



THE WORD IN SEASON

January, February, March 2015
Volume 83, Number 1

Rochelle Y. Melander and Julie O'Brien,
editors

THE WORD IN SEASON (ISSN 0279-6007), published quarterly by Augsburg Fortress, P.O. Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440-1209. Periodicals postage paid in Twin Cities, Minnesota, and additional mailing offices. Subscriptions \$7.50 per year (\$11.00, large print). Copyright © 2014 Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Postmaster: Send address changes to **THE WORD IN SEASON**, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, P.O. Box 1553, Minneapolis, MN 55440-8730.

USPS-626340 Printed in U.S.A.

USPS Publication Agreement Number 1631519
Canadian Publication Agreement Number 40030418

Scripture Readings

The scripture readings for each day come from *Revised Common Lectionary: Daily Readings* (Fortress, 2005). The Sunday meditations are based on the Gospel reading from the Revised Common Lectionary.

The Writers

January 1–14. Charles Oberkehr is the pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church of Mount Vernon, Alexandria, VA, part of the Metropolitan Washington DC Synod.

January 15–21. Darlene Bowden Muschett is a semi-retired parish pastor who serves as Discipleship Coordinator at Lord of the Mountains Lutheran Church in Dillon, CO.

January 22–28. Gene Bradbury, a retired ELCA pastor, teaches adult classes in theology and biblical history, and he writes stories and books. He lives in Sequim, WA.

January 29–February 4. Vivian Eucker lives on a farm near Albion, NE. A retired English teacher, she's a member of Zion Lutheran Church.

February 5–18. Heather Lee, a member of Lake Park Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, WI, is a mother, wife, teacher, and author of *This Moment of Retreat*.

February 19–March 4. Pat Siegler serves as pastor of Zion Church, ELCA, in Madison, WI. He and his wife have three children: Jacob, Lydia, and Brian.

March 5–18. Tanya Ferdinandusz is a wife, mother, freelance writer, and Bible study teacher from Colombo, Sri Lanka.

March 19–31. Daniel D. Maurer, St. Paul, MN, is former ELCA pastor, freelance writer, and author of *Sobriety: A Graphic Novel*.

Prayers. Beth Ann Doerring, Colorado Springs, CO, is currently pursuing a career in photography and writing.

Acknowledgments

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Name of Jesus

So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. (v. 27)

As a pastor, I offer this blessing from Numbers or a similar one at the close of worship every week. One Sunday, I gained a deeper appreciation of these words. All the congregants turned, faced the person next to them, joined hands, and repeated these words with me to each other. The effect was powerful and deeply moving. I realized how often we fail to understand the power we have to be a blessing and convey the presence of God.

Through Moses and Aaron, God blessed the people of Israel with God's own name. And we have been included in God's blessing through the holy name of Jesus. As we consider resolutions to begin this new year, perhaps this is a good place to start. May our interactions with all people and all creation declare God's gracious intent: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (vv. 24-26).

Gracious God, in this new year, use me to declare your blessing to all. Amen.

Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.
(v. 17)

As I write this, the United States Congress has begun their summer recess without acting on immigration reform, on the child refugee crisis at our Mexican border, on the growing inequity in our society...the list goes on and on. This morning Israeli rockets struck another U.N. shelter in Gaza, killing dozens more Palestinian children and fleeing civilians. Partisan gridlock, driven by an understanding of doctrinal purity that does not allow any compromise, has effectively paralyzed our political process. World leaders pursue the wisdom of brute force to achieve their goals, leaving the most vulnerable to suffer the most.

According to James, wisdom from above is pure and peaceable. The marks of wisdom include a willingness to yield and a lack of partiality—the very qualities that are being devalued today. It's ironic that much of the conflict we experience in the world claims religious motivations, when James speaks so clearly about the wisdom of God and how it differs from the brute wisdom of the ego. Let us seek the gentle wisdom of God.

Touch my heart with gentleness, O God, and help me seek first the pure wisdom of mercy. Amen.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? (v. 1)

Not since the Gilded Age in the 1920s has our society experienced the income inequities we live with today. More and more of the economic pie is in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Finger-pointing, accusations, and indignation increase and abound under such conditions. Those who are poor are vilified as lazy, swinging in the hammock of the social safety net. Yet that social safety net effectively subsidizes the profits of those who are wealthy by subsidizing their underpaid employees. Now this may be perfectly legal, and there could and should be discussions about how best to address this situation. What is undeniable for James is that this sorry state of affairs couldn't be farther from what God intends for us.

