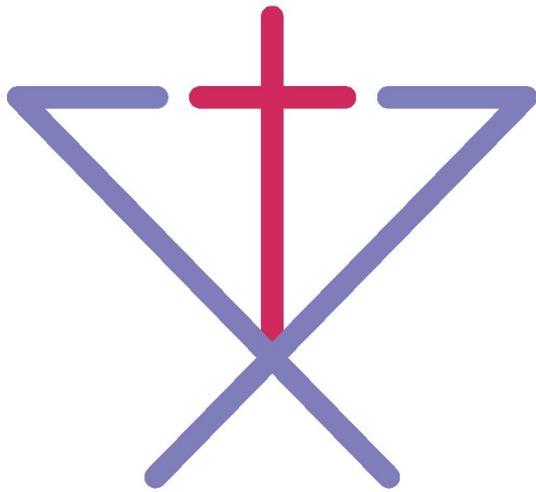
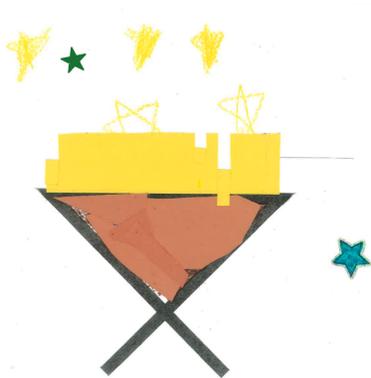


# THE DAILY PATTERN

CHRIST MEMORIAL LUTHERAN CHURCH | ADVENT 2023



PRESENCE  
PARDON  
POWER



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# INTRODUCTION

## THE DAILY PATTERN

With all the noise in the world, do you hear the voice of God? Your calendar tells you what to do, but do you remember who you are? Being comes before doing. This is a call to put first things first. During this busy season, return to the Lord with this daily pattern of prayer and devotion. Set aside this time as a sanctuary. Find a space free of distraction and follow this pattern.

The Daily Pattern is a short order for daily prayer and devotion, following the historic Christian liturgy of invocation, prayer, confession, and word. The template remains the same each week but each day will have a unique Scripture text and meditative thought.

## PRESENCE, POWER, PARDON | MANGER, CROSS, CROWN

The gospel is so comprehensive that its depths have been mined for millennia. And yet it's so simple that children can speak of it. One gospel, three angles: manger, cross, crown

### Manger | Presence

The manger is the incarnation—the God who takes on flesh, even to the point of being born in an animal feed box. The manger means that God is not distant, but near. It means that he comes to be with you, so that you are not without him. It means that God dwells in the midst of messy human drama.

The gospel as the presence of God is thrilling news for those who are distant from God. This is gospel for those who feel lonely, alienated, and hurt. For those who feel inadequate. For those who feel that God could never love them, never come to them. For those who feel like the very lowest social caste. The manger: God's presence with us.

### Cross | Pardon

The cross is God's forgiveness for sinful people. The cross means substitution—his life for your life. It means justification—justice is attained by his sacrifice in your place and for your sins. It means forgiveness, that what you deserve for your offenses has been taken on by another.

The gospel as pardon is thrilling news for those who are overwhelmed with guilt. This is gospel for those who are tortured with shame. For those who are nagged by conviction. For those who feel dirty over their thoughts, words, or deeds. For those who feel that there is no way that a good God could love a bad person. For those who feel that every bad thing that happens is God punishing for the bad things they've done. The cross: God's pardon for us.

### **Crown | Power**

The crown is the resurrection power of God. The crown means that Jesus did not stay dead. It means that God is in the business of making dead things alive. It means that Jesus now wears a crown and stands as the supreme king of the entire universe. It means that history is steadily advancing toward a powerful Last Day of resurrection. It means everything will be fully put right under the merciful rule of the crucified and risen One. The crown means victory. The crown means that God wins out.

The gospel as power is thrilling news for those who are oppressed. For those who, as the hymn writer wrote, mourn "neath their sorrow's load." For people who are neglected and abused by those in positions of power. For those broken and enraged by injustice. For those who are haunted by their own frailty, weakness, and ineffectiveness. For those who yearn for a better world. The crown: God's power for us.

## **CONTRIBUTORS**

The Daily Pattern is a collaborative work by pastors and lay members of Christ Memorial Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Missouri. This series features contributions from Rev. Jeff Cloeter, Rev. Geordie Denholm, Rev. Paul Dickerson, and Rev. Nathan Schultz as well as from Koleen Barnes, Brett Harmann, Anna Jacob, Megan Roegner, Julianna Shults, Susan Senechal, and Erica Tape.

This Advent we are proud to feature the artistic work of several children of our congregation. Thanks to Abigail, Alina, A.T., Averie, Ben, B.H., Camden, Doxsa, Eldana, Ellie, Hadassah, Jocelyn, Lila, Lillian, Loren, Oscar, Nicholas, Marcos, Reagan, Teddy, Thomas, and all of the other Connections children who participated.

We hope that this pattern of prayer, Word, and reflection blesses your Advent.

To read past series or to share this series digitally, please visit [www.thedailypattern.org](http://www.thedailypattern.org).

# WEEK 1: PRESENCE

December 03-December 09

## SUNDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD

*Read slowly and more than once, if you can. After reading, find a word, phrase, or verse that resonates with you. Meditate on that small piece of scripture. What truth is it speaking to you today?*

### Isaiah 64:1-9

- 1 Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
- 2 as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!
- 3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
- 4 From of old no one has heard  
or perceived by the ear,  
no eye has seen a God besides you,  
who acts for those who wait for him.
- 5 You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,

those who remember you in your ways.  
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;  
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?  
6 We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
7 There is no one who calls upon your name,  
who rouses himself to take hold of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.  
  
8 But now, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand.  
9 Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,  
and remember not iniquity forever.  
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

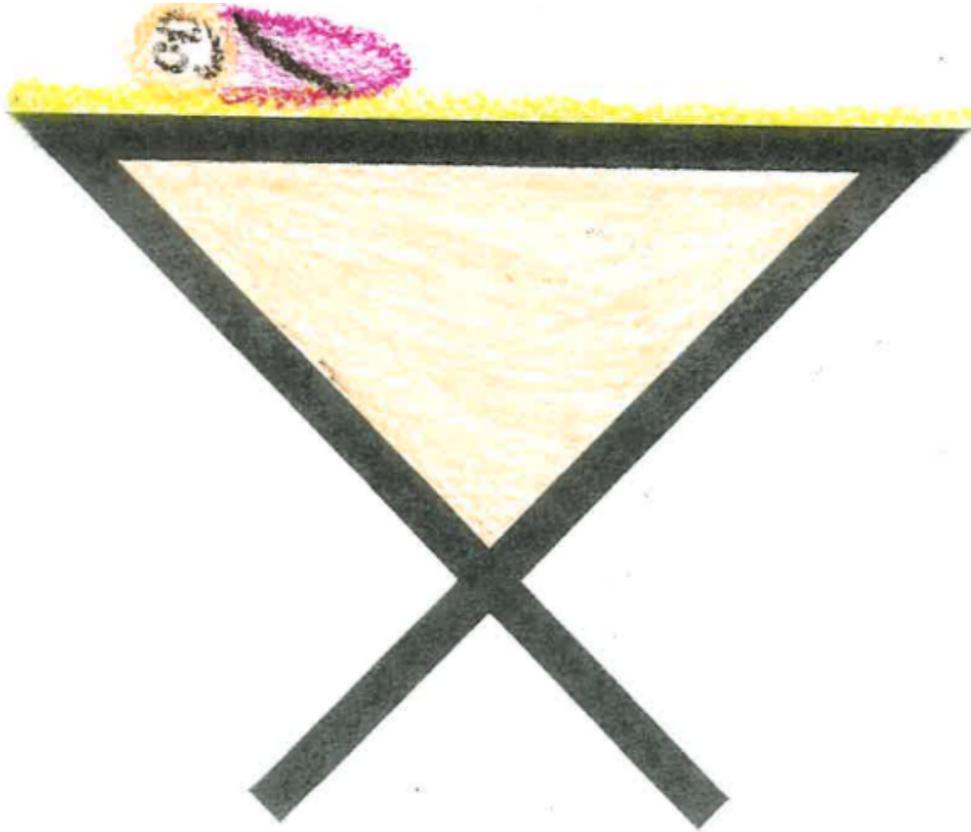
### **Mark 13:24-37**

24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. 27 And 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.

