

HOPE MAKES A WAY

PSALM 24

Pillar or Gate?

*Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.*

Psalm 24:7

On All Saints' Day, as we read the list of those who have died in the past year, I often find myself picturing how each individual upheld our community. We call faithful people "pillars of the church." But is thinking of these saints as pillars a bit too static? A faithful life is active. Saints are those who open their arms in welcome, pull up another chair, have the vision to see where God might be calling the community of believers, and spur us to action. Perhaps they are not solid, unmoving pillars but rather gates and doors.

Psalm 24 reminds us that we enter God's holiness when we seek God's face rather than upholding things that are false. Our call is not just to uphold the church but rather to throw open the doors and let God's glory in.



Oh, Lord, I thank you for the saints who welcomed me into your presence. May I be as open and welcoming to others as a wide-open gate. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

HOPE MAKES A WAY

MARK 12:38–44

Generous Love

They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.

Mark 12:40a

The story of the widow who gives a few pennies to the temple treasury is familiar, but we don't always remember what comes before. Jesus is teaching in the temple courts and calls out people whose displays of religion are meant to show their own importance. Piety for the sake of appearances isn't just harmful to the show-offs: Jesus says what they do actually "devours widows' houses."

It is easy to position ourselves with Jesus and the disciples in this story and to tell ourselves that we, of course, would never be ostentatious with our displays of religion. But I wonder if the people Jesus pointed to that day were fully aware of the harm they were doing. Did they believe their public observance was a witness to others? Perhaps they were simply doing what had always been done. Which makes me ask, what might I be doing in my own practice of religion that, intentionally or unintentionally, harms my soul and devours the resources of those in need of justice?



Lord Jesus, may my devotion for you always move me to acts of generosity and love. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

HOPE MAKES A WAY

PSALM 146

Hoping for Justice

*Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.*

Psalm 146:3

The morning after any election, I read or sing Psalm 146. One of my seminary professors taught me this practice: he said it served him well in years of living in a country where elections were often rigged and unjust.

I need this psalm both when I'm excited by the results of an election and when I'm disappointed. On mornings when I am celebrating the results, I need the reminder that my hope is not ultimately in a political candidate but in the work of God in the world. And on mornings when I fear that candidates elected will not be equitable rulers, I need the reminder that God is the one who protects all who cry out for justice.

We are called to see the world with God's eyes and to work alongside God to move the world toward the wholeness, the shalom, that God intends for all of creation. And God is finally our hope for the world.



*O God, may I put my trust in you, see the world
through your eyes, and follow you as you move the
world toward wholeness. Amen.*

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

HOPE MAKES A WAY

RUTH 3:1–5; 4:13–17

Hope in Community

The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth 4:17

When Naomi returns to Bethlehem, she is an outsider, accompanied only by a Moabite daughter-in-law. In that time and culture, a woman’s security was her connection to a man. Ruth’s and Naomi’s prospects were grim. They were reduced to picking at the edges of the harvest, surviving on the margins of the community. Naomi, though, knows how to work the system and coaches Ruth through an intricate plan to return them to security.

In the end, the two women are welcomed into the bosom of the community. As Ruth gives birth to her and Boaz’s baby, the neighbors recognize in the face of that child not just Naomi’s resourcefulness but the graciousness of the God of Israel. Their recognition of that hope blossoms into hospitality and acceptance when they give him a name. God’s children are never abandoned: God is steadfast, breaking the barriers we humans create to remind us that there is always hope and a better way.



God of hope, may I have the openness to welcome others and the eyes to recognize your surprising gifts. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2021

HOPE MAKES A WAY

PSALM 127

Hope's Heritage

*Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.*

Psalm 127:1a

Sometimes I lie awake at night, worrying that a sound in the attic means that I have a squirrel problem or that I need a new roof; and when I figure out what's wrong, everyone will know that I have failed as a homeowner. If this goes on for more than a few days, I know that it is time to attend to my mental health.

We live in a culture that praises us for our accomplishments and attributes success in life to the work of our own hands. Success or failure are attributed to the self. Our hope, we are taught, is internal.

Psalm 127 reminds us that this is wrong: when the people of Israel approach Jerusalem to worship God, they sing this song as a reminder that with God, our hope is external. The buildings we construct, the heritage we pass on through our descendants—these things are not our true source of hope and security. Hope is not something we create: it is given to us by our Creator.



*O Lord, may I sleep in peace, knowing that my hope
is in you. Amen.*

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

HOPE MAKES A WAY

1 KINGS 17:8–16

Hope for What's Next

For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.

