the new, the different...God just might be there ahead of us.

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Holy Lord, holy and eternal, we thank you for the gift of baptism that washes over us with your promises of hope, salvation, and sanctification. We give thanks for your promise that has washed over people of all ages, claiming them as you children, and calling them to your distant shore in that great forever, and ever, amen.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Almighty God, in the baptism of your son Jesus Christ we read of the signs that day, your voice booming, and a dove descending. Open our eyes to your signs in our world. Give us the vision to see them, and the confidence to act on them, following Christ all the days of our lives.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of Healing and wholeness, through the waters of baptism you claim us as your daughters and sons for all of eternity. Though the world is still ravaged by sin, illness, and darkness that causes pain, isolation, and torment. We pray your compassion, company, and strength on people, but especially those calling out from the wilderness of their lives.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Holy God, as your spirit once descended on Jesus; descend it on us and on our communities. Fill us with wisdom and understanding and then send us out into our week, ready to bring your grace and peace into the situations we find ourselves in. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the star in the night guide you as you wait for our Lord to reveal himself anew. May you live in the hope of God's promises courageously and joyously and may your courageous hope be a light to guide others along the way. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen



### **Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 139):**

O Lord, you know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

**O LORD, you have searched me and known me.**

Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

**O LORD, you have searched me and known me.**

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

**O LORD, you have searched me and known me.**

### **Prayer of the Day:**

Almighty God, who calls your disciples in every time and place, place in our hearts the calling of your gospel: that we might perceive your work in this world and joyfully invite others into your kingdom, for you reign as one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading from John 1:43-51:**

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus

answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

***Sermon on John 1:43-51 by Rev. Dominic V. Guido,  
Pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Crestview Hills, KY***

Have you ever wondered how we decide what scriptures to read in worship? Have you ever asked yourself why Pastor always puts that reading with all the unpronounceable list of nationalities on Pentecost every year? Have you ever wondered just how it all works? Well, the answer is something called a lectionary. Now, those of you who knew about lectionaries, and knew that this would be the answer to my initial question; you can all feel free to roll your eyes right now. OK, now we can all move on together and get onto the same page. A lectionary is a prescribed set of readings for worship. The readings are meant to coordinate with one another, both within the service itself and throughout our church year, which begins in Advent and runs through Christ the King Sunday in November.

Now, the lectionary that are using now here for this Worship Companion is called the Revised Common Lectionary, which was published in 1994 as a collaboration between the North American Consultation on Common Texts and the English Language Liturgical Council. For each Sunday and Festival of the Liturgical year, the RCL (as it is known) provides a lesson from the Hebrew Bible, one from the Psalms, one from the New Testament (usually one of the letters, usually one of Paul's), and one from one of the Gospels. For this resource, however, we generally cut that list down to just one reading: the gospel in the case of today's sermon. The lectionary is further divided into three years: A, B, and C; one each focusing on the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We are currently in Year B, the one that focuses on Mark, so natu-

rally today's gospel story comes from the gospel of John.

Now, there are reasons for that. Among them is the fact that Mark is shortest of the four gospels and so needs a little help to make it the full year long. Now a more pious, and perhaps more useful reason, is that the different gospel writers give us different windows onto the Gospel: which is the good news of Jesus Christ. This week, we get a glimpse through St. John's gospel window at the calling of some of Jesus' first disciples, and next week the Revised Common Lectionary's gospel reading gives us St. Mark's account of the same episode in the story of Jesus' life and ministry.

Now, when Jesus calls these first disciples, when Jesus calls us as well, one of the ways that we talk about this is by using the word vocation, which just comes from a Latin word that means "calling." And, this calling that we receive as Christians, this calling that hearkens back to the callings of disciples like Philip and Nathanael, is rooted in Holy Baptism. For in baptism, we claim that mission that is shared by all the church: to give thanks and praise to God and bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world. And, here today in John we get a first hand look at how that call gets to us. And it is a calling to announce and enact the Kingdom; praise, glorify, and bear the Word. So, how does it get to us? Well, this week, we see examples in sacred scripture of external vocation. The calling of God coming from other people, and into our hearts that way.

In John, we see this with Philip and Nathanael. Jesus calls Philip to follow and Philip, in turn, goes and finds Nathanael, telling him that "we have found the one about whom the prophets and Moses wrote." Now Nathanael is initially skeptical especially when Philip says that this great awaited one is from Nazareth. Nathanael, you see, doesn't think very highly of Nazareth. He's not sure anyone decent would come to a respectable place like Galilee from one of those kind of places. But, he goes. He trusts the one who invites him, and he goes. The call of Jesus goes through Philip to Nathanael, and he goes. Nathanael goes and he has an encounter with Jesus and he is changed. And, this is what we (in the Lutheran tradition) have historically called a sort of ex-

ternal vocation, call, which comes from God through other people and brings us into an encounter with Jesus.