I have just come inside from filling our bird feeder. The neighborhood birds are squabbling over the feeding stations, oblivious to the fact that I have stocked the feeder with enough seed for a week. I feel a sad little tug at my heart watching them, knowing that in God's eyes, we're not much different.

**Generous God, you provide an abundance for all.
Open my eyes and end the wars between us.
Amen.**

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 110

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (v. 14)

Think for a moment of all the revelations of God in the Bible. Moses experienced God as a burning bush in the desert. The people of Israel knew God as a pillar of smoke and fire. On the mountain Moses could only glimpse the back of God when God passed because no human being could see God and live. These manifestations of God strike fear into our hearts. We fight the urge to run from them.

It's different with Jesus. No one runs from a baby. Babies are like magnets. They draw people closer for a better look. No one runs up to a pillar of smoke and fire, unless they're trying to put it out. The awe that John's narrative inspires is the wonder that in Jesus we witness a revelation of God like never before. Here is God, vulnerable and helpless. Our eyes don't tear up because smoke blew in them. We are moved to tears at the sight of God's heart, burning in love. In this infant Jesus, we behold the full glory of God.

O Lord, open my eyes to behold the fullness of your glory in grace and truth. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14

From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you. (v. 3b)

We live across the street from one of the small feeder creeks of the Potomac River. In the morning when I walk our collies, I am treated to the sight of the sun sparkling across the water. Or, in winter, the sun rises through the shimmering mist the cold air conjures from the water. And even on those dreary mornings when the rain falls and it's hard to tell where the creek ends and the day begins, my heart is lifted when the dogs bound joyfully out the front door. They seem to know instinctively what the psalmist affirms.

Every morning is a womb from which the world is born again and again. Every morning is the opportunity to take our place in the marvelous family of things, as Mary Oliver calls it. No matter how many mornings we've seen or will see, it doesn't matter. Each is new. God invites us to begin again. See the dogs, their noses to the ground, tails held high like flags, rejoicing in it all.

Gracious God, each morning you extend your grace, and I am renewed. Amen.

Proverbs 22:1-9; Luke 6:27-31

The Epiphany of Our Lord

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. (v. 2)

In Matthew's birth narrative, strangers from far away appeared in Jerusalem. These strangers from the East, maybe as far away as India and Arabia, were Gentile magi. They showed up in the Holy City and declared that they had seen a sign of the arrival of a new king of the Jews. It took these strangers from the East to see what Herod's own priests and advisors missed.

We worship a Lord who was born the illegitimate child of an unwed mother, outside in a stable, while only a few yards away, people were laughing, cozy, and warm in the inn. We worship a God who took his place among the pagans and the outcasts who warm themselves around small fires, who live under the night stars, and take off for miles and years following their own bright stars. If we truly travel with the magi and see the star, we can never go back to Herod, we can never go back to the world we came from. We can never be the same again.

Holy God, in the birth of Jesus you have changed everything through your all-inclusive love. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12

She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.” (2:10b)

Moses' mother hid her son in the Nile, in a spot where she hoped the Pharaoh's daughter would find him. The Pharaoh ordered that the Hebrew children should be killed. The Hebrews were getting too numerous and threatened Egyptian society. Moses' mother was willing to give up her son in order to save him. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby, and knowing full well where the baby came from, she took him for her own. She didn't see a threat. She only saw a child. In a strange twist, the child's real mother was found to nurse the baby. She and her son were reunited. She would raise her son for a life she couldn't even imagine in the Pharaoh's court. The Hebrew slave, plucked from the water, would become Egyptian royalty.

Sometimes it's hard to entrust what's precious to us to God. But God works in the midst of brokenness to bring healing, restore relationships, and work for the good of all who place their trust in God.

O God, help me trust your goodness, even when I must do what I would rather not do. Amen.

Psalm 110; Hebrews 11:23-26

The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. (v. 4)

Today, a single voice amplified by technologies like Facebook and other social media can wield a powerful impact. Many celebrities have millions of followers waiting for their pronouncements that in turn influence opinions, set trends, market goods, and generally shape the culture in which we live. But you don't have to be a celebrity. Even the average Facebook user in 2014 had a circle of 350 friends. One unintended consequence of all this is that the background noise of our lives has grown almost deafening. Experts have sprung up to craft and hone a message to maximize its impact to cut through the noise.