1 Kings 17:14

When I'm hiking and need to cross a stream, I'd rather not put my foot on the first rock until I've made a plan about the path of rocks I might use to get safely to the other side. It turns out that trusting in God is not always like finding a path across a stream. Sometimes God asks us to put aside our fear and take things one step at a time, trusting that God has the next steps figured out.

What Elijah asks of the widow of Zarephath is beyond generosity. He asks her to risk her and her son's lives by giving him the first loaf of bread. By the widow's careful accounting, that is the last loaf she can make. Elijah asks her not to fear and to step out in confidence that God has a next step ready, even if she cannot see it.



*O God, guide my feet as I take each step forward,
even when I cannot see where I am going next.
Amen.*

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

GETTING COMFORTABLE

1 SAMUEL 1:4–16

The Comfort of Being Heard

Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?”

1 Samuel 1:8

Hannah’s pain as she longs for a child is still familiar. Many of us have felt this pain or know someone who has. But we’re often unsure of the words or actions that would bring comfort. We struggle for the right words to say. Or we assume that we know what is causing someone’s distress, and often, we assume wrong. Hannah’s husband tries to comfort her by pointing out what she has: isn’t he, her loving husband, enough for her? And Eli, the priest, assumes that drunkenness is Hannah’s problem.

Hannah knows what she needs: she needs to be heard. And God is the one who will listen. God’s comfort for Hannah is not just in Samuel, the answer to her prayers, but in the fact that God truly hears her. The name, *Samuel*, has its roots in the words for “God heard.” We cannot always fix everyone’s pain, but the first step to comforting someone is to hear their cries.



Open my ears, O Lord, that I might truly hear the cries of those who need comfort. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2021

GETTING COMFORTABLE

1 SAMUEL 1:9–20

Audacious Prayers

I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD.

1 Samuel 1:15b

Imagine walking into your church sanctuary and seeing a modern-day Hannah in the pews: lips moving quickly with her silent words, tears pouring down her cheeks. Many of us would probably wonder, as does Eli, about her state of mind. There is a ferocity about how Hannah prays, not just in her outward appearance, but also in her words. She asks so much of God, and she promises so much in return.

Hannah's example makes me wonder if our prayers are too restrained and polite: Are we willing to ask God for big things? Are we comfortable enough with God that we can be open about the great desires and the great wounds of our lives? Most of all, are we ready for God to answer prayers in ways that are even bigger than what we ask for? Because God answers Hannah with so much more than just a child: Samuel will grow up to be one of the greatest of Israel's prophets, shaping the future of God's people.



O Lord, may I pray to you with the confidence and audacity of Hannah. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2021

GETTING COMFORTABLE

1 SAMUEL 2:1–10

Harmonies of Faithfulness

*There is no Holy One like the LORD,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.*

1 Samuel 2:2

Upon the birth of a child, we would expect the song of a mother to be a lullaby. Instead, Hannah breaks into a song that is about the victory of a whole nation. Birth is a powerful experience, but this seems like an odd choice, even if it is something that was added to the story by a later editor and not what Hannah herself actually sang.

This song is similar to other songs that the people of Israel sang in their public worship. It reminds us that we experience God's work both in our individual lives and in our life together as the people of God. When we sing together, the lines of a song might remind each of us of a different personal experience. But when all those experiences come together, the harmony of our own individual stories tells the bigger story of God's work in the world.



*God of Hannah and Samuel, I join my voice with
your people to sing of your faithfulness. Amen.*

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

GETTING COMFORTABLE

HEBREWS 10:11–18

Muscle Memory

*“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds.”*

Hebrews 10:16

Two decades ago, I bought a book and taught myself to knit. It took me months to learn. One mistake in knitting can make a whole project unravel. It was incredibly frustrating; I felt like I was doing the wrong thing every time I picked up my needles. Now, after years of practice, my fingers know the motion of knitting almost in the same way that my lungs know how to breathe.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us in our Christian life by reminding us of the promise that God’s law will be in our hearts and written on our minds. We can live our lives without the shame and anxiety of sin because we live in the knowledge that we are forgiven, that Jesus’ work has already perfected us. Even when we do make mistakes, we are freed to live in this new reality where doing God’s will is written on our hearts, part of our muscle memory.