So, I have a simple question for you. Who has been Philip for you? Who were those people who brought you to faith, those people, who invited you to “come and see” Jesus? Was it a parent or a Sunday School teacher? I know a pastor up north in Wisconsin, for whom Philip was a high school classmate. My colleague hadn’t ever been to church growing up, but one day a friend from their choir at school asked them if they wanted to come sing in the choir. Well, my friend wasn’t about to give up another chance to sing (real choral nerd that one), and so they came to choir at a small United Church of Christ congregation in Northeast Illinois. Their friend, like Philip, invited my colleague to “come and see,” and then Jesus got ahold of them and did the rest. So, again, who was your Philip, who invited you to come and see?

Now, another interesting question to ask is who are the people who noticed God calling you in a particular direction or in a particular way and pointed it out to you? (In 1 Samuel 3:1-10, we get the story of the priest Eli being this sort of person for Samuel, it’s another of the Revised Common Lectionary’s readings today.) What was the calling that they pointed out? How have you followed God’s calling in your life? How has following that calling changed you? Were you changed like Nathanael, whose latent prejudices were swept away to follow Jesus? Were you changed like Samuel, who would go from just another assistant under Eli to being the primary prophet (the one who speaks the Word of the Lord) among God’s people? Who were your Elis, who pointed you toward God’s call?

And, another interesting question to ponder: who are your Nathanaels? Who are the people in your life that God may be calling you to invite to “come and see?” And, how might God be calling you to make that invitation? Might it be as simple as “come and see? In that same vein, who are your Samuels? Who are the people in your life, who are getting a call from God, but can’t quite put all the pieces together? How can you point them in the direction of that call?

Now, I realize that this has been a lot of me asking you to ponder things, but I

think that's important for a couple of reasons. First, I think it's important that we learn to see ourselves within the story of sacred scripture. This story, the Biblical story, is the story centers us. This is the story that forms us. The story around which we gather, even if we are doing so in strange and different ways these days. This story is our story, and asking questions like these helps us to place ourselves within the story that God has given us. That matters.

Also, you matter. You are someone through whom God has chosen to work. Psalm 139 tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made by God, and let me let you in on a little insider wordplay here. When the psalmists talk about the wonderful works of God, the works that are getting referenced are things like the Exodus from Egypt, the return from exile, you. You are a wonderful work, and not only that but remember in your baptism you have been claimed and called by God. God has chosen to work through you. Through you, the creative and redeeming word of God is born into all the world. God has called you. Maybe you were invited by a Philip or had that call pointed out to you by an Eli, but you are called by God.

You are called by God to (as we proclaim in Holy Baptism) to announce and enact the Kingdom of God: to realize a vision of justification and reconciliation. That is the Good News, that has chosen you and empowered you (God has given you all you need) for this important work. The gospel of Jesus Christ is world-shaking, life-changing news. And, that good news, this calling, changes us. So, let us go forth into our world and into our week, with this question on our minds and on our hearts: how will we invite others into this vision of God's future? How will God use us: each of us, all of us, to call all people into his kingdom? Thanks be to God. Amen.

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Heavenly Father, as we continue through this season of light, we thank you for your holy word that has been passed down from generation to generation. We thank you for the prophets, writers, clergy, and all the faithful who have taught your word that serves as a light for our life's journeys .

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Christ our Lord, you knew us before we were born, and through all things you continue to love us and call us just like you did Nathanael. Strengthen us that we might be kind to ourselves. Remind us of how much you love us, that we might treat ourselves with the compassion and grace that we have for our neighbors.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of comfort and solace, in you there is no end to wholeness, care, and mercy. Today we pray for all those whose lives are impaired by illness, sickness, and depression. We raise before you today those who weigh heavy on our hearts, that they may find restoration in you.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Holy Lord, today you asked your followers to consider what they were looking for. Help us to seriously consider this question in our own hearts. Let the answer ring out “you and your desire for our lives.” Then, help us to discern that we might see your Truth in the situations in which we find ourselves, and have the courage to speak, act, and live into that Truth. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the star in the night guide you as you wait for our Lord to reveal himself anew. May you live in the hope of God’s promises courageously and joyously and may your courageous hope be a light to guide others along the way. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen



**Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 62):**

God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

**For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.**

On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

**For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.**

Trust in God at all times, O people; pour out your heart before the Lord; God is a refuge for us.

**For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.**

**Prayer of the Day:**

Holy Lord, through the words of scripture, the witness of the faithful, and your Holy Spirit, you call to us. Open our ears to hear your voice, open our hearts to receive your word, open our mouths to proclaim your Good News, and then open our hands to do the work of your kingdom. All this we make bold to ask through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

**Gospel Reading from Mark 1:14-20:**

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called

them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

***Sermon on Mark 1:14-20 by Rev. Jennifer Moser,  
Pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church,  
Fort Collins, CO***

“Lead us in your truth dear Lord, your word is truth, Amen”

This story has always struck me as just a little odd. Maybe it's just me, but can you picture the scene? A stranger comes to you and says follow, and you do? Without question?