28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32 "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. 35

Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— 36 lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”



### **CLOSING PRAYER**

O Word made flesh, you entered our divided world. Show us a new way. Just as you have come near to us, lead us to be your compassionate presence with others. In Your name we pray, Amen.

## MONDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence.” (Isaiah 64:1)

### MEDITATION

#### “Do We Matter?” by Brett Harmann

The question of, “Where are you God?” gets at a paradox of our belief. How can God, who is infinite and outside of time, relate to us? And how do we, stuck in time, relate to an infinite God? There were 400 years of prophetic silence from Malachi (the final book in the Old Testament) to the birth of Jesus. God seemed absent. But then, Jesus arrived.

Now, it has been nearly 2,000 years since Jesus’ execution on the cross. Yet, we still ask, “Where are you God?” In our own lives, maybe we ask this when a loved one dies. Or perhaps when we’ve been waiting for the right significant other for what seems like forever. Or when we get let go from our job.

Looking more broadly at the world, it seems like we are regressing into moral decay and depravity. All we hear about on the news are drug overdoses, human trafficking, senseless murders, war, and all other kinds of evil. Suicide and depression rates are at all-time highs. We are more connected than ever through social media and the internet, yet we are more alone and isolated than ever in real physical life. So much evil and loneliness in the world—do we even matter?

I was just having a conversation with my mom. With Christmas coming up, gift-giving is on our minds. But she said something that really resonated. She said that “the best gift you can give someone is your time, full attention, and presence.” Being present matters. Ultimately, it's God's presence with us on Earth that reveals his love, and it also means that we matter to God. He cares.



As we patiently await Jesus' arrival this advent, maybe we can take a step back from the hustle and bustle of our lives and reflect. Maybe we can give the gift of our time and presence to someone who is feeling a void this season. After all, the best gift we ever received was the presence of God in human form to dwell with us. And by his presence, he shows his love.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord, your love casts out all fear. We are grounded, secure, and at home because of your self-giving love. Now we know we can come to you with cares and worries, needs and struggles. Hear our prayers, from a world of separation and division. Today, we ask your presence in these circumstances...Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

## TUESDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD

“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—

We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” (Isaiah 9:1-2a;6b)

### MEDITATION

#### “Felix Culpa” by Megan Roegner

While St. Louis autumns are full of surprises, by early December, we are settled firmly into a season of darkness and cold. I love October in all of its brilliance, but the poet in me responds more powerfully to the bleakness of late fall. The bare branches of trees scrape the sky in shocking contrast to the lushness of summer; they are a powerful symbol of transformation, as powerful as the first brave blossoms of spring.

In chapter nine of Isaiah, the prophet is longing for the presence of God to change the world, like fire transforms wood and water into entirely different substances. In pondering the lonely trees and Isaiah’s words that “we all fade like a leaf, / and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away,” I am reminded of the Latin phrase *felix culpa*, which means “fortunate fall.”

Felix culpa is a paradox. A way for us to consider the fall of man and our broken, dying world as the means for God to demonstrate his perfect, undying love for us through Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection. Our greatest tragedy transforms into our greatest joy.

Advent is the most deeply meaningful time of the church year for me. There is something about the encroaching darkness of winter that fills me with urgency and makes the promise of Light all the more thrilling.

**Fortunate Fall**  
**by Megan Roegner**

God's presence is fog in the morning  
and a vast, orange moon. We find him  
in the strange beauty of a dying world:

dry leaves beneath our feet,  
bare branches reaching to the sky—  
supplication

and contemplation,  
everything falling and fallen.  
Brilliant colors give way to gray,

the nights grow long,  
the sun more distant.  
We bow our heads

for the mist that will one day clear,  
for the moon that promises change,  
for starry brightness amid a cold, black night.

And for the last leaves, tragic and glorious,  
returning to the earth and whispering,  
*death*

*is not*

*forever.*

## CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious Lord, comfort the sick, injured, and dying. By your very presence, confront all pain of body and soul. Have compassion on those who mourn and grieve a loss. To a world of separation and division, bring your presence, O Lord. Amen.



## WEDNESDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD

“From of old no one has heard  
or perceived by the ear,  
no eye has seen a God besides you,  
who acts for those who wait for him.” (Isaiah 64:4)

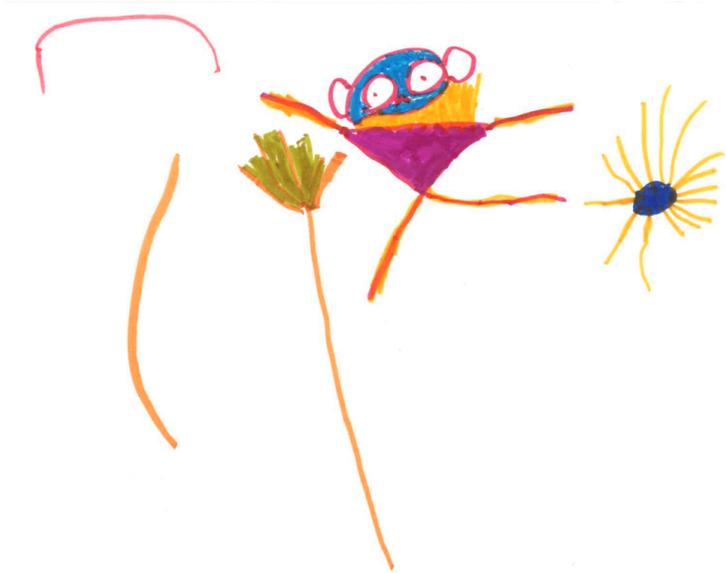
### MEDITATION

#### “Hold it Together” by Anna Jacob

It has been quite a while now since I have felt alone. It has been a nice change, having someone around. Part of me feels like I spent years practicing how to be alone. And now, here I am, looking to commit to one person for the rest of my life, preparing to spend that time with him—through the good and the bad days.

Being single for a couple decades has definitely helped me to become a more independent individual. I have learned to do for myself what needs to be done. And while I may not have had the added responsibilities of others, such as a spouse or children, life could feel overwhelming.

Feeling alone can cause you to look for and turn to something for comfort. Comfort can come in many forms; for some that might be alcohol or chocolate. Others may look for another type of escape like reading or going to the movies. We look for comfort when we are sad and alone. But those things we reach for may not always be the best things for us. Often they bring only temporary relief or become an unreliable crutch to lean on.



Earlier this year, I was venting to friends at church when one boldly told me to take a breath. He walked away, and while I stood in a state of brief confusion, he soon returned with a cup of water. A thank you stumbled out of my mouth. His response, "You do for others what they won't do for themselves."

That moment has stuck with me for many months now.