What makes the Lord's voice powerful is not how loud it is or how big a crowd it's able to draw. In fact, as the prophet Elijah discovered, in the end the Lord's voice is very still and small, whispered intimately to the heart. It's the voice that says, "I love you." These words are the most majestic, powerful message any of us will ever hear.

**Your voice speaks to me and calls me by name,
Lord. Let me love others as you have loved me.
Amen.**

1 Samuel 3:1-21; Acts 9:10-19a

**These are the things you must insist on and teach.
(v. 11)**

It's easy to get sidetracked in life. It's easy to forget what's important. It's easy to lose sight of God's purpose and to replace it with our own pride and ego. God calls us to live in a big, diverse world, bounding in colors, sights, and sounds. Within our world live millions of people who have many ways of thinking and being. It can seem intimidating. We try to set limits and draw boundary lines in order to regain a sense of control. We might even try to insist on one right way.

The writer of 1 Timothy encouraged readers to resist that impulse and recognize that all God has created is good when received in thanksgiving and sanctified by God's word and prayer. Nothing, he wrote, is to be rejected. This passage from 1 Timothy calls us to a holistic way of living marked by gratitude, thanksgiving, and prayer. As he said, "These are the things you must insist on and teach."

**Dear Lord, help me to live in faith today, and to receive everything in gratitude and thanksgiving.
Amen.**

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 29

“Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God.” (vv. 2b-3a)

In this passage, David was addressing his son Solomon for the last time. He said beautifully that he was about to “go the way of all the earth” (v. 2). Even in death, the great king understood his connection with God’s creation. Death had not isolated him, but instead drew him into communion with all creation.

David knew firsthand that it takes strength and courage to keep the charge of the Lord. David was painfully aware that he often lacked both. Ultimately, David’s strength and courage came from his ability to admit his weaknesses and not try to hide them from God. And in this passage, he entrusted himself to God’s care and faithfulness with the prayer that Solomon would surpass his father and that the Lord would reward him and bless Israel. David’s final prayer was that the best of who he was would live on in Solomon so that God’s blessing of Israel might continue, even after David was gone. What a wonderful way of understanding our own lives and our connections to the people we love.

O Lord, your love and faithfulness endure in all my circumstances and choices. Use me as a blessing today. Amen.

Psalm 29; Luke 5:1-11

The Baptism of Our Lord

**John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the
forgiveness of sins. (v. 4)**

John had humanity's number. He saw that everyone, not just the Gentile converts, needed the cleansing of baptism. John was right. What not even John understood was the radical, scandalous, and all-consuming grace of God. John's jaw dropped when Jesus himself came to him to be baptized: the one whose sandal John was not worthy to untie; the one who would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. For if baptism is for the unclean, the sinful, the brood of vipers, then why was Jesus standing before John in that muddy water, insisting John baptize him?

Jesus stands with those who have fallen. Jesus forgives those who are mistaken. He loves the unloveable. Jesus didn't come to judge us. He came to transform us in love. That's what baptism by fire and the Holy Spirit means.

**O God, your Son was baptized in the River Jordan
by John. Extend your Holy Spirit in love and
blessing. Amen.**

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7

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

This summer, as I write these devotions, my mother has discontinued chemotherapy and enrolled in hospice. The doctors say continued treatment would, at best, postpone the inevitable only a few more months. When measured against the physical and emotional cost, it didn't seem worth it. This has become a summer of water, up to the neck. Of turnpikes and traffic, a daily drip of almost imperceptible losses, rising slowly and steadily. My father died unexpectedly almost 14 years ago. In some sense, we are still in shock. My mother is giving us all the opportunity to reflect and prepare as her death slowly approaches.

Sitting with her the other day, I thought how much time I've wasted being afraid. Afraid or not, we all come to this moment, where God and love are all that's left and all that matters. I don't know what the situation will be by the time you read this. I've seen through this time that God saves us every day, no matter how fast or far the water eventually rises.

Keep me connected with the things that matter today, and don't let fear keep me from extending my heart in love. Amen.

Genesis 17:1-13; Romans 4:1-12

And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.