I know this is the bible, but honestly - who does that? Have you ever managed people? I was a manager for about 6 years. None of my people ever did what I told them without discussion, and, unlike Jesus in this story, I had relationship with them. I was indirectly responsible for their salaries, directly responsible for their bonuses, and I still felt some days like I was on the debate team. And at first, that was a bit tiring, but it didn't take me too long to understand that when my teammates questioned things, mostly it wasn't to be difficult, or to question my authority. Mostly, it was just because they wanted to understand...wanted to feel like part of the team...wanted to be included in the creative processes that we had.

It's how we're wired, I think. We want to know, we want to understand, and we want to see the big picture.

And you know? It's how the disciples are wired too. Especially Simon Peter. All through the Gospel witness, we can see it played out: Peter. Jesus' friend and disciple, who has an off-point comment, and question and even the occasional argument for just about everything Jesus says and does.

But not this time. This time – for the first and last time in Jesus’ 3-year ministry, Peter manages to shut his mouth and do what he’s told. Why? Doesn’t it make you wonder what was going on with Peter that day?

Unless, of course, there’s a different question altogether that this gospel wants us to consider...

When you hear of someone being called to do the work of the kingdom of God, what’s the first thing that pops into your mind? The first image? Mother Teresa? MLK, Jr? Gandhi?

Or, maybe it’s an image that we get sometimes in the news or on shows like extreme home makeover where you hear of this story of someone doing something amazing, like running an entire soup kitchen out of their own poverty...

Certainly, those images all, I think, reflect kingdom work.

But, how many of you, when you hear that phrase “called to do the work of the kingdom” picture getting on a bus and going to school as a student? Or going to school as a teacher? How many of you picture how you do your work? Or how you speak to your coworkers, friends, or family, or other church members?

How many of you hear the phrase “called to do the work of the kingdom” and picture yourself? Waking up in your own bed, getting up, getting cleaned up, and doing whatever it is you do every day?

Honestly? It’s not the first picture that comes to my mind, when I hear that phrase. And I’m not sure it’s the picture that came to Peter’s mind, when he thought about doing the work of the kingdom – if he did, prior to Jesus.

And maybe that’s why he follows that day in silence. Maybe he was just too startled or too intrigued, or maybe even too hopeful to do anything else.

Because lots has been made of this whole fish business in this story, as in:

“I’m going fishing for Jesus,” or “I’m casting my net for Jesus, “ or “I’m putting a fish on the back of my car so folks know I follow Jesus.”

But I’m wondering if the only reason Jesus talked about fish and fishing for people like he did is because...well...he was talking to a bunch of fishermen?

What I mean by that is: I am not sure Jesus was asking Peter to do something he wasn’t already doing. I think what Jesus was asking Peter to do was to follow him, so that he – Peter - could become transformed in his fishing.

Think about it: Peter starts a fisherman in the gospel of Mark. And as a fisherman at that time, how would he do after casting his net on a good day? I’m not sure – maybe on a really good day catch a few hundred fish? In the book of Acts, Peter convinces three thousand people to be baptized after casting the net of a single sermon. Peter never stopped fishing, he just became completely transformed in it!

And then there’s Paul. Paul was a tent maker. Which is to say that he took various pieces of fabric and other materials and wove or sewed them together to create one functional piece. And isn’t that exactly what Jesus called him to do? And isn’t that exactly what he did? Weaving together Pagan Greeks and Romans and devout Jews into one Body of Christ?

So, what do you do? How do you think Jesus can transform it and you into a better version of what’s been?

It’s clear from this story that being a disciple isn’t about getting a seminary degree. It’s about Jesus himself – who comes bursting into our lives, and asks us to follow as we are...asks us, sometimes, to be transformed right in place...to shift our world view so that we can understand that everything we do is sacred...everything we do can be the work of the kingdom, if we let him show us how...if we let it be.