*O Lord, may I live as one who is freed and forgiven,
with your law so close to me that it is part of who I
am. Amen.*

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2021

GETTING COMFORTABLE

HEBREWS 10:19–25

The Provocation of the Saints

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24

It has been a challenging couple of years for many North American Christians. I have watched as friends feel called to move out of their comfort zones to address injustice in the world. Sometimes, we need extra prodding to step out and do this work. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that our communal life in the church is not just about relaxing into the comfort that, in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. We must use that comfort as a jumping-off point to follow Christ's call into the world. This is one of the reasons we organize as the body of Christ, a community that worships and works together: when we get too comfortable, those who are alongside of us can be the ones who gently tug at us to get up and get moving. Sometimes, we Christians are called to provoke, even to irritate, one another into action. I am grateful, as I look back, for those saints who have prodded me out of complacency and pushed me to live more and more bravely as a disciple of Jesus Christ.



Thank you, God, for those saints who have pushed me beyond comfort and provoked me to love and to do good deeds. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

GETTING COMFORTABLE

MARK 13:1–8

No Stone Unturned

Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Mark 13:2

This section of Mark’s Gospel is called “the little apocalypse.” An apocalypse is not actually about destruction so much as it is about uncovering. When Jesus talks here about no stone being left on a stone, it’s not just a reference to destroying the temple but also to the idea that everything will be uncovered: no stone left unturned.

Historians will surely look back at our recent history and see it as a time when stones were turned over: in the last years, those of us who were previously sheltered from harsh realities of inequality and injustice have learned much about what is hiding under the stones of our own society, and much of what we have learned ought to make those of us who live comfortable lives uncomfortable. There are ways in which our world is incredibly broken. The work of fixing this world seems overwhelming, even frightening. Jesus tells the disciples that fearful times will come, but they should not worry: these times will not be the end. There is something even better being born.



Lord Jesus, may I be brave and may I look forward in hope toward the better world being born. Amen.

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2021

GETTING COMFORTABLE

PSALM 16

Security Blanket

*Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.*

Psalm 16:9

On days when my kids are home sick, we usually wind up with a pile of blankets and pillows on the couch. Even my teenager takes comfort in a tangle of blankets from her bed. There's something about curling up in a place that feels and smells like safety and security that helps us to rest.

As you read Psalm 16, think about the places where you have felt security in your life: in the arms of a loved one, surrounded by the smell of a grandparent's cooking, in a beautiful and beloved outdoor place. This psalm tells us that God, for us, is the true refuge and place of safety. It's not that all dangers have disappeared from our lives, but the psalmist calls us to rest, body and soul, in the knowledge that God holds us. This is a psalm to cling to, much like a security blanket, when we need that reminder.



*Surround me, O God, with your comfort so that I
may rest securely in your care. Amen.*

Erica L. Schemper, Saint Paul, Minnesota

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2021

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

JOHN 18:33–37

God Says or We Say?

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king."

John 18:37b

There is something comforting about being able to define and categorize, to put things in neat boxes we can understand. It helps us make sense of the world. Throughout our history, the church has used different metaphors to understand God, including Christ as a ruler. In his conversation with Pilate, Jesus points out that others are using the word *king* to describe him; Jesus never declares himself a king.

As we prepare for Reign of Christ Sunday, we recognize that Christ did not come to conquer in the ways human rulers often have. But we call Christ our ruler as a way to honor God's sovereignty. We still recognize Christ's reign, acknowledging that we owe our allegiance to God, not to earthly powers. We look to God for strength and guidance, sing out praises for God's glory and mercy, and work for the day when God's will is done throughout the earth.



Sovereign God, help us to honor your will in how we live our lives. Amen.

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2021

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

JOHN 18:33–37

Your Kingdom Come

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world."

John 18:36

When I was a child, I took this verse to mean that Jesus did have a kingdom, far off in space. It was probably like heaven, where my young mind imagined we would all walk on clouds and ride unicorns. I believed Jesus would eventually transport all of us to this magical kingdom when he came again. Of course, as I grew older, I grew out of these ideas, beginning to understand that Jesus meant that his kind of kingdom would be something completely at odds with how our world tends to function. Jesus, who promised that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, would not have a kingdom recognizable to any of us. He was always turning things upside down, going against the cultural norms; why would his kingdom be any different?

When we pray "your kingdom come," we pray for our kingdoms to be toppled so that God's can thrive. It might mean we give up some of our own power, but wouldn't that be worth it to experience what God has in store?