(v. 16)

Paul, sent to persecute Christians, was one of God's reclamation projects. He was part of a long line of prophets and patriarchs with questionable pasts. Abram, the father of faith, gave his wife as a concubine to save his skin. He sent one son out to die in the desert with his mother, and he tried to sacrifice his other son, Isaac, who finally fulfilled God's promise. Isaac had two sons. Jacob tricked his father and stole his brother Esau's birthright. Jacob wrestled with God's angel and was given the name Israel. Moses, the giver of the Law, was wanted for murder by the Egyptians and was on the run, tending his father-in-law's flock, when he came upon the burning bush.

Scripture shows that God uses a different yardstick to measure us. We may feel inadequate for the work God calls us to do, but God has been using flawed people like us to accomplish great things since the beginning of time.

**Lord, help me to trust your perceptions of me,
and use me to accomplish your will. Amen.**

Exodus 30:22-38; Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36

I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (v. 17b)

Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The witness of scripture certainly attests to that. The children of Israel endured many injustices throughout their history, including long periods of exile, occupation, drought, and famine. The prophets like Isaiah called them to remember, in the midst of those difficult times, that their hope and their help was in the God of Israel who would surely act to deliver them.

Jesus even went so far as to identify himself with the poor and the least of these so intimately that acts of kindness and charity done on their behalf was the same as offering charity and kindness to Jesus. And conversely, ignoring the needs of those who are poor and marginalized in society is equivalent to ignoring Jesus. Faithful disciples live with their hearts open to the needs of others, and as the motto of the ELCA says, offer their willing hands to do the holy work of God.

Give me ready hands and a willing heart to lift up those who wait upon you, O Lord. Amen.

Psalm 69:1-5, 30-36; John 1:29-34

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. (v. 14)

The first memory I have of being alive is this one: I was sitting on my mother's knee and she was bouncing me a little as my dad drove us to the movies. It is a memory of being loved and cherished without any effort on my part.

The role of parents is extremely important—and so daunting. If we transmit unconditional love to our children, we point them to God's unconditional love. If we give them the idea that they must earn our love, they may relate to God only as a harsh task-master.

Of course we don't know if the psalmist was a parent or not, but we do get a clear sense that he had experienced God's love with no strings attached. The psalmist praised God for his own life: I am fearfully and wonderfully made. He praised God for all things good: wonderful are your works. The psalmist's words remind us that we too can give thanks often for our lives and for God's unconditional love. We can also share that love with others.

Loving Parent-God, I thank you for my life and for your amazing love. Help me to love without any conditions attached. Amen.

Judges 2:6-15; 2 Corinthians 10:1-11

For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. (v. 18)

It was the sabbath. Paul was in the synagogue in Antioch. Having been asked to speak by the synagogue officials, he related God's history with the Israelites from the exodus until the time of John the Baptist.

While reading today's lesson, I am drawn to these words: God put up with them. Those five words sum up much of biblical history. God put up with old Sarah's doubting laughter when told she would conceive. God put up with her grandson Jacob's deception when he stole his brother Esau's birthright. God put up with Peter's denials of Jesus—just to name a few instances down through the centuries.

What matters more to me is this question: how much has God put up with me in my fairly long life? My doubts about God, my fears of aging, my unsettled thoughts about dying, my jealousy of others, and my harsh words to loved ones. Today and every day I need to give thanks to God for continuing to put up with me. Do you also want to thank God for putting up with you?

Ever-patient God, thank you for putting up with me. Daily help me to live so that you might be glad I am your child. Amen.

Judges 2:16-23; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD. (v. 21b)

Samuel's mother, Hannah, had prayed fervently for a son. In gratitude to God for the birth of Samuel, she offered him to the service of the Lord after she had weaned him. Samuel was trained for the priesthood by Eli the priest. He learned what sacrifices to offer to the Lord and when to offer them. He learned the temple prayers and procedures.

What does it mean for us to live in the presence of the Lord? What sacrifices do we offer to God? A couple of prayers by rote every now and then? A purposely fervent prayer when we get into a difficult situation? Maybe even an hour on Sunday morning—sometimes?

Centuries after Samuel's service, Jesus spoke these words: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). What is my greatest treasure? My home? My investments? My need to have everyone's esteem and affection? Could it be that the more we open our hearts to receive God as our greatest treasure, the more we may experience God?

Ever-present God, I open my heart to you. Help me to live in your presence at all times. Amen.