How often do we get wrapped up in life and forget to slow down, breathe, and take a moment to check in with God? We often thirst for God but in our moments of frustration or sadness we neglect him. We struggle with sin and attempt to conquer it on our own. But that battle has already been won. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Through Jesus, death has been defeated and sin can no longer separate us from God. As Christians, our hope in God allows us to turn to him even when we feel like we do not have anyone in our life who will understand. Even in those weird moments where it feels like God might not be there, you can lean into your faith. You can trust in the knowledge that he promises to never leave you. As you struggle to keep your life together or as you face daily challenges and times of frustration, God is in those moments with you. Ultimately, God is at the center of all things. As Colossians 1:17 says, "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

God does not abandon us. His presence is there no matter our situation. But when you next feel alone, try taking a moment to stop, breathe, and call on him. Ask him to be with you, to fill you up—with his word, with his grace, with his love.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord of the nations, by your presence, confront all violence, injustice, and turmoil. Bring peace to nations suffering war and crisis. Only You can repair broken trust and the pain of crisis. To a world of separation and division, bring your presence, O Lord. Amen.

## THURSDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

"Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD

"But now, O Lord, you are our Father;  
we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8)

### MEDITATION

#### "The Potter and the Clay" by Julianna Shults

I love watching pottery being made. While I will never have that artistic skill, it is fascinating to see each piece as it is thoughtfully designed, carefully formed, and glazed with colors exposed through time and heat. The creation of pottery is productive joy. Design and function combined to make art that is both a joy to see and useful to our lives.

Scripture repeatedly uses the imagery of God as a potter and His people as the clay. Our God made us with his loving hand and thoughtfully formed us for a purpose. Each piece is precious and valued by God, but that is not always how we see ourselves and others.

Instead, we focus on ourselves, ignoring the potter altogether, and listen to voices that diminish us. We compare ourselves to people on the internet. We internalize harsh words from our boss and coworkers. We fight with those we love most. Fear, pain, and our own sin hurt our relationships. We isolate ourselves from one another and doubt our value to anyone.

"Be not so terribly angry, O Lord,  
and remember not iniquity forever.

Behold, please look, we are all your people."  
(Isaiah 64:9)

Making pottery has many steps, including times of waiting to cure and going through fire. For generations, God's people in the Old Testament waited for the coming of Jesus, the one who would save them from their sin. They wandered to other idols and sought out value from other sources. Yet, God did not forget them. They cried out to God and our potter did not leave His creation in brokenness, loneliness, and despair.

God saved us by sending His only Son to earth, born in a manger. Jesus lived among the broken people He created, and died so that we can be restored and live out our purpose of loving each other in His name. The potter did not remember our iniquity forever. His loving sacrifice on our behalf and gift of faith means we can confidently be about the purpose for which He designed us.

In Advent we wait for the coming of Jesus who will return and restore us fully. As we do, we celebrate our God who makes us beautiful and uses us for His good.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Jesus, you are the Word made flesh. Work your word deep into our hearts and minds. Transform us by your speech. Show us the depths of "loved" and "sent." To a world of separation and division, bring your presence, O Lord.



## FRIDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

"Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD

"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Mark 13:32)

### MEDITATION

**"What's Jesus Really Saying?" by Erica Tape**

If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one God, how can one person of the Trinity know something the others don't?

My father-in-law is a pastor, so I asked him. He said some Bible passages emphasize Jesus's divine nature and some emphasize his human nature. This spot emphasizes the human one.

I can see both parts of Jesus's nature in this verse. I see divine Jesus saying, "That's not something you lowly humans need to know. You don't need to know exactly when the world will end."

I would love to know when the world would end. I would like to plan accordingly. In addition to knowing when to do my last grocery run (because who wants to leave food rotting in the fridge?), I'd also get my whole life cleaned up. I'd be like, "Look, Jesus! I've done everything I'm supposed to. I've earned my way into heaven."



But Jesus came to earn our way into heaven for us. He was born on earth, fully God and fully human, to die the death we should die for our sins. He paid the price. He did the work.

So the other part of me can see human Jesus saying in this verse, "That's not something you need to worry about. I'll take care of it."

And he did. That's the whole point of Advent. Advent is the beginning of human Jesus's story. We celebrate it every year because every year we need a reminder that Jesus is the one who did all the work. We don't have to worry about anything.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord, we pray for those who feel severe separation and alienation. For the depressed, lonely, and abandoned. For families that are divided. For those who quietly bear the pain of isolation. To a world of separation and division, bring your presence, O Lord. Amen.

## SATURDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

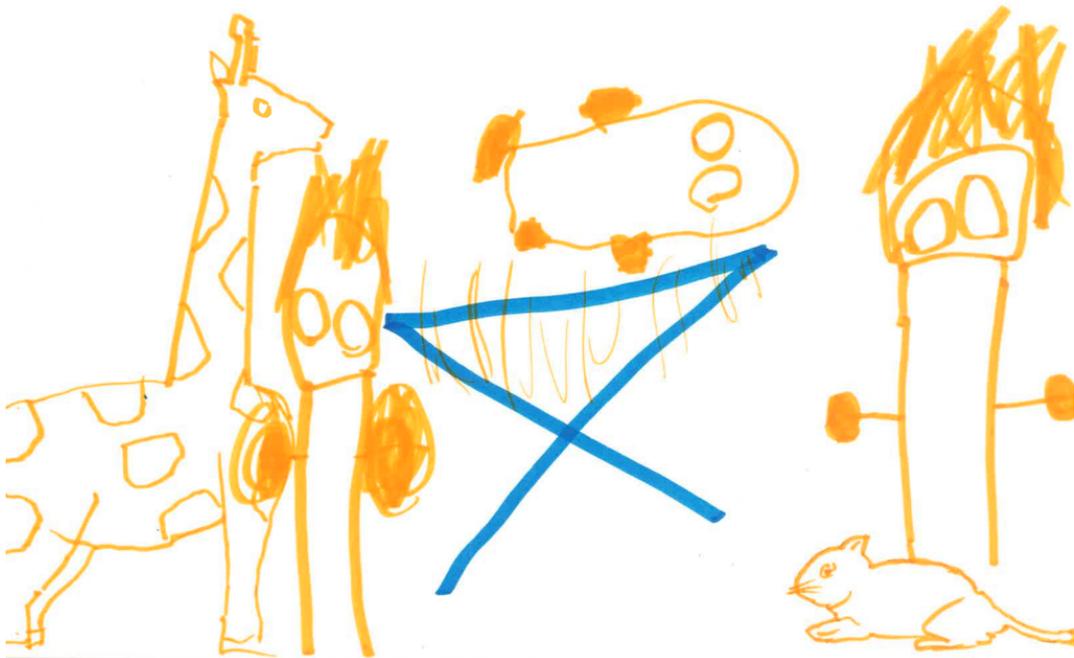
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Remember that you were at one time separated from Christ, alienated...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13).

