

The background of the entire page is a night sky filled with stars. A bright, multi-pointed starburst or comet-like light streaks down from the top center. Below the sky, a dark silhouette of a forest is visible, with small, glowing lights scattered throughout, suggesting a town or village at night.

Nov/Dec 2015

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

## WAITING *for the* KINGDOM *of* GOD

ALSO: WHEN IN ROME . . . WITH JESUS

Friends:

As we enter the end of the calendar year, we also enter Advent, a season in which we wait upon the Lord. So much of our culture focuses on ostentatious excess in the holiday season, on buying things we don't need and can't afford with loud celebration, as if we can party our way to feeling good about ourselves. Instead, Advent brings a welcome time of waiting and longing for our Savior. It reminds us that we cannot save ourselves but that God has already sent the Savior in Jesus of Nazareth. As a watchman waits through the night for dawn, so we commemorate the waiting for Jesus' birth as we long for his coming again. Come, Lord Jesus!



In December, with Pastor Norman Visser we explore waiting in the season of Advent. We'll look to biblical examples of what it means to wait upon and long for the kingdom of God to come fully.

But first, in November, with Pastor Henry Kranenburg we walk through the first half of the apostle Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome, showing us how to live in Rome not as the Romans do, but as people who wait on the Lord!

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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**“Waiting for the  
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**Managing Editor:** Eleanor Lamsma  
**Executive Editor:** Steven Koster

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**re**FRAME MEDIA

# november

## When in Rome . . . with Jesus

**Henry Kranenburg**

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” People often say this when they adopt socially or politically correct manners and behavior, especially if they are far from home.

But the letter of Paul to the Romans suggests something else. To belong to Jesus may mean doing something quite different from what “the Romans do,” even if you are in Rome.

The apostle Paul wrote to Christians who lived in Rome, the city of the emperor, during the time of emperor worship in the Roman Empire. Paul wrote to people for whom social and political correctness and action could result in either promotion or death. But Paul’s goal was spiritual correctness. When we are “called to be saints,” we are called to belong to Jesus. Paul’s letter to the Romans helps us understand how we belong and how we should live when we are “in Christ” and not simply in Rome. This month, as we read and reflect on passages in the first half of the book of Romans, let’s aim to deepen that understanding.

*Pastor Henry Kranenburg serves as lead pastor at Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ontario. He previously served Bethel CRC in Brockville, Ontario. Henry is married to Marnie, and together they have four children in various stages of life, work, and study.*

**“A DEVOTED SLAVE OF JESUS”**

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus . . .*

—Romans 1:1

I can become too familiar with some phrases in the Bible, like this one: “a servant of Christ.” When that happens, it’s easy not to pay much attention. Eugene Petersen, in *The Message*, his contemporary language version of the Bible, treats those words this way: “I, Paul, am a devoted slave of Jesus Christ on assignment. . . .” That catches my attention.

Calling himself a servant says something about Paul. He knew better than we do what servants were and how they fit into the culture of his time. But hearing Paul introduce himself as “a devoted slave on assignment” gives me pause. Paul wasn’t just a member in some new movement. He wasn’t just a theologian trying to make sense of new ideas he had come across. He wasn’t just a preacher looking for an audience. Paul was a

devoted slave of Someone who was not just anyone but the Lord of heaven and earth.

For a Roman citizen—which Paul was—to begin a letter to people in Rome that way *demand*s our attention. Paul is unabashedly connected to Jesus—even enslaved. His opening identification highlights his relationship with Christ as Lord.

That makes me ask, “How do I identify with Jesus?”—because that’s what the Christian faith is all about, first and foremost.

Lord Jesus, the attractions and distractions of my life can lure me from being devoted to you. Help me to grow in seeing your presence and work everywhere, and in connecting with who you are. In your name, Amen.

## LETTERS FROM GOD

*To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people . . . .*  
—Romans 1:7

The New Testament includes a lot of letters from spiritual leaders to churches and to church leaders. We might ask, “Of all the ways to write about faith and how it works, why use a bunch of letters?”