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” (v. 43)

If you happen to be my age, you may remember the words to the song, “Pass It On”: “It only takes a spark to get a fire going.” As I read today’s verses, the image of a fire comes to mind: first one spark flickers, followed by another spark, and then another until the fire blazes forth. First Jesus called Andrew; then Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Then Jesus told Philip, “Follow me.” And Philip invited Nathaniel to meet Jesus as well. One spark followed by another: one disciple followed by another. The fire of commitment to Jesus grew and spread.

But fire can bring either warmth and comfort or untold destruction. It is the same with our witness to Jesus. If we share Jesus with compassion and helpful actions, we can bring the warmth of his love to others. If we share him with arrogance, we can destroy any spark of faith flickering in another. Striving to follow Jesus is an awesome responsibility.

Flaming Spirit of God, set me on fire with your love. Help me to share it in ways that draw others to you. Amen.

1 Samuel 3:1-10 [11-20]; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13)

During Jesus’ ministry, itinerant healers traveled the countryside performing healings. There were others teaching throughout the land as well. Jesus might well have wanted to know if his disciples thought that he was simply a healer or a teacher. Or was he something more than that? Simon Peter (rarely hesitant to speak up) understood the fullness of who Jesus was. He said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (v. 16)

Who do we say Jesus is? Simply a good man who lived 2,000 years ago and did many good things? Simply a teacher? A healer? Or do we, too, know him as the Christ, the Savior of the world, who calls us daily to love and serve in his name?

One way we can follow Jesus is to stay in touch: daily opening our hearts to his presence and seeking his guidance for our words and our deeds.

Ever-present God, help me to follow Jesus, the Messiah, each day. Amen.

Acts 4:8-13; Psalm 18:1-6, 16-19; 1 Corinthians 10:1-5

**But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and
faithfulness. (v. 15)**

The psalmist was in a difficult situation. In this psalm, he asked God to: “preserve my life” and “save your servant” (v. 2). We don’t know if it was a personal problem or one facing the community for whom he spoke. But we can learn how to face our own difficulties by following the psalmist’s example. He did at least two things to move through the challenging situation.

First, the psalmist remembered the past help and mercy of the Lord. Verse 15 is an exact quote of Exodus 34:6, recalling how the love and faithfulness of God had guided the Hebrew slaves in their exodus from Egypt. The psalmist remembered God’s past help. Second, the psalmist gave thanks: “I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart” (v. 12).

We know that to be human is to face difficulties—at home, at work, at school, or even in our congregations. When trouble comes, I too want to remember God’s past help and give thanks for many ongoing blessings.

**Faithful God, help me to remember all your
goodness to me and to keep thanking you always.
Amen.**

1 Samuel 15:10-31; Acts 5:1-11

Jesus...said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (v. 16)

Because this is one of my favorite Bible stories, I like to imagine it.

It was a hot, sunny day in Galilee. A gentle breeze was blowing through the olive trees. Moving closer, you could hear laughter rippling through the breeze and ongoing giggles coming from little children, trying to get close to Jesus. Parents were handing their babies to Jesus for a blessing. He gazed at each of them with a love in his eyes that could melt the hardest of hearts.

Then a couple of large, fishy-smelling disciples arrived: *Jesus, get those kids out of here; they are making too much noise. They don't belong here.* Jesus stood up and told them passionately, *Let them stay right here; they are my children. The kingdom of God belongs to them.* Jesus knew that children were often completely disregarded, and he would have none of it.

Why did Jesus welcome the children? Is it because children trust, freely receive and give love, and are willing to forgive? Here's a bigger question: can we trust, love, and forgive as freely as they do?

Loving Jesus, bless my longing to follow you with a childlike trust, ready and willing to love and forgive others. Amen.

Genesis 16:1-14; Psalm 86

**For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope
is from him. (v. 5)**

Our lives are filled with noises and distractions. For example, many libraries, once quiet, are no longer so. Where can we find a place to listen quietly for the voice of God?

Early one morning, I sought such a place at a nearby lake. The beach was empty and quiet. I listened to my breathing and waited in the stillness. Surely God's presence was in this place.

A car drove into the parking lot. Doors slammed as young people tumbled from the car. Rock music punctured the stillness. From a tent down the beach someone tuned a radio to a country and western station. I tried to ignore rock music in one ear and country in the other. All hope of quiet disappeared.

It's not easy to find a place to wait in silence. However, that should not stop us from seeking such a place. Neither does it mean that God's voice cannot reach us on our busiest days. Closing eyes while at a desk, looking out a window, or standing at a sink can open a door to God's immediate presence.