So, will you drop your net...and follow? Amen

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Lord Of Light, we pray that you break through the darkness of this world with the light, of your love, hope, and salvation. Remind us this day that you remain with us through our good times and bad; eternally calling, caring, and leading your creation to a home in you.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Master of the Universe, open our eyes to your activity in the world, that we might see and further the cause of your kingdom where we live. Inspire us by your Holy Spirit, that we might step forward in trust and confidence, helping to do your work with our hands.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God Almighty, you travel with us through our Epiphany journey alongside the Wisemen, John the Baptist, Simon, and Andrew leading us by your holy light. We pray for all those who feel lost this season. Lord we remember all who live under the heavy weight of fear, sadness, and loss. We pray for all those afflicted by illness, sickness, and depression. We raise before you now those who weigh heavy on our hearts both silently and aloud.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

## **Closing prayer:**

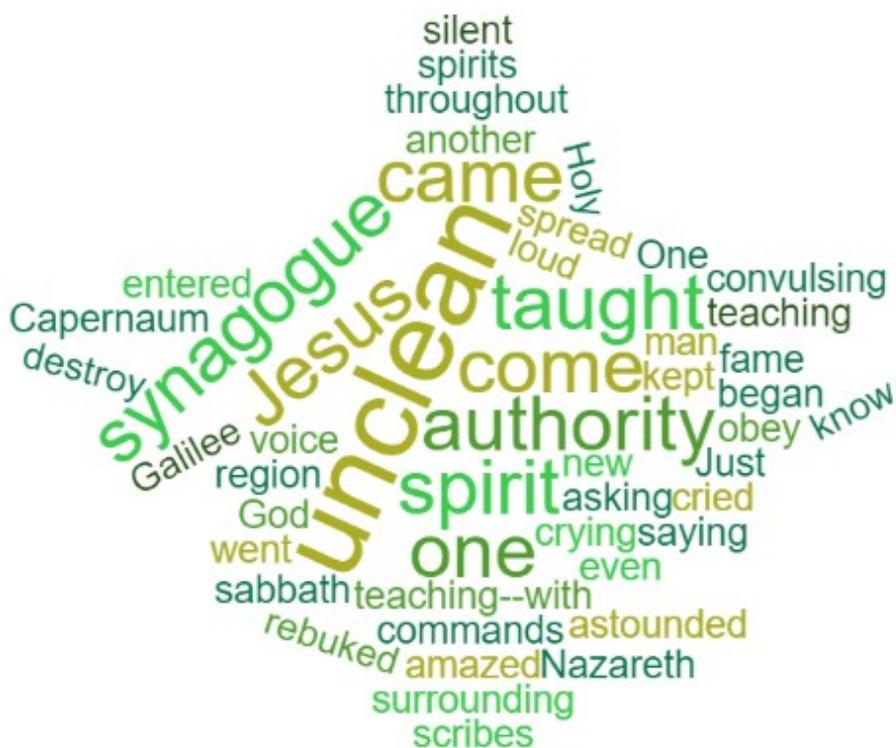
Amazing challenging God, today you called out to a bunch of ordinary people to come and follow you. Shockingly, they did exactly that without a single question or sign of hesitation. Give us the courage to follow where you lead us with the same confidence and let us be transformed as certainly as those first disciples were. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

## **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the star in the night guide you as you wait for our Lord to reveal himself anew. May you live in the hope of God's promises courageously and joyously and may your courageous hope be a light to guide others along the way. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

# A Brief Order of Prayer and Worship for Sunday, January 31, 2021



## **Candle lighting for the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany:**

Almighty and Sovereign God, we thank you for your care, compassion, and protection amid the evils and challenges of the world.

As we light these candles in our homes, may their light dispel whatever darkness binds us and haunts us this season. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

### **Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 111):**

God has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful.

**I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.**

God sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is God's name.

**I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.**

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.

**I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.**

### **Prayer of the Day:**

God who transcends boundaries, open to the church new possibilities of ministry and mission. May your spirit illuminate our path and lead us to light our way with the love you have revealed that is constantly challenging the walls and boundaries we create. Bless us in this time to be the church that you call us to be. Amen.

### **Gospel Reading from Mark 1:21-28:**

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have

you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

***Sermon on Mark 1:21-28 by Rev. Michael Stadtmueller,  
Pastor of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Fort Collins, CO***

Sometimes things are not always what they seem. The issue at hand is not really the issue at all. The toddler refusing to put a shirt is not about wearing a shirt, but about making their own choices. Or a teenager telling a parent that they don't want them around, isn't about overprotective or clingy parents, it's wondering how much freedom their parents will allow. How much time do their parents really have for them, or how much do their parents really care? Or in a marriage relationship, we don't really dig in our heels about what time dinner is, or who should do the dishes or laundry, we're wondering if we are in true partnership, heard and cared for. We tend to spend an inordinate amount of energy worrying about the wrong things and the actual issue can never be addressed. Often, every conflict boils down to fear. Fear of losing control of personal or communal boundaries.

I've noticed quite a bit of conversation in the air about boundaries. Boundaries communicate expectations and safety; we have boundaries for healthy relationships, boundaries that protect futures. Boundaries mostly seem positive but sometimes the question must be asked, positive for whom? Boundaries or the illusion of boundaries can also be used to control people or situations and when boundaries are in the hands of those with the most power and the most to lose from boundaries changing, damage can be done. We know that when someone crosses boundaries of our human worth, dignity and agency that person is suspect and dangerous. Personal boundary

crossing raises red flags in our consciousness and we can even feel it in our bodies.