### WORD, MEDITATION, AND CLOSING PRAYER

*Return to the word, phrase, or verse you meditated upon on Sunday. Re-read that selection from the text. After a week spent pondering the presence of Christ through his incarnation and birth, what truth is the scripture speaking to you now? Write or speak your own prayer or meditation in response to God’s Word.*



## WEEK 2: PARDON

December 10-December 16

### SUNDAY

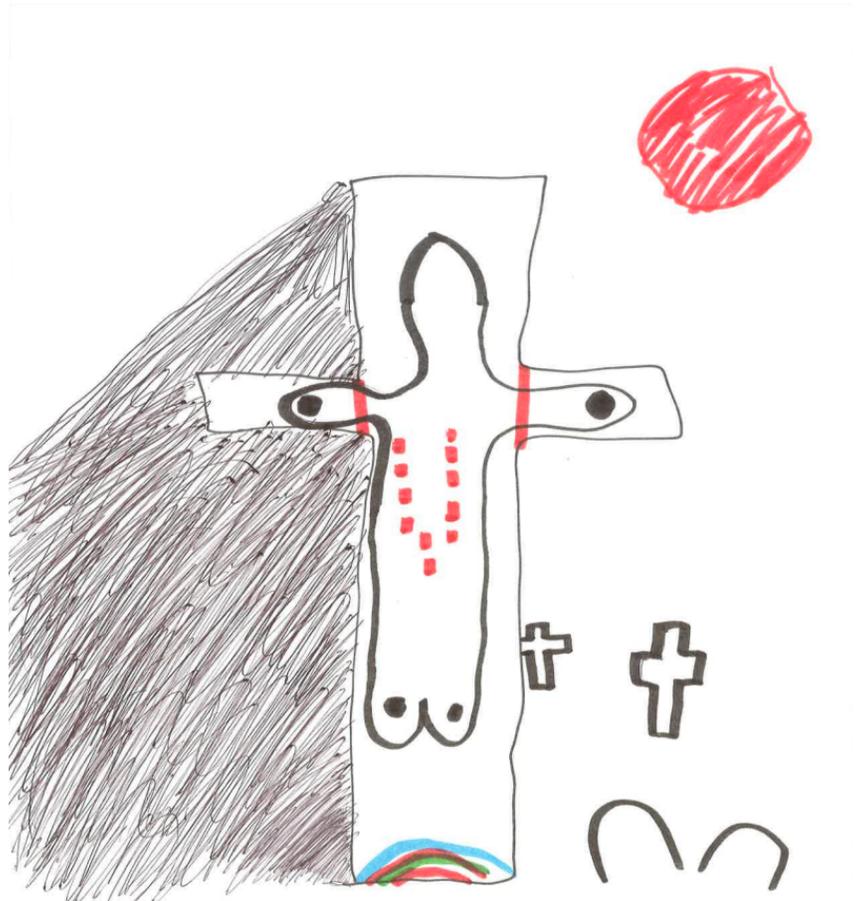
#### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,  
In the name of the Father, and of  
the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

#### INVITATION PRAYER

“Let the morning bring me word of  
your unfailing love, for I have put  
my trust in you” (Psalm 143:8).

Jesus came that we might receive  
pardon and forgiveness. Our sins  
haunt us with guilt and shame.  
We confess that we too often  
cover in fear instead of living in  
joy. John writes, “There is no fear  
in love...for fear has to do with  
punishment, and whoever fears  
has not been perfected in love”  
(John 4:18).



*Consider your sin and fear this day:* Fear of being alone. Fear of being rejected.

Now consider the pardon of the cross of Christ: “In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4:10). God’s love is proven to you in sacrifice. Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain and a last breath. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted and cast out. With no conditions or strings attached, you are loved by God!

## WORD

*Read slowly and more than once, if you can. After reading, find a word, phrase, or verse that resonates with you. Meditate on that small piece of scripture. What truth is it speaking to you today?*

### Isaiah 40:1-11

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the Lord's  
hand  
double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;  
make straight in the desert a highway  
for our God.

4 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.

5 And the glory of the Lord shall be  
revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry!"  
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass,  
and all its beauty is like the flower of  
the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades  
when the breath of the Lord blows on  
it;  
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God will stand  
forever.

9 Go on up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good news;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;  
lift it up, fear not;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
"Behold your God!"

10 Behold, the Lord God comes with  
might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.

11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with  
young.

## Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,

who will prepare your way,

3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,’”

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of

repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

## CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we have not seen a love such as yours. Move us beyond clichés and show us the depth of your love. In a world of fear and counterfeit forms of love, reveal your love in Christ to be distinctive. Inspired by your love, move in us to be mighty carriers of your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## MONDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

"Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you"  
(Psalm 143:8).

Jesus came that we might receive pardon and forgiveness. Our sins haunt us with guilt and shame. We confess that we too often cower in fear instead of living in joy. John writes, "There is no fear in love...for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love" (John 4:18).

*Consider your sin and fear this day:* Fear of not being good enough, pretty enough, or productive enough.

Now consider the pardon of the cross of Christ: "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10). God's love is proven to you in sacrifice. Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain and a last breath. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted and cast out. With no conditions or strings attached, you are loved by God!

### WORD

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1).

### MEDITATION

**"With Strength" by Susan Senechal**

Oh the holiday season—how do I dread thee? I know it's supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year," but to be honest, beyond the tinsel and glitter and lights, it fills me with anxiety. So many stressors: to plan the perfect party, to buy the perfect gifts, to make sure my home is beautifully decorated and that everyone around me experiences joy to their world. I just cannot do it. I fail miserably (or maybe I fail very well.) I become

frustrated, agitated, short-tempered. There's very little jolly left in this elf by the end of the day.

And to be honest, these stressors are present every day of the year. I fall short of the expectations of others, and myself. I lose my temper. I say and do things that I shouldn't, and I don't say and do things that I should. I miss the mark. I fall short. I sin. And it all weighs me down.



So, wow! Do I love the words of Isaiah 40! Do yourself a favor and read it. Then read it again. Its first word gives me exactly what I need today and every day during the hectic holiday season—and in fact, every day of the year: Comfort.

“Comfort.” Derived from the Latin, it means “with

strength.” And it is God’s word through Isaiah to us: “comfort...with strength; have strength; be strong. Not a command that we need to do, but a gift we have been given. “Here,” God says, “take my strength...your hard service has been completed, your sin has been paid for...every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground made level.”

The sin, the guilt, the shame has all been removed. When that baby who was born in the manger went to the cross to pay the sacrifice for our sins, he freed us from all of it. The struggle is over, the victory won. We have strength for our days because of the Jesus of Bethlehem and Calvary.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Come, O long expected Jesus. Set us free. Release us from our fears and sins by your death on Calvary. Be our strength and consolation. Be our hope and our joy, today and every day. Amen.

## TUESDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you”  
(Psalm 143:8).

Jesus came that we might receive pardon and forgiveness. Our sins haunt us with guilt and shame. We confess that we too often cower in fear instead of living in joy. John writes, “There is no fear in love...for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (John 4:18).

*Consider your sin and fear this day: Fear of failing.*

Now consider the pardon of the cross of Christ:  
“In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). God’s love is proven to you in sacrifice. Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain and a last breath. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted and cast out. With no conditions or strings attached, you are loved by God!

### WORD

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:2)



## MEDITATION

### “Justice and Guilt verses Mercy and Grace” by Brett Hartmann

God is just. A justice system, properly administered, gives punishments for criminals that fit the crime. Simply put, justice is getting what one deserves because of their actions. In Christianity, we understand that “for the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Death is the true and right punishment for sin.

Mercy is pardon. Mercy does not say that the crime did not occur. Rather, mercy fully acknowledges that there was a crime, and punishment is deserved. This is a key element of mercy. A wrong was committed, and the punishment is proper. But mercy says, “I pardon you.” In olden days, kings had the power to pardon. In Biblical context, Jesus has this power. Only the judge can pardon.

I think C.S. Lewis was on to something with his essay entitled, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment.” He defends the classical understanding of mercy tempering justice. He says, “The essential act of mercy was to pardon; and pardon in its very essence involves the recognition of guilt and ill-desert in the recipient.” But he argues that in today’s world, “the Humanitarian theory wants simply to abolish Justice and substitute Mercy for it.”