**Spirit of God, find me in the momentary silences
of my busy days. Amen.**

Jeremiah 19:1-15; Revelation 18:11-20

Where is the promise of his coming? (v. 4a)

Many have gathered on hilltops to wait for Jesus' return. The scene is played out again and again by those who believe they know when Jesus will appear. Their hope reminds me of the child who opens the cereal box to find the prize inside. The scoffer across the table says, "It's always at the very bottom. Or it might not be there at all."

Peter was addressing those who were waiting. They were scoffed at because so much time had passed, and Jesus had not returned. Perhaps they were being told there was no prize at all. What about today?

What do we do with the promise of Jesus' coming? Perhaps it's more about the cereal than the prize—more about the journey than the destination. Isn't our spiritual nourishment really about the daily presence of Jesus in our lives?

The promise is in the prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed." It's a prayer that can be used not only at table, but throughout the day.

Come, Lord Jesus. Be present in each moment of my day. Amen.

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 62:5-12

[Jesus said,] “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!” (v.13a)

Jesus sent out seventy to carry his message, and he reminded them of the difficulties ahead. He himself had been rejected in the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. It would be no different for his followers.

Jesus’ instructions seem out of character for one who continually spoke of compassion. Did these words come from Luke’s own experience? Or was Jesus trying to prepare his disciples for the worst? What is to be our response when others do not wish to hear what we have to say? In the previous verses, Jesus suggested that the messenger walk away. It’s enough that the kingdom of God has come near.

I’m reminded of a prison chaplain who introduced himself to a prisoner. The inmate looked the chaplain in the eye. His words were clear and threatening: “Just stay away from me.” The wise chaplain did as the man asked. But it did not stop him from seeking ways to show God’s love. How many homes rejected the seventy? We do not know. But we do know the kingdom had come near their homes.

**O God, give me wisdom to speak lovingly to others. Give me patience to know when to listen.
Amen.**

Jeremiah 20:14-18; Psalm 62:5-12

And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (v. 17)

The pastor placed the cut-out paper fish in a plastic bucket. He added a cut-out of a man dressed in a business suit. Five children stood in the aisle on Sunday for the children’s story. Each child took a turn with the fishing pole. The line dropped in the bucket. When the child reeled in a catch, the congregation applauded. The last little girl caught the paper man. The crowd laughed, and then went silent. “What do you think he’s doing in there?” the pastor asked the child. She was quick to answer, “I think he drowned.”

It wasn’t the result the storyteller hoped for, but the point was made. Jesus used a metaphor fishermen would understand. He called Simon and Andrew to cast their nets in new waters. They would not change professions, but they would focus on people rather than fish. They would still need patience. They would still experience more failure than success. These disciples would no longer take life for their own use, but give life to others in need of good news.

Loving God, open my ears to listen for those who need your love. Help me wait patiently for those who pass my way. Amen.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Conversion of Paul

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace,... (v. 15)

The apostle Paul was so certain of God's love, he couldn't imagine a time when he was without it. His vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus convinced him he was on God's radar. He was called and valued by God.

How many today feel undervalued? Not to be valued often results in anger, bitterness, resentment, and hopelessness. Such is the story of a young boy who accidentally killed a child while cleaning his gun. His classmates avoided him at school. Their silence drove him to a decision. If no one talked to him by Friday, he would take his own life.

The last class ended, and he was on his way home in despair. A girl in his class crossed the grass and offered him a stick of gum. Years later the young boy, now a man, told how that simple offer saved his life.

We all need to be valued. Paul felt so loved by God that he was certain it had always been so, even before he was born.

Spirit of God, I have been valued by you; give me the courage to reach out to those who feel unloved. Amen.

Acts 9:1-22; Psalm 67; Luke 21:10-19

Be still, and know that I am God! (v. 10a)

I watched the eagle on a high snag. How still he sat. In a lake nearby, a blue heron stood on one leg and held his prehistoric frame perfectly still. Time seemed unimportant to both birds; they were unhurried and unworried. Where does the stillness come from?

Does the swift darting over the fields envy the eagle? Does the hummingbird flitting from flower to flower envy the heron? Species are different. Someone said to me, "You seem at home in your own skin." Perhaps that should be our goal.

But I often envy those who sit still and appreciate the moment. The psalmist calls us to move inward. Clear a place where the Spirit can land. Even the swift must be still sometimes. The hummingbird must find rest.