It would be a bit bold to suggest I have the answer, but it strikes me that in the letters of the New Testament, Paul and others are writing to people. In fact, we could say that God, speaking through Paul and others, is giving his Word to people in the form of a letter *because letters are written for readers*. Letters are personal. They are not just about information but about connection and relationship. Letters need readers.

So after identifying who he is in relation to Jesus, Paul clarifies that he is writing to people. People are the point. Theology is for people because God is for

people. Christianity is not about a religious system that puzzlers are trying to piece together. It’s about us—real, everyday people—who belong to Jesus. God loves us and calls us to be holy people (saints). God wants to extend his grace and peace to us.

I think God is making a point by using letters in the New Testament. God wants me to know that he doesn’t just want me to hear truth; he wants me to hear him because I matter to him personally.

Heavenly Father, for the gift of your letters to us, we thank you. For your desire that we hear you, affirming our value to you, we give thanks in Christ. Amen.

## GOD'S WORDS FOR ME

*I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.*  
—Romans 1:14

If you ask, “For whom is God’s Word written?” someone will usually reply, “For everyone.” But when you ask a few more questions and dig deeper, you begin to see the answer is not so simple. Is the Bible written for people who couldn’t care less? Is it written for people who can’t read Hebrew or Greek? Is it written for atheists?

For example, if I took all the letters I wrote to my wife while we were dating, and made them into a book, and then asked for whom it was written, what would the answer be? Paul’s letter is for Greeks and non-Greeks, wise and foolish. But somewhere in that mix I too am included. God’s “letter” is for me too—not based on my nationality or amount of wisdom. It is for me because God loves me and calls me to belong to him in Jesus.

Here’s what this means: If I lean toward the foolish end, God’s Word is for me. If I am already wise and seasoned, God’s Word is for me. Why? Because God is not interested in simply teaching me theology. God wants me to know him and hear him and love him. That’s the whole point of the gospel. And that is why God’s letter through Paul to the Romans is for you. God’s desire, as with any letter, is that you open it and read it—and more than just a few times.

Father God, sometimes my own sense of wisdom, or the lack of it, can hinder me from hearing your Word. Help me see that however and wherever I am, you desire me. In Christ, Amen.

## GOD'S DESIRE FOR ME

*I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.  
... It is the power of God that brings salvation.*

—Romans 1:15-16

In my experience as a pastor, I would not describe preaching as either easy or simply fun. But it can be incredibly meaningful when you sense that something in your message of God's love connects with your listeners. So I can appreciate that Paul is eager to preach the gospel to the people he cares about in Rome.

Paul is eager not because he thinks he's so good at what he does or because he would like to headline a few performances in the empire's capital. The reason for his eagerness comes from the fact that the gospel is the power of God. And it is power for a specific purpose.

The gospel is not power to get a new bill of health, or to gain the friend or spouse you desire. It's not power for financial success or fault-free parenting. It's not power to get to heaven when

you die. It's power for salvation. And salvation has to do with getting where we need to be in our relationship with God.

Paul's eagerness in all this is a reflection of God's desire. God wants me to belong to him as fully as I can in the life I am now living. That's the point of the gospel, and that is its power. The challenge for me is to have the same eagerness for God that God has for me.

Dear God, sometimes we see your power mostly as a means to our ends. Help us not to use it for us but to seek you, and to know your desire that we find you. In Christ, Amen.

## KNOWING GOD

*What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.*  
—Romans 1:19

I'm not the smartest person I know. I'm also not the wisest. My children still sometimes say I'm the smartest dad in the world, but now they say it with more love than conviction. I'm fine with that because I want their love, not false beliefs.

God also knows I'm not the smartest person. I am deeply grateful that his love for me is not based on how wise or foolish I am (Romans 1:14). But God does draw some lines that I need to understand.