Damaging boundary crossing might be when people offer unsolicited opinions about us, harsh critiques, or words of how we make them uncomfortable, and when this happens, especially under the cloak of anonymity, it's a boundary that has been crossed to the detriment of all involved. Sometimes our very existence can cross a societal norm boundary, and this makes people question the truth about boundaries and our human need to keep people in certain categories.

Our Mark 1 and 1 Corinthians 8 texts are not what they seem. In Mark, we might say this passage is about Jesus teaching with authority, or about demons, or an exorcism. In 1 Corinthians we might say that passage is about food, meat, idols or culture. But both passages are actually about boundaries. Jesus' first public act in the gospel of Mark reveals what God thinks about boundaries. We got a foretaste of that from the baptism story when the heavens were torn open and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. God's love couldn't even be contained by the boundary of heaven! Jesus wrestles with Satan, calls some disciples and then goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, like any good Jewish person. But Jesus did something that the ordinary person entering synagogue did not do: he taught with authority. Boundary crossed. Only the rabbis and scribes had any religious authority- but the people were caught by the nature of Jesus' teaching. It was different, it was authentic, it revealed something about God and God's nature. It was so revealing that a man also in the synagogue with an unclean spirit called Jesus by his true identity: Holy One of God! An unclean spirit in the synagogue is indeed another boundary crossed, in case you are wondering! We don't know if no one knew this man had an unclean spirit or if the man had been outside and came in when he heard Jesus, we just don't know. What we do know about Jewish purity laws is that this would have been a cause for great concern. The man should have been cast out away from everyone else for safety, but Jesus didn't do that, he crossed the boundary and went toward the conflict, the uncleanliness, he took the issue head on.

He saw the man not as a someone to keep in boundaries, but as a beloved child of God needing to be freed from a harmful boundary. Jesus leapt over the boundary of cleanliness to bring this man into community. Jesus does this. Jesus declares that boundaries that harm us and keep us from being all who God created us to be are no more.

Jesus call us out of our boundaries for the sake of proclaiming the gospel. God says that nothing should separate us from God and so whatever cultural norms we do or do not adhere to are irrelevant. That might mean we have to let go of how we think people around us should act. Society tells us that women are to be small, meek and quiet. Culture tells us that we can't take up much room, we have to leave room for the men. My spiritual director calls that spiritual anorexia and it's dangerous not just to bodies but to minds and souls of girls and women as well as boys and men. We know that God calls women to be equally bold, big and loud for the sake of proclaiming the love of God as men. Society tells us that men are to be tough, non-emotional, or grandiose. Plus the pressure of soul wage earner. We know that God also calls men to be equally gentle, emotional, and true partners in the proclamation of the gospel as women. It's not an either/or it's a both/and. There's room for all and we have to shed the worry of fitting into a boundary that isn't God made.

In 1 Cor. Paul is not worried about who eats what food from idols but about the boundaries that have arisen in the community. Some in the Corinth church were elite, educated and thought mostly of their own needs. Paul recognized that some in the community were struggling to understand the freedom in this pure grace from God and were still tripped up by the gods and idols of their culture around them. The elite and educated didn't see that their eating meat from idol worship was confusing for some and frankly, the elite didn't care. They had what was making them comfortable and what they understood, so that's all that matters. But it was straining the relationships within the community and Paul beautifully lays waste to this human-made boundary: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." If a boundary isn't about love, it's not a real boundary. And not the kind of love where you might say to

someone, “I’m lovingly telling you to stay in a boundary that makes me comfortable.” No, it’s a boundary of selflessness where you put your own comforts and needs aside for your neighbor. Boundaries, Jesus declares throughout the gospels, are always about your neighbor in need. Boundaries often do make us uncomfortable as they are almost rarely about us.

But boundaries help us to name fear and anxiety when we feel it and to know that this is often the core of conflict. Jesus proclaims that we go towards the conflict, towards the fear and anxiety to walk together, to learn from one another, to peel back the outward layers where we can get stuck in useless debate and never get to the real issue. Jesus’ very existence erases boundaries. God draws boundaries to create healing, wholeness, community, and living as the beloved body of Christ. God draws us all into the boundary of unending, abiding, and steadfast love. This is good news indeed, and not just for some, but for all people. Amen.