The psalmist invites us to slow our heartbeats, halt our activities, and be still. The writer knows stillness begins from within. To hear the voice of God I must stop thinking, desiring, and planning. I must be as still as the eagle and the heron.

Create in me a still heart, O God, and renew a quiet spirit within me. Amen.

Genesis 45:25–46:7; Acts 5:33-42

**Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding
raise her voice? (v. 1)**

The Bible often uses the word *wisdom*. Job asked the question: "But where shall wisdom be found?" (Job 28:12). Luke wrote that, "Jesus increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). Paul referred to Jesus as the wisdom sent from God (1 Corinthians 1:30).

What are we to make of this word that crops up like a dandelion on the surface of the biblical lawn? Wisdom calls us to go deeper in our relationship with God. Proverbs reminds us to look for wisdom on our daily walk, on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, and beside our gates.

It's a profound invitation to keep ourselves open to God's wisdom throughout the day. I began to think about my daily walk in a new way. On Sunday morning, I take a walk to relax and think. As I pass the church, I imagine that Jesus accompanies me through town and into the countryside. "Silly," some might say. For me it's an invitation to begin the day in the presence of Jesus, the wisdom of God.

**Gracious God, walk with me this day and give me
wisdom. Amen.**

Psalm 46; Mark 3:13-19a

**Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who
delight in them. (v. 2)**

My three-year-old daughter, determined to tie her own shoelaces, tried and tried again...beginning of wisdom. As a mother, I taught her how to tie her laces and then patiently allowed her to try again and again...beginning of wisdom.

Psalm 111 spoke of the greatness of the Almighty. Through graciousness and compassion, the Lord's works were honorable and righteous. God had performed three miracles for the faithful: fed them, gave them land, and freed them from slavery. The psalmist reminded us of God's love as the Lord's people left Egypt. Understanding the magnitude of God's deeds and righteousness leaves us in awe and is the beginning of wisdom.

Allowing a three-year-old to tie her own shoes is the beginning of wisdom for the child and the parent. The accomplishment of such a small task can't measure up to the works of God. The births of my three children, miracles, leave me in awe of the Lord. Standing in awe of the greatness of God's works becomes the beginning of wisdom, the tie that binds our hearts in love for God.

**Thank you, God, for your righteous works. Guide
me to fulfill the beginning of my wisdom by
following your commandments. Through Christ I
pray. Amen.**

Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one. (v. 13b)

Struggling to swim in water over her head, my grandchild reaches for my hand. I tell her to hold on fast. Holding onto my hand, she catches her breath and is ready to swim again.

John spoke to the people of Pergamum with a sharp two-edged sword. One edge of the sword was the word of Christ; the other edge symbolized the warrior image of Christ destroying evil. First, John gave Pergamum the good news: they had held fast to God's name even to the death, like Antipas. On the other hand, he warned them that they must be intolerant of evil in the form of idolatry and immorality. Valuing things before God, not obeying God's commandments, and malicious gossip can be evil. When faced with evil, even in tribulation, we must be careful to not compromise God's laws. John reminded those with ears to not tolerate evil.

Just as my grandchild holds fast to me, we must hold fast to the word of God so that the hidden manna and the white stone with a new name will be ours.

Thank you, Jesus, for your word. Guide me to be intolerant of evil. Amen.

Deuteronomy 12:28-32; Psalm 111

The LORD your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep,...and to him you shall hold fast. (v. 4)

Our local weatherman gives us daily predictions of what is to come. He often qualifies his prediction by saying, "Tomorrow will be a 'mixed bag' of weather." Frequently, his predictions are accurate.

Moses gave the new generation wisdom in the book of Deuteronomy. He reinforced God's laws. One of his greatest warnings was to beware of false prophets. The ultimate test given in this passage stated that if a prophet was leading people away from the Lord, even if the predictions came true, this was a false prophet. Jeremiah expanded this by specifically saying that a false prophet preached in the name of a false god, said what people wanted to hear, had not stood in God's council to hear the word, and relied on his own dreams, not God's word (Jeremiah 28:5-9).

Our local weatherman uses the best technology to make predictions; we trust him. God has given us the best test for knowing false prophets: don't turn from the way God has commanded you to walk; trust in the Lord. Following God's commandments, trusting the Lord's word, directs our walk.

**Thank you, God, for guiding my walk through life.
Steer me to follow your path. Amen.**

Psalm 111; Matthew 8:28-9:1