*O Christ, help us work for your kingdom to come.
Amen.*

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

JOHN 18:33–37

A Kin-dom

“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”

John 18:37b

As Jesus continues his conversation with Pilate, he gently shifts away from the idea of kingdom as Pilate was likely envisioning it, clarifying his actual purposes. His kingdom is not about power. It is not about control, or dominance, or so many of the things that we associate with human rulers. Even as Jesus prepares to go to his death, he insists that his purpose in life is a testimony. It is about truth: the truth of a God who loves us unconditionally. It is a love that we could never earn and that is freely given, a love that binds us together in what theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz calls a “kin-dom,” where we are brought together as family.*

A king, by human standards, does not eat with commoners, or ride triumphantly on a donkey, or die on a cross. But Christ testifies to the truth of a God who wants to be by our side, living with us and loving us to the end.



Loving God, thank you for coming to be with us so we might know you more fully. Amen.

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

* Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Kin-dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal,” in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamin Valentin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

REVELATION 1:4B-8

Our Infinite God

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Revelation 1:8

"I AM THAT I AM" (Exod. 3:14, KJV). "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev. 1:8). Sometimes the phrases used to describe God in Scripture are abstract and even confusing. While Jesus sometimes uses more familiar images, like "Good Shepherd," to describe God's nature, other times the Bible can leave us scratching our heads as we encounter language that seems more cosmic than relatable.

The truth is, we worship a God who cannot be described in words, who is beyond the capacity of all our languages. Our human definitions, categories, and even metaphors fall short when it comes to describing God. Phrases like these try to get at the boundlessness of God's nature. God is the beginning, the ending, and everything in between. God encompasses all of time and space. God is too infinite to be described or understood. But it is this expansive God who comes to be with us, who cares for us, and who saves us. We are not too small to be noticed; we are valued by the creator of the cosmos.

—♦—

Almighty God, thank you for caring for all creatures, great and small. Amen.

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

DANIEL 7:9–10, 13–14

Everlasting

*His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.*

Daniel 7:14b

I remember being completely in awe the first time I went to Yosemite. I saw mountains rising majestically out of this exquisite landscape, and it took my breath away. I felt suddenly aware of how old this earth is. How many years had it taken for these rocks to form? Though I knew it wasn't scientifically accurate, it felt like these mountains had always been here and would always be here. The thought brought me comfort in a time when I felt as if everything was shifting around me and nothing was sure; at least these mountains would always remain.

This is the kind of permanence of the dominion of God, a realm that no power on earth can destroy. Though even the mountains will rise and fall, we worship a God who has been here from the beginning and who has no end. This God is our guide and help through all the mountains and valleys of our lives: sure, strong, and everlasting.



*Eternal God, help us to know your steadying presence.
Amen.*

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2021

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

PSALM 132:1-18

Abide with Us

*“This is my resting place forever;
here I will reside, for I have desired it.”*

Psalm 132:14

It is easy to think of God as being far off and away. When someone passes away, it is common to say that they have gone to be with God. While I surely hope that I experience God in a deeper and more immediate way when it is my time, this verse points us to another truth: God resides with us. God is not simply in heaven, disconnected from human affairs. God is with us, choosing to live among us. God actually desires to be with us on earth, and so God came to us in Jesus Christ and continues to dwell with us in the Holy Spirit.

The idea that the all-powerful Creator and Ruler of the universe, God, wants to spend time with us is one of the most awe-inspiring wonders of our faith. Psalm 8 says, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?” (v. 4). Compared with the whole of creation, we are almost nothing, and yet God wants to be with us!



All-powerful God, thank you for your mindfulness of us. Amen.

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

CHRIST'S UNEXPECTED REIGN

PSALM 132:1–18

Not Just Buildings

*“Let us go to his dwelling place;
let us worship at his footstool.”*

Psalm 132:7

Up until March of 2020, I had always associated verses like this with going to church on Sunday morning. After all, the church was God's house, right? I knew that God could not be confined to walls but still found myself centering God's presence around church buildings. But with the COVID-19 pandemic devastating the area where I lived, we suddenly had to close our churches and find other ways to connect with God and one another.

While I still love church buildings (I cried when I stepped inside a sanctuary for the first time in over a year), I found myself surprised by all the ways that God showed up through phone calls and video chats. I found God in quiet moments of personal meditation and prayer. God was present in the Christmas Eve service I held in my apartment, just me and my partner.

God's dwelling place is more than just our buildings. God meets us where we are and dwells alongside us, always ready to hear us whenever and wherever we pray.