### **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Christ our Lord, your majesty and power are known the world over, even by the demons. We thank you for your presence in our world and in our lives that brings light into the darkness, hope to the hopeless, and relief from the demons that torment us.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Blessed Trinity – We thank you for creation, for family, for wisdom and for life. We thank you for the spirit of fellowship in Christian community that extends beyond time and space. To you we bring all things, ourselves, our time, and our possessions. Today with joyous hearts we raise a petition of thanksgiving for gift of our lives.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of hope and wholeness, you call the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the blind to see, not only in the stories of the Bible, but every day. Be with those who call out to you today in any way, those in pain & suffering, those isolated & lonely, those longing to hear your voice & see your face, those we remember before you now.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Righteous Lord, today you reveal yourself to us as the one who has power over our demons: over the things that stalk us and haunt us and make us feel afraid. Search our hearts and subdue whatever demons of anxiousness, fear, and isolation that you see there. Replace those demons with your love and peace that we might be healed and made ready to do the work of your kingdom. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the star in the night guide you as you wait for our Lord to reveal himself anew. May you live in the hope of God's promises courageously and joyously and may your courageous hope be a light to guide others along the way. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen



### **Call to worship (adapted from Psalm 147):**

Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

**Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.**

God determines the number of the stars; and gives to all of them their names.

**Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.**

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.

**Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.**

### **Prayer of the Day:**

Holy God, we have been in the midst of cultural illness and uncertainty, but with our Gospel lesson, you remind us that you are the God who chose to come to us, take us by the hand, and lead us to a place of comfort and wholeness. Help us to find peace in the story of Simon's mother-in-law, remembering that no matter what, we are never beneath your care and concern. Amen

### **Gospel Reading from Mark 1:29-39:**

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve

them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

***Sermon on Mark 1:29-39 by Rev. Carolyn Albert Donovan,  
Pastor of Peace Lutheran Church, Austin, TX***

As we come to the words of Scripture offered up for us today, we are at the end of the time after Epiphany...that expanse between the Christmas season, and the festival of the Transfiguration... which itself is the hinge towards Ash Wednesday and Lent.

Very few of us could have imagined as the last Lenten season began how much our Lenten fast would overflow its 40 days. Perhaps you feel like you never left Lent of 2020...like you are still waiting for an Easter that hasn't arrived. And yet, here we are...leaning toward Lent again.

But within this past journey around the sun and around the circle of the church's year...there has been birth and death...and resurrection...there has been healing and hope...and deep, deep pain. The circle keeps on turning...

As I write these words, I am still on the other side of the season of Advent and Christmas...and so I wonder...what have you heard and seen...where have you witnessed God's action in the intervening months that separate my writing from your reading?

In this moment when I am writing, we are only hearing the first murmurs of vac-

cines. We do not yet have a fully certified presidential election, or a final composition of both houses of Congress. I have started Christmas shopping...but the tree isn't up. (If I know myself...the tree is probably still up now as you are reading...though my church's worship has been broadcast virtually from my living room for much of the past year... and if folks are still seeing my living room on a daily basis, I may have managed to put away the tree uncharacteristically early.)

In the past weeks of this time after Epiphany, we have heard again (from the writers of both Mark and John's gospels) how Jesus gathered followers and set about the work of healing the world. Work that continues to bring itself to bear in our world now. Here. Today. In our lives.

Mark's gospel is so much action and near-chaos. We are only now coming to the end of its first chapter, and so much has happened. Jesus has entered onto the scene where John the Baptist is loudly proclaiming his imminent arrival. The heavens have torn open at his baptism, and the Holy Spirit has entered him and then cast him into the wilderness of temptation...where angels come to wait on him. As he leaves that wilderness place, he picks up John's proclamation of repentance (as John has since been arrested), and then he gathers up Peter, James and John...right out of their daily lives as fishermen and into the journey of discipleship. It is from there that he goes into Capernaum's synagogue to teach...and is then confronted by a man possessed by a demon. His first act of power is to exorcise the demon. Then he goes out of the synagogue to Peter's house...where his mother-in-law is ill in bed with a fever.

This is the second reference in the first chapter of Mark's gospel that is an intimation of the family Jesus' newly minted disciples are about to leave behind. Simon has a mother-in-law...and so presumably has or had a wife. James and John left their dad in a boat with half-mended nets a few verses ago...

But Mark doesn't make very much of this. Rather, he shows Jesus entering her room and reaching out to take Simon's mother-in-law's hand. (You'll par-

don't the adequate phrasing, I hope. She is one of the many women whose names we never learn.) And in that act, he raises her...lifts her up... resurrects her. (It is the same verb.) And she immediately begins to serve them. For many, this moment is the birth of diaconal ministry. Her healing ordains her to service.

What strikes me most, though, is that by sundown that same day people have begun to gather. As this day ends, there are folks who want to be healed like Simon's mother-in-law...or who have demons like the man in the synagogue. And Jesus comes out of the house to meet them.

As darkness begins to fall, the healing and wholeness Jesus brings usher in rest. And then, as the next day begins to break...Jesus strikes out for a moment of solitude...as if he knew that more daylight would bring more of the world's needs to Simon's door. And sure enough, he hasn't even finished his prayers before the disciples have hunted him down to say that everyone is looking for him.