It is important that we do not abolish justice. It is important that we recognize our guilt and that we are convicted. We must realize that. Because, only at that point, do we need Jesus’ mercy and pardon. Only when we comprehend the direness of our situation can we understand and give thanks for the love of Jesus. Jesus says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32).

God extends his grace to us through his mercy. During this advent season, may we extend grace to others as well. When we are wronged, we are right to acknowledge the wrong. But we also do well to extend grace to our fellow brothers and sisters, as Christ has done for us. In a world that loves to condemn, may we be a people of grace.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Dear Jesus, as we await your arrival at Advent, help us to understand the depths of our sin and our need for you. Help us to understand that we are guilty, but that by the cross, you extend us your mercy. You forgive and pardon our sins. Help us to respond with gratitude to this great news, and help us to show your grace to others. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

"Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you"  
(Psalm 143:8).

Jesus came that we might receive pardon and forgiveness. Our sins haunt us with guilt and shame. We confess that we too often cower in fear instead of living in joy. John writes, "There is no fear in love...for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love" (John 4:18).

*Consider your sin and fear this day: Fear of the future.*

Now consider the pardon of the cross of Christ: "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10). God's love is proven to you in sacrifice. Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain and a last breath. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted and cast out. With no conditions or strings attached, you are loved by God!

### WORD

"A voice says, 'Cry!' And I said, 'what shall I cry?'" (Isaiah 40:6a)

### MEDITATION

**"I'm the Problem, It's Me" by Anna Jacob**

Guilt is a heavy thing to carry around. Even if we do not always take action, our sinful thoughts add to the already weighty burden we can carry. It is a sobering thought to stop and consider all the things that I am guilty of today, let alone from my past.

There are many ways in which I find myself reacting to and handling my guilt. At times, guilt feels small, like a tiny nagging thought, one I attempt to ignore and try to push aside. I do not act upon it, but even in my inaction, I am guilty nonetheless. Just as a tiny pebble in my shoe will not go away on its own, neither will my guilt.



When guilt creeps into my life, I look for a way to remove it. I become quick to blame someone else. Yet my attempts to find fault in others does nothing to minimize my guilt. I cannot truly pass the blame. My own guilt does not allow me to point my finger at anyone else. Instead, like lyrics from Taylor Swift, my guilt has no problem reminding me that "It's me, hi, I'm the problem, it's me."

Once I have acknowledged my guilt as my own, I look for a way to fix it, wanting to right the wrong. And while there are many ways to do good and be better, this does not change the fact that my sin is my own. Some actions cannot be undone, harsh words cannot be unspoken, and hateful thoughts still creep in.

Guilt is a heavy thing.

But God does not leave us alone to fix it. He pulls us out of our guilt and shame and breathes new life into us. Through his blameless son, we have a new life and an inheritance free from the guilt of sin. His actions have already won, his words continue to be spoken, and his love remains true.

In worship, we are intentional about remembering this part of our relationship with God. As a congregation, we acknowledge our sin and ask forgiveness from our heavenly father.

Yet this should not be merely a weekly practice. Daily we should strive to repent and turn to God, crying out to him. For we know that through Christ we have received forgiveness. God's grace frees us from the burden of guilt.

So remember today, and every day, that you have a God who is present. He is waiting for your cry. Go to him in prayer.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Dear Lord, we thank you for your pardon. You sent your son to free us from our guilt and shame. Help us to return to you to receive daily forgiveness. Help us to call out to you when we feel alone. In your name we pray, Amen.

## THURSDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,  
In the name of the Father, and of the  
Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

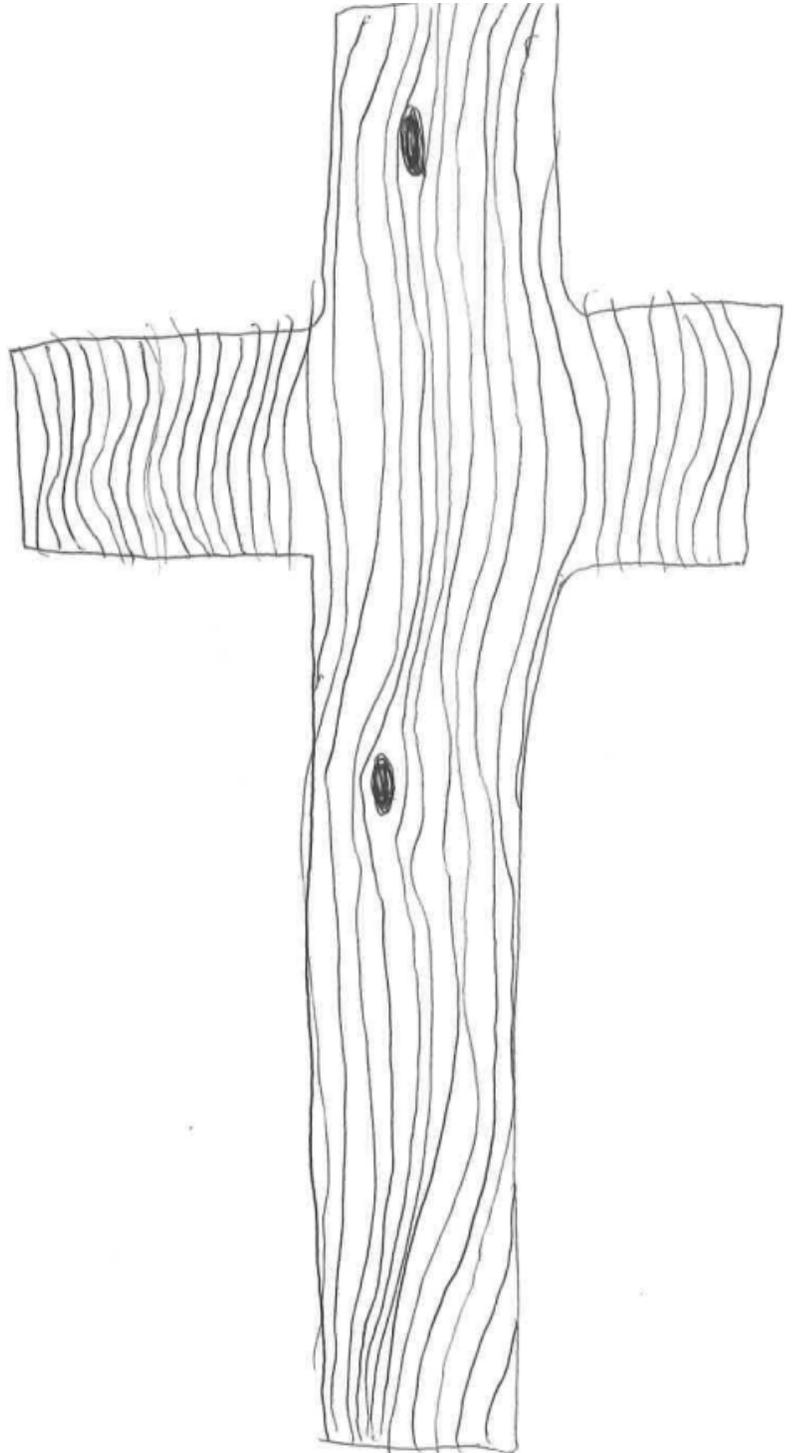
### INVITATION PRAYER

*“Let the morning bring me word of your  
unfailing love, for I have put my trust in  
you” (Psalm 143:8).*

Jesus came that we might receive  
pardon and forgiveness. Our sins haunt  
us with guilt and shame. We confess  
that we too often cower in fear instead  
of living in joy. John writes, “There is no  
fear in love...for fear has to do with  
punishment, and whoever fears has  
not been perfected in love” (John 4:18).