*Ever-present God, help us to remember that you meet
us wherever we are. Amen.*

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2021

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

JEREMIAH 33:14–16

Trusting God's Promises

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Jeremiah 33:14

Advent is the beginning of the Christian year, when we once again commit ourselves to the story of Jesus Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection. While Christmas gets the cultural spotlight, Advent brings with it the excitement and promise of a new year as we prepare to receive the Christ child into our world. Passages like this one speak to the promise of change and hope sung throughout Scripture.

At the same time, it can be hard to hear words that speak of fulfilled promises year after year. Advent comes every year, and still there is tragedy. Christmas comes every year, and there are still too many people who do not have enough to survive. Lent comes every year, and there are still so many ways we do not reflect God's image into the world. Easter comes every year, and there is still too much death.

But I am comforted every year knowing that God is present with us in our conflict and our mess. God continues to come to us, be with us, and fulfill the promises in our time.

Emmanuel, come to be with us again. Amen.

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2021

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

PSALM 25:1–10

Are We There Yet?

For you I wait all day long.

Psalm 25:5b

Patience is not a value our society tends to hold dear. We live in a time of instant gratification, of everything we need being available at our fingertips to order and receive in our mailboxes the next day. This is perhaps never clearer than during the holiday season. I say “holiday season” instead of Advent or Christmas because the holiday season starts far before either of these; stores rush to put out Christmas merchandise as soon as Halloween is over.

But I have come to treasure this time of waiting and preparing. It is a time to deepen our prayer life and practices, to reflect on what Christ’s coming means so that when Christmas day finally arrives, we can greet it with the joy and celebration it deserves. Practicing Advent helps sustain me in other moments of my life when I feel like I am stuck waiting. It helps me know that there is growth to be found even when I cannot immediately feel it.



*Faithful God, give me the patience to wait for you.
Amen.*

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2021

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

PSALM 25:1–10

Doubt and Trust

*O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame.*

Psalm 25:2a

I am not a naturally trusting person. While I will certainly be friendly with (almost) anyone, it usually takes years before I will actually trust someone with anything that deeply matters to me. The idea of putting my trust in God sounds great in theory, but my tendency to hold my cards close to my chest often interferes. My unwillingness to trust generally has nothing to do with whom I am trusting but rather with the shame that would come from putting my trust in someone who could not hold it. I worry that whatever happened as a result would be my fault because I trusted someone I shouldn't have trusted.

It seems blasphemous to imply that God cannot be trusted, which is why I appreciate this verse so much. Sometimes it is hard for me to trust God. Sometimes there is a part of me that believes I would be foolish for trusting in God. It is comforting to know that this same doubt is even reflected in Scripture. This allows me to bring my doubt before God, who is big enough to handle it.



*Compassionate God, hold our doubts and fears for us.
Amen.*

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

PSALM 25:1–10

A Winding Path

*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.*

Psalm 25:4

When I was in middle school, I experienced a labyrinth for the first time. Printed on a giant canvas and set up in our church's gym, the labyrinth was a single path that twisted and curved its way toward its center, a spot for stillness and meditation. It was not a maze; there were no choices to make or wrong turns to take, but as I walked this path, sometimes I worried that I'd misstepped and would never make it to the center. Sometimes the path would bring me close, and I would think I was almost there, but then it would take me to the farthest edges of the circle.

I have walked many labyrinths since that day many years ago, and I have begun to think of that now-familiar path like the paths of God. Sometimes they bring us close, sometimes they send us out, far away to the margins, but they always lead us home, to the heart of God.



*God, our guide, journey with us along the paths you
have laid for us. Amen.*

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

PSALM 126

From Sorrow to Dancing

*Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.*

Psalm 126:6

When I reflect on what I am thankful for each year, I frequently find myself grateful for the ways that God transforms us. I come back to this psalm year after year to appreciate the move from weeping to shouts of joy.

I frequently find myself in conversations with those who do not share my faith, and we often talk about the age-old question: If God is good, why is there suffering in the world? Did God cause that suffering? I believe that God does not cause suffering—suffering is inevitable if we have free will—but that God is present with us in our suffering. What's more, God transforms our suffering. Sometimes quickly, sometimes through years of heartache, we reach peace and even joy. I like to think of the Holy Spirit as an opportunist, entering horrible situations, pondering, "How can I bring about something good, even here?" As you think about what you are grateful for today, consider the transformations in your life since last year.



Generous God, thank you for all the ways you transform our lives. Amen.

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

PSALM 25:1–10

Jesus, Remember Me

*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my
transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!*

Psalm 25:7

The memories I always want to forget are the ones I always seem to remember. I try to hold on to the details of wonderful days, but they turn into a haze in my mind. But I can recall every excruciating detail of times when I have been embarrassed, times when I have messed up, and conversations I wish I had never had. Shame still makes me blush when I remember these, and I desperately hope that these are not the moments other people remember when they think of me.