And with all these twists and turns the ministry of Jesus has begun in earnest.

So...with so much action going by so quickly I wonder...what part of these opening moments of Mark's gospel are your favorite...?

There is so much to choose from...baptism...temptation...exorcism... healing...prayer...the call to discipleship. You might want to reflect, journal, or draw something that shows the moment you like most.

I wonder...what part might be the most important?

I wonder if there is any part we could leave out and still have everything we need?

Most of all, perhaps...I wonder where you are in this gospel word...or what part of it is especially for you?\*

Have you been called away from what you thought would be your life's

work? Have you heard or seen the heavens torn open and the Spirit on the move? Have you felt yourself in the fog of fever...raised up by a strong and gentle hand? Or maybe, you are still waiting for the healing to come...the hope to come.

Perhaps you are like the ones crowding the door...after hearing there was hope on the other side...and you are still waiting to see what he looks like... what his voice sounds like...

Perhaps you are still waiting for the fullness of the promise made in Isaiah, chapter 40, for which we have deeply yearned in this past year:

Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted;  
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

Jesus is on the move...in our midst...

What that will mean for us is a mystery ever-unfolding. I pray that mystery is as close as a hand holding yours when you most need comfort. And that you are raised up for the work that will bring you fullness of life.

May you feel and follow the healing and powerful presence of God.

Amen.

*\*Pastor's note: These four questions do not originate with me, but rather with a method of spiritual formation created by Jerome Berryman, called Godly Play. I bring these questions always with me to every sacred story...and even to my own life. They help me find where God is speaking into my heart. I hope they help you, too.*

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Heavenly and gracious God, as our journey through the season of Epiphany comes to a close, we thank you for your companionship, your guidance, and your solace. Thank you for the companionship that we have found in each other, albeit remote and distanced, but above all thank you for the relationship that Jesus Christ offers that sustains and nourishes us.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Most Holy Trinity, in the face of a world that seems more complex, frightening, and out of control every day, help us to find symbols of your grace, peace, and abundance in our everyday lives. Remind us that standing on the water of baptism, we are a community held together by you.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

God of abundance and grace, we pray your companionship, your healing and your calm for all your children. We pray sustenance for those without food, companionship for those tormented in the loneliness of the night, and peace for those afflicted by illness & diseases. Lord be with all those we name before you now, both silently and aloud.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

### **Closing prayer:**

Healing God, you show us that you are the one who works to heal us and make us whole. You give us strength to serve others and provide comfort to those in need. Give your healing strength to us as well, Lord, that we may serve others in your name, and be a voice of your comfort and healing to those who need it. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

### **Blessing:**

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the star in the night guide you as you wait for our Lord to reveal himself anew. May you live in the hope of God's promises courageously and joyously and may your courageous hope be a light to guide others along the way. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen



## **Prayer of the Day:**

Holy and Gracious God, you call you servants to ventures of which we cannot see the end. As our Epiphany journey with the Wisemen has ended, and we stand atop this mountain looking into Lent, and across the Valley of the Shadow of Death, be with us. Lead us and guide us, through the challenges of our world. Hold us, empower us, and remind us of the blessings we receive through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

## **Gospel Reading from Mark 9:2:9:**

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

**Sermon on Mark 9:2-9 by Rev. Dan Hille,  
Pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Whitehall, OH**

My mother loves to tell the story of the first time I saw “Mary Poppins.” I was home sick from elementary school, and she put in the VHS for me to watch. My mother, who is blind, sat next to me to keep me company. Early on in the film, the children write down a list of traits they want their nanny to have in the form of a letter, though after the list is read it’s tossed in the fireplace.

After that scene, my mother leaned over and said... “watch the letter” and to my amazement, minutes later the letter was magically sucked up & out of the chimney.

Sometimes it’s fun... when we know what is going to happen. Other times, it seems like more of a burden. It can also feel like there is an elephant in the room, when something is going to happen, and we want to tell people it will be okay.

There is an elephant in the room today.

Peter, James & John have been traveling with Jesus for some time, but something has happened, and now they see Jesus in a different way. They knew Jesus was Jesus, that is to say that they heard what he had been teaching, they had heard the parables and seen the miracles, but today, now, they see him in a different way— because they have also seen Moses & Elijah... *again*, out of time, and in that moment they saw Jesus *again* (for the first time).

Jesus looks different to them now, he’s quit glowing, or whatever “transfigured” means, but Peter, John, & James, can’t shake the feeling that something has changed, something is different, but they are keeping silent although it is a long walk to Jerusalem.

I always want to say something to them, but I cannot. We know the ending, but they do not. Great things will happen, but first they will experience great loss and sadness. Like any friend, parent, or confidant I have that desire

to make it easier for them, to give Peter, John, & James a “head’s up” and tell them what’s coming, to assuage their awkwardness, to banish this elephant in the room.