*Consider your sin and fear this day: Fear  
of death.*

Now consider the pardon of the cross  
of Christ: “In this is love, not that we  
have loved God, but that he loved us  
and sent his Son to be the atoning  
sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4:10).  
God’s love is proven to you in sacrifice.  
Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain  
and a last breath. By the death and  
resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted  
and cast out. With no conditions or  
strings attached, you are loved by God!



## WORD

“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.  
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:4-5)

## MEDITATION

### “Uneven Ground” by Megan Roegner

When I was a child, I didn’t understand that Advent is meant to observe both the first coming of Christ and to anticipate the second. As an adult, the idea makes me uncomfortable. The “second coming” is a phrase that—thanks to William Butler Yeats, B-movie horror films, and false, cultish prophecies—evokes in me a sense of unease. I believe the words of the Nicene Creed: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” But I’d probably also be quick to assure a non-Christian friend, with a blush and images of Kirk Cameron in “Left Behind” in my head, that I don’t think that’s happening anytime *soon*. It’s much more sensible, after all, to focus on the here and now. Right?

But the here and now is strange in its own way. A broken world filled with people struggling to make their way through its uneven ground. Christians believe that our sins are forgiven, that through the grace of God and Jesus’s death and resurrection we will live eternally and perfectly with God after death. But while we’re still here, even after Jesus’s first coming, we experience pain, guilt, and grief. To use Isaiah’s imagery, our lives in this in-between time are filled with mountains and valleys: joy in the knowledge of our salvation; despair at our persistent sinfulness.

What does it mean to live between the first coming and the second? The terrifying beauty of a liminal space is that it is transformational. You know who you were. You know who you are called to be. Perhaps today you can ask yourself how God is shaping you as you journey through this uneven ground.

**The In-Between**  
**by Megan Roegner**

You said it was day  
and it was night.  
But I don't know yet  
what it means to be  
just one thing or the other.  
What about twilight?  
The darkening of dusk,  
the brightening of dawn—  
in-between, unresolved,  
still beautiful, still yours.

The man on the radio  
this morning said,  
with authority, that  
the sun rose just  
sixteen seconds ago.  
As if sunrise is  
a singular moment,  
and not an unceasing  
intercession between  
dark and light.

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Jesus, you are our light in the dark. Prepare our hearts for your return. As we wait, keep our identities grounded in you. Amen.

## FRIDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

“Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you”  
(Psalm 143:8).

Jesus came that we might receive pardon and forgiveness. Our sins haunt us with guilt and shame. We confess that we too often cower in fear instead of living in joy. John writes, “There is no fear in love...for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (John 4:18).

*Consider your sin and fear this day:* Fear of poverty and struggle.

Now consider the pardon of the cross of Christ: “In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). God’s love is proven to you in sacrifice. Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain and a last breath. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted and cast out. With no conditions or strings attached, you are loved by God!

### WORD

“He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young.” (Isaiah 40:11)

### MEDITATION

“**Mom Guilt**” by Koleen Barnes

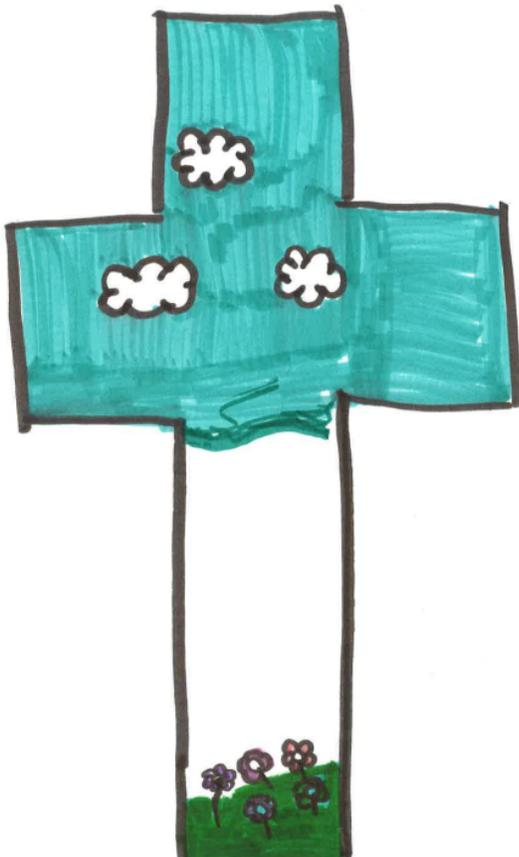
Something I always heard about but never understood was “mom guilt.” Then I had my son. Prior to becoming a mom, mom guilt was something I knew of only from the viewpoint of a child. My mom wishing I would come home more frequently or spend more time with my

family when I was in town, not going out with my friends. When my son came into the world, that all changed.

Mom guilt wasn't coming from a mom, but was all over me because I *am* a mom. Nothing I did felt right. Nothing I tried was enough. Feeding, sleeping, cleaning, being a wife, a friend, a daughter, and, most of all, a mom, wasn't enough. I gave it all I had and still felt like I was somehow coming up short. The guilt was thick and heavy on my sore body and brain. I quickly found there is no shortage of things you can feel guilty about. People will tell you to be gentle with yourself but I was not prepared for that to mean mental gentleness as well as physical.

We are lucky in this world to have an outlet—our faith. This faith in Christ tells us that the guilt is unwarranted. We were chosen for these roles in our lives specifically because we are the only ones that can do them. We are guided by Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross

lifted the burden of guilt forever. Now if I would have read this paragraph freshly postpartum, I'm not sure I would have been proud of the words that went through my head. However, finding that grace and forgiveness of guilt is a bit easier when you practice turning guilt into gratefulness.



*"I feel guilty for not wanting to get out of bed at night when my son wakes up" turns into "I am grateful for a healthy boy with strong lungs who knows he can rely on me."*

*"I feel guilty for wanting time to myself" becomes "I am grateful that I have a support network who wants to spend time with my son."*

*"I am so tired, God. My body and my mind are at their end," changes to the prayer, "Thank you for choosing me to be his mommy. Help me raise him in the way that he should go."*

Feeling guilty is easy and feeling grateful is hard. Luckily we have Christ in our lives and his sacrifice makes the burden of guilt lighter and the mental flip to gratitude that much closer to our grasp.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Dear God, Please help us to practice turning our guilt into gratitude this holiday season. Guide us in processing these feelings and remembering your sacrifice and what you have done for us. Amen.

## SATURDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,  
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### INVITATION PRAYER

*“Let the morning bring me word  
of your unfailing love, for I have  
put my trust in you” (Psalm  
143:8).*

Jesus came that we might  
receive pardon and forgiveness.  
Our sins haunt us with guilt and  
shame. We confess that we too  
often cower in fear instead of  
living in joy. John writes, “There  
is no fear in love...for fear has to  
do with punishment, and  
whoever fears has not been  
perfected in love” (John 4:18).



*Consider your sin and fear this day: Fear of shame.*

Now consider the pardon of the cross of Christ: “In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I John 4:10). God’s love is proven to you in sacrifice. Wood and nails, sweat and blood, pain and a last breath. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, fear is confronted and cast out. With no conditions or strings attached, you are loved by God!