The psalmist's prayer is very relatable; we do not want God to think of us as a compilation of our worst moments. Rather, we pray that God remembers us through the lens of God's own steadfast love for us. Just as we tend to remember the best moments of those people whom we love, we pray that God thinks of us in a favorable light. The good news, of course, is that God comes to be with us while we are still sinners, offering us redemption and new life.



*Merciful God, thank you for loving us even when we
fall short. Amen.*

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2021

DRAWING NEAR IN ADVENT

LUKE 21:25–36

All Shall Fade

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words
will not pass away.*

Luke 21:33

I have always been drawn to places and practices that feel ancient. I love to stand in cathedrals where the stone has darkened from years of weathering, marveling at windows and sculptures that have withstood centuries of wear. I order my life through the liturgical calendar because it helps me to feel connected with Christians throughout the ages, practicing traditions that have been practiced since far closer to the days when Jesus walked on this earth.

In times when things are too chaotic, when our lives are in shambles, when relationships are on the rocks, when grief overwhelms us, when our livelihoods are insecure, when the world around us is in upheaval, grounding ourselves in tradition can help us feel the truth of these words of Scripture. Everything else will pass away, but God's words will remain. God is here in chaos and loss. God is here in triumph and joy. God is here with us no matter what else happens.



*Ancient of days, help me to feel grounded in you.
Amen.*

Slats Toole, Minneapolis, Minnesota

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

MALACHI 3:1–4

Faithful Messenger

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming.

Malachi 3:1

What would we do without instant messaging? No speedy yes or no to a lunch date. No quick answer to a question. No swift prayer in response to an urgent request. Not even a rapid, wordless emoji. No immediate delivery.

Poor Malachi! He had to wait four centuries for his message to be executed. He never lived to see his special delivery arrive. Yet he was faithful to convey God's promise of the true "messenger of the covenant"—Jesus. A very long chain of messengers spanning generations was faithful to carry the most important communication ever dispatched.

Today, the messengers keep coming. We, too, are relay runners on God's team, carrying a baton inscribed with the good news of Advent. The instant message reads: "God is with us!" That is our message to a hopeless world. We may be the only baton passer to someone God has put on our track; hopefully, we can be a strong link in the relay.



Messenger of the covenant, may we be "a trustworthy messenger to the one who sends him" (Prov. 25:13, NIV). Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2021

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

MALACHI 3:1–4

Message in the Pudding

*For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;
he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*

Malachi 3:2b–3a

I'm making crème brûlée for dessert. It's a labor-intensive recipe that requires torching the sugary topping of a perfectly good custard. Why would I want to do that?

Chefs say that the flame melts and browns the sweet glaze and brings a nuttier flavor to the dish. But it is tricky: if the ramekin is overheated, the pudding becomes scorched and bitter and inedible.

In today's verses, the Lord, the Messenger of the Covenant, is the one with the torch, and we are the crème brûlée. He knows just how hot a flame to apply to keep us from becoming charcoal and how much is needed to make us a rich, flavorful blessing. Our part is to withstand the necessary heat of the trial we are in. The refiner's fire is not meant to destroy but to eliminate the impure and enhance the value.



*Our refiner, purify us with the fire of your testing so
that we are not ruined but are savory and pleasing to
you and others. Amen.*

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland

MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS

PHILIPPIANS 1:3–11

Message from the Lighthouse Keeper

In all my prayer for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now . . . all of you share in God's grace with me.

Philippians 1:4–7 (NIV)

Have you ever considered the lonely life of a lighthouse keeper? Today most manned lighthouses have been replaced with mechanized beacons. Yet there are still some lighthouse keepers. While the lighthouse stands through the years, the lighthouse keepers change. Some can't take the battering of the elements and the seclusion, yet many have remained to help mariners navigate to safe haven.

In many ways, we are God's lighthouse keepers. Like St. Paul, we partner in holding our individual candles up together to make a brighter beam. In darker moments, perhaps only one person is tending the light. One may be given a greater illumination to share with the rest. The crucial thing is that God's light always shines brightly for those looking for the best route through troubled waters. We share the responsibility so there aren't any sunken ships on our shores.



Heavenly beacon, help us as we share the Advent light of God's grace and good news to illuminate the route for skippers on the seas of life. Amen.

Sara Lewis, Ocean City, Maryland