But then I realize that it is not their elephant, but mine.

They are doing exactly what they should be doing, they are following Jesus. They have been following Jesus since he called them at the piers. Living a life of faith active in love and life, they continue to walk with him trusting what Jesus says. They will once again meet up with the others, walking with Christ though not always perfectly— there are, and will be, issues. Peter will deny, and Judas will betray, but in the end, when they get where they are going Jesus will die for them, for us, for everyone.

For generations this has been called the scandal of the gospel. This reality that Jesus, in his perfection, would die to redeem us, the broken sinners of the world, from Peter & Judas to you & me.

It’s scandalous. That us everyday people, broken as we are, not royalty or celebrity, or possibly even all that found of ourselves some days, receive this attention and care from the creator of All, and a personal loving relationship with God’s only Son.

But the scandal is God’s. The action is God’s. The salvation is God’s gift given to us as a blessing- a blessing which we receive. A blessing that allows us to glimpse a top the mountain, with Peter, John, & James and see who Jesus is, the beloved son of God-- spreading the promises made to Moses, and Elijah as a sign of God’s faithfulness to the world. A blessing that tells us again and again throughout history that God stays faithful.

When we find ourselves enslaved like Moses by the world, or sickness, or debt, or shame, God stays faithful.

When we find ourselves like Elijah, presented with death, or famine, or scarcity, or hostility, God stays faithful.

Or like Peter, John, & James, when we are not sure of what will happen next, where this journey will lead, or what to say next, God stays faithful

In our lives as we remain off-kilter by the effects of pandemics, politics, and persecutions, God will stay faithful, walking with us through it all, and out the other side.

I find however, that as freely as God gives us this blessing, I equally find the elephant in the room... but that's my elephant, not God's.

This elephant has lots of names: insecurity, self-doubt, confusion, fear, and worry, many different names that come back to the same thing; how do we believe, how do we trust, that God will be as faithful to us as God has promised?

Like Peter, I too want to build a dwelling (or three) and stay there, ... it's not really "a dwelling" I want to build, but a manger and a stable, so I can stay at Christmas with Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, where faith is simple, direct, and easy.

But instead, we find ourselves on the road to Jerusalem, where there are crowds, and people, and convulsing children. We are on this road to Jerusalem in a world where there is economic disparity, political trickery, and an international health pandemic. It is in **this** reality that my elephant asks me, "Will God really remain faithful?"

Looking into the mirror of life, knowing our own journeys, the elephant asks, "...but will God be faithful to me despite this, or in spite of that?"

With the manger of Christmas so far away, do we wonder, "Where is God now, in the midst of this journey?"

The scandal of the gospel is God's perfect faithfulness to us, an imperfect and broken people.

The elephant in the room, is the question, “Do we believe that God is faithful? Continually loving and constantly supporting us?”

Will God be faithful as we carry our own baggage, both on journeys that we do not know the end to, as well as the journeys that we do?

Moses would say “Yes.”

Elijah would say “Yes.”

And Jesus would say “Yes.”

And he will say “yes” again, after we get to Jerusalem.

But until we get there, let us pray...——

*“O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”*

## **Prayers of the People:**

As members of the Body of Christ, gathered in our homes and around the world, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

Holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we thank you and praise you for your unity, your distinction, your holy mystery, your grace, and your love. We thank you for all the ways you interact with us in our lives.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer**

God almighty, we praise your name and thank you for coming. You came into our world on Christmas to change it. You will come again to judge the living and the dead. We gather this day, albeit socially distanced, as a community that extends through space and beyond time, as your people waiting to see you come again.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer**

Holy Spirit, eternal breath, we pray for guidance and peace, for restoration and wholeness. Be with all those who are in need. Enshroud those who yearn for your presence, your solace, your guidance. Linger on all those across this world who suffer, who cry, who long, who need you, all those we name now both silently and aloud before you now.

Lord in Your Mercy, **Hear Our Prayer.**

Trusting in your mercy and goodness, we bring before you these prayers and whatever else you see that we need, in the name of the one who sets us free, Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

## **Closing prayer:**

Almighty God, you are Holy and wholly other than we are, yet you choose to come among us and to reveal yourself to us in the face of Jesus. Help us to listen and to be transformed by his words, as you commanded us. Fill our hearts with your radiance that we may live more fully in the joy of your kingdom. Remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

## **Blessing:**

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May you experience our Living Lord in a new way. May your experience of our Lord fill you with awe and transform you as surely as it once transformed Peter. And may the glory of our Lord chase all shadows from your path that you might walk in peace and joy. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

## **Martin Luther's Morning Prayer**

“I thank you, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

## **Martin Luther's Evening Prayer**

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray You to forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

## **Apostle's Creed**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.\*  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.



SHEPHERD    
OF THE HILLS    
LUTHERAN CHURCH