### WORD, MEDITATION, AND CLOSING PRAYER

*Return to the word, phrase, or verse you meditated upon on Sunday. Re-read that selection from the text. After a week spent pondering the presence of Christ through his incarnation and birth, what truth is the scripture speaking to you now? Write or speak your own prayer or meditation in response to God’s Word.*

## WEEK 3: POWER

December 17-December 23

### SUNDAY

#### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

#### INVITATION PRAYER

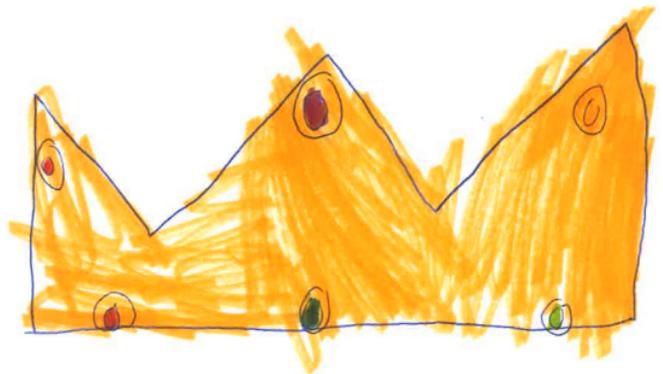
The baby in the manger is the King on the throne. Come to him in prayer: King Jesus, who reigns over all things, establish your rule deep in our hearts. Overwhelm all our weakness and frailty so that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

#### WORD

*Read slowly and more than once, if you can. After reading, find a word, phrase, or verse that resonates with you. Meditate on that small piece of scripture. What truth is it speaking to you today?*

#### Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the  
brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to  
those who are bound;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's  
favor,



and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a beautiful headdress  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the garment of praise instead of a faint  
spirit;  
that they may be called oaks of  
righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, that he may be  
glorified.  
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins;  
they shall raise up the former  
devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.

8 For I the Lord love justice;  
I hate robbery and wrong;  
I will faithfully give them their  
recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant  
with them.

### **Luke 1:46-56**

46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is for those who fear him

9 Their offspring shall be known among  
the nations,

and their descendants in the midst of  
the peoples;

all who see them shall acknowledge them,  
that they are an offspring the Lord has  
blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;

my soul shall exult in my God,  
for he has clothed me with the garments  
of salvation;

he has covered me with the robe of  
righteousness,

as a bridegroom decks himself like a  
priest with a beautiful headdress,

and as a bride adorns herself with her  
jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its  
sprouts,

and as a garden causes what is sown in  
it to sprout up,

so the Lord God will cause righteousness  
and praise

to sprout up before all the nations.

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones

and exalted those of humble estate;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 as he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord God, we live in a world that is grasping for power. Dispel false reliance on our own strength, and help us to fully trust your transcendent power. With your gracious power, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

## MONDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The baby in the manger is the King on the throne. Come to him in prayer: King Jesus, who reigns over all things, establish your rule deep in our hearts. Overwhelm all our weakness and frailty so that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### WORD

"He has sent me...

to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—

to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,

and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." (Isaiah 61:3)

### MEDITATION

#### "Royalty" by Susan Senechal

I'm related to royalty! That's right, several years ago one of my cousins was the Michigan Sugar Queen. Didn't know there was a Michigan Sugar Queen? Well, consider yourself educated. What does the Sugar Queen do? Well, for one, they ride atop a float in the Farmers' Festival Parade in my dad's small hometown in Michigan, and they wave. They make other public appearances, and they take home a small college scholarship. In other words, they don't do much. A queen in title only, they have no power to make laws or decrees, nor can they give you a "get out of jail free card" if you're caught speeding past the sugar beet factory in that same small town. But royalty is royalty, and I'm happy to claim her as my cousin.

She may be the former Sugar Queen, but she's still human, as are we all: frail, weak, sinful human beings, with no power to save ourselves. We are poor, brokenhearted captives in this world of sin. But God. But God, who sent his son into this very world as a fetus, to be born in a stable and laid in a manger, which we remember and celebrate every year at Christmas. But Jesus, who grew into a man who taught us how we ought to live, and then, more importantly, died on a cross in our place, for our sins. But Jesus, who rose from the grave and was raised into heaven where he sits on the throne along with the Father, reigning in majesty, full of power and might, victorious over our greatest enemy. Powerless, but God.

When Jesus came he gave us a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning; a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Because he is reigning with the Father, we are set free, not to remain powerless figureheads, but to share that good news with others.

Mary says it in what we call "the Magnificat" from Luke 1: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...for the mighty one has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."

We are not powerless figureheads—we have been extended a hand of blessing—now it is up to us to sing his praises, tell of his marvelous deeds, and go in the strength that is ours, seeking mercy, justice and forgiveness, and blessing others along the way.



## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord, we commit to you our leaders, elected officials, judges, and all who hold positions of authority. Demonstrate your power through their work. Grant them humility and competence for the sake of peace. Confound all tyrants and those who abuse power. With your gracious power, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

## TUESDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

The baby in the manger is the King on the throne. Come to him in prayer: King Jesus, who reigns over all things, establish your rule deep in our hearts. Overwhelm all our weakness and frailty so that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### WORD

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;  
my soul shall exult in my God,  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." (Isaiah 61:10)

### MEDITATION

#### "Faulty Instrument" by Koleen Barnes

Sometimes I have trouble articulating my faith. It can be a scary thing to talk about, especially when some not-so-great assumptions are tied in with being a Christian. Simply stating that fact can land you on one side of a fence or another without you knowing it. Our church makes it a bit easier by saying that we are Loved and Sent—loved by God and sent into the world. With these words, it is easier to express my faith in how I treat others and the way I live my life.

Jesus lived his life here with us so that we have a tangible connection to God. He was a man here on earth just like we are. He practiced patience, acceptance, kindness, gentleness, and so many other qualities we can strive for, but above all he treated people well. He was

respectful of those who some may have considered lower in station or different than him. He took in people who needed it and even exalted them at times.

I fail at these qualities every day, but it gives me something to strive for. Jesus shows us how he expects us to act and how he plans to use us to show people what living in His way can do. When we live our lives with this in mind, we allow ourselves to be instruments of God and show others his love without having to verbally articulate it.



### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord, you make use of such weak human instruments to fulfill your mighty purpose. We think of young Mary before Gabriel. We think of your humble birth in a manger. We join you in this spirit of humility. We submit to your call on our lives. We give you our time, our service, our decisions, and our resources. With your gracious power, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

The baby in the manger is the King on the throne. Come to him in prayer: King Jesus, who reigns over all things, establish your rule deep in our hearts. Overwhelm all our weakness and frailty so that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### WORD

“He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy.” (Luke 1:52-54)

### MEDITATION

**“I Don’t Know How” by Julianna Shults**

“God, I don’t know how to do this.”

I have prayed this prayer so many times. God, I don’t know how to leave the congregation I have served for years. How to walk with my friend through job loss. How to find my way out of burnout. How to fix this broken relationship. My desperate pleading prayer was that God would show me the way through what seemed impossibly difficult in that moment.



Throughout Scripture we see God send His people into situations where they could not see the end. They tried, failed, and cried out in need of saving. God's people look to their own feeble ability and wonder how they will ever get through. Forgetting God's power, we fear we are on our own.

If there was ever anyone I would expect to pray, "God, I don't know how to do this", it would be Mary. This young woman is visited by an angel and suddenly thrust into the middle of God's plan for the world. Not married. Not prepared. Yet, if you read her Magnificat, you hear something much different.

Her prayer is one of humble acceptance of what God was asking her to do. Rather than focusing on the unknown future in front of her, she focused on what God was able to do:

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy

Mary trusted that we have a God who is powerful, strong, and merciful, even when we can't see it. We don't need to know how to navigate difficulty because even in our deepest despair, we can trust God to make a way. Jesus comes down in human form to live, teach, and ultimately die on our behalf to forgive our sins. Through Jesus, we know that sin, death, and the devil don't have the final word; God does.

I don't need to know how to get through whatever joy or trouble will come. Like Mary, I remember God's power and mercy to guide. We trust that His Spirit will give us faith, empower us to move even when we cannot see, and bring us someday to His kingdom forever.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, we often do not know how to do what is set before us. If we go on our own, we will fail. Forgive our selfish doubt and remind us of your unending power. Protect us. Fill us with good things as you remember your mercy toward us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THURSDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*  
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

The baby in the manger is the King on the throne. Come to him in prayer: King Jesus, who reigns over all things, establish your rule deep in our hearts. Overwhelm all our weakness and frailty so that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



### WORD

“...he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53)

### MEDITATION

#### “God as a Pair o’ Ducks” by Erica Tape

Earlier this fall, my husband, our daughter, and I went to Colorado for a weeklong mission debrief. We were missionaries in the Dominican Republic for a couple years and moved back to St. Louis over the summer. The debrief was a time to meet other missionaries, talk about all the stuff we went through, and figure out what to do with our emotional baggage.

On the first day, the leaders introduced us to the yuck duck and the yay duck. The yuck duck is a rubber ducky covered in permanent marker. It represents all our bad feelings. The yay duck is a clean, pristine rubber ducky representing our good feelings. The two ducks

travel on the river of life together. They're both there all the time. We can look back on an experience and have both good and bad feelings of the same thing. That's a paradox. Or as they say, a "pair-o'-ducks."

When I read this week's Luke passage, I notice a paradox in the way Mary describes God. Specifically in verses 52 and 53: "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

God is vengeful and harsh. He brings down rulers and sends the rich away. But he is also merciful and kind. He lifts up the humble and satisfies the hungry. God demonstrates huge power in that he is the ruler of all, the creator of the universe. And he demonstrates weakness in that his Son, Jesus, came to earth as a helpless baby who couldn't even hold up his own head.

God's personality is a paradox.

But I think that before he created us, he knew we'd need him to be complex. We'd need him to be tender in addition to almighty. We'd need a God who knows pain and fear and loss and loneliness. And he's been through it all—God the Father watched his Son die, and God the Son was abandoned by his Father.

Advent is a reminder of God's tender side. The side that lifts us up when we're beaten down and fills us up when we're empty. The side that sticks with us during even the yucky parts of life.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord, we lift up those suffering weakness of the body. For the sick, the dying, and all who suffer in body, mind, or soul, that they receive strength to bear their afflictions with patient endurance. With your gracious power, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

## FRIDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross and say,*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

The baby in the manger is the King on the throne. Come to him in prayer: King Jesus, who reigns over all things, establish your rule deep in our hearts. Overwhelm all our weakness and frailty so that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### WORD

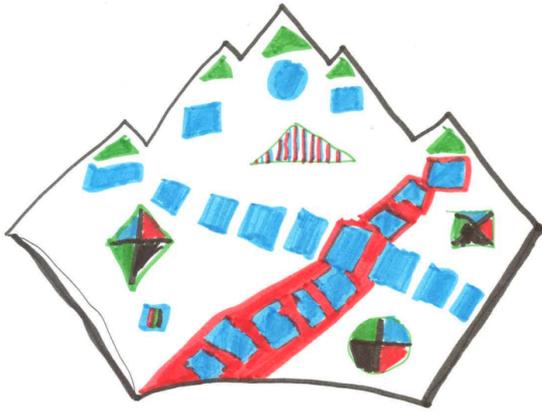
“He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate...” (Luke 1:51-52)

### MEDITATION

#### “Those of Humble Estate” by Megan Roegner

When I read the Bible, I am hungry for the voices of women. As a woman in a denomination that does not allow female ordination, I often feel that our discourse surrounding gender roles speaks more about who women are *not* rather than who we are. I need sisters and mothers to show me the way.

For Mary and Elizabeth, of course, the gender roles were even more clearly defined and much, much narrower. In Mary’s famous song, the Magnificat, she uses her feminine perspective to celebrate how God elevates the humble and humbles the proud. God’s power does not rely on human strength or social position. Rather, God’s power works in ways that our mortal minds struggle to comprehend because true might is not fearful, defensive, or insecure: It has abundant room for mercy.



The words of the Magnificat alone are beautiful. But I also am moved when I think about the relationship between the text, the speaker, and the audience. These prophetic, confident words are spoken by a pregnant, unwed teenager in a time and place that were hostile to people in her situation. Not only that, they were spoken to another woman, one who lived the majority of her adult life childless in a time and place that believed the most essential

role of married women was motherhood. Mary and Elizabeth know all about humble estates, but God gives them voices, makes them vessels not just for their incredible babies but for his Word.

And maybe the most beautiful thing about it is that Mary and Elizabeth do not have to be miraculously transformed into anything other than who they are to do the amazing work God has planned for them. They are still women of their time and place; they are mothers, wives, and friends. In these roles, they meet their bewildering circumstances with courage, faith, and joy.

We can't assess the transformative power of God's love through human measures of social position and rank. One of my favorite Bible verses is Luke 2:19: "But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." God meets us where we are and changes us from the inside out.

**Parenthesis**  
**by Megan Roegner**

In their stable bed,  
Mary curls her body around  
her son protectively,  
like a parenthesis.

He may be the Incarnate Word,  
but she is still his mother.

Stirring, he stretches in  
the cat-like way of babies,  
and she lifts him onto her chest,  
heart to heart.

Outside, stars shine, angels sing,  
and shepherds kneel,  
but for this moment Mary ponders

(the sweet smell of milk,  
the wispy hair brushing her chin,  
each miraculous breath)

whether there is any better way  
to understand the divine.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Lord, give us eyes to see one another as you do. Extend your reign and rule through us. If there is a word you want me to speak, or a service you want me to perform, I'm available. Send me with your gracious power, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

## SATURDAY

### INVOCATION

*Make the sign of the cross  
and say,*

In the name of the Father,  
and of the Son, and of the  
Holy Spirit. Amen.

### INVITATION PRAYER

The baby in the manger is  
the King on the throne.

Come to him in prayer:  
King Jesus, who reigns  
over all things, establish  
your rule deep in our  
hearts. Overwhelm all our  
weakness and frailty so

that your power may be evident to all. Supersede all forces and powers that set themselves against you. For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### WORD, MEDITATION, AND CLOSING PRAYER

*Return to the word, phrase, or verse you meditated upon on Sunday. Re-read that selection from the text. After a week spent pondering the presence of Christ through his incarnation and birth, what truth is the scripture speaking to you now? Write or speak your own prayer or meditation in response to God's Word.*



## COMFORT, COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE

by Johann Olearius, translated by Catherine Winkworth

Comfort, comfort ye my people,  
speak ye peace, thus saith our God;  
comfort those who sit in darkness  
mourning 'neath their sorrow's load.  
Speak ye to Jerusalem  
of the peace that waits for them!  
Tell her that her sins I cover,  
and her warfare now is over.

Yea, her sins our God will pardon,  
blotting out each dark misdeed;  
all that well deserved His anger  
He will no more see nor heed.  
She hath suffered many a day,  
now her griefs have passed away;  
God will change her pining sadness  
into ever-springing gladness.

For the prophet's voice is crying  
in the desert far and near,  
bidding all men to repentance,  
since the kingdom now is here.  
O that warning cry obey,  
now prepare for God a way;  
let the valleys rise to meet Him,  
and the hills bow down to greet Him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,  
make the rougher places plain,  
let your hearts be true and humble,  
as befits His holy reign;  
for the glory of the LORD  
now o'er earth is shed abroad,  
and all flesh shall see the token  
that His Word is never broken.