I don't know everything there is to know about God, but if I suppress what I do know, or if I don't take God seriously, or if I live in ways that deny the truth or undermine what God has said is truth, then I will stir up God's wrath. That's because truth is important. In fact, Jesus said he is "the way and the truth and the life," to which

he added, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). This means that when we "suppress the truth," we block our way to God.

God knows the damage that our suppression of the truth can cause; he lost his Son once because of it.

"Smart" is not what God is asking of me; allegiance to the truth is what he demands. It's the starting place on the track of salvation.

Father God, we know our human nature; we accept the truth we want to hear, and we set aside what we don't want to hear. Help us in honesty to hear what you say—and to live by it. Through Jesus, Amen.

## FOLLOWING TRUTH

*They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

—Romans 1:25

In our reading from Romans today, Paul paints a picture of what happens when people do what is right in their own eyes.

When people “suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18), they no longer want God to function as God in their lives. Their thinking becomes futile, and their minds and hearts grow dark. And God says, in effect, “If that’s what you want, that’s what you get” (*The Message*). God gives them over to their own desires, and all kinds of immorality and destructive behavior take over in their lives. Paul summarizes in a way like this: “Since they didn’t bother to acknowledge God, God quit bothering them and let them run loose. And then all hell broke loose” (*The Message*).

If I didn’t care about God or what God says, I might be irritated by this passage. But I do care, and the last thing I want

is for God to let me destroy myself. Since I know how easily I can turn to my own ideas of truth, or what I wish truth to be, what do I do with this?

God’s answer is clear: we need to follow the one who is Truth, the one who won’t be deceived or deceive. That’s the track to life. The only road.

The story of the lost son (Luke 15) gives me hope. It tells me that when Truth helps me see that I am off track, my Father is also waiting to help me get home. That is gospel truth!

Father, your hand in my life is life. Forgive me for the ways I have not acknowledged you. Lead me on the path that brings me to you. In Christ, Amen.

## KINDNESS AND REPENTANCE

*Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*

—Romans 2:4

Paul says that when I judge someone else's actions, I am also judging myself. Judging claims to know something about truth, and if I know enough truth to judge someone else, I obviously know that truth for myself too.

That makes sense to me. It would be silly to think that I could point out the greed in someone else and then claim innocence about the greed in my own life. When I was a child, my parents taught me and my sisters to pray with our eyes closed. It took experience to understand that if I told my mom that one of my sisters had her eyes open during prayer, it was obvious that I'd had my eyes open too.

The odd thing is that, like children, we still point out others' faults and think we can get away with it. So God closes the loophole on our tendency

to ignore our own guilt while we place blame on others. God makes us look at ourselves. What God wants here is not a detailed theology of sin and guilt but an understanding that his "kindness is intended to lead [us] to repentance."

God's goal is not about catching us pointing fingers at others. It's about honesty that leads to full life in Jesus. God's motivation is to save us from destroying ourselves through our sin. God is asking, "Do you see that?"

Father God, thank you for your kindness, forbearance, and patience. Thank you for taking me seriously in all that I am and for pointing me to Jesus. In his name, Amen.

## BEARING FRUIT MATTERS

*It is not those who hear the law . . . but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.*  
—Romans 2:13

“Merely hearing God’s law is a waste of your time if you don’t do what he commands. Doing, not hearing, is what makes the difference with God” (*The Message*).

Trying to be righteous in what I do is not the same as trying to earn salvation by aiming to be righteous. We are saved only by God’s grace. But once we realize we are saved and declared righteous through Christ, we want to live in gratitude by trying to be righteous. Both the Old and New Testaments teach that the way I live says something about who I am and how I really understand the faith journey. Jesus taught that you can tell something about a tree by the fruit it bears (Matthew 7:16-20).

Though I may do good things, that’s not really Paul’s point here. The question is whether or not the good things I do come from

a heart that belongs to Jesus. Do all the things I do reflect that my heart belongs to him?

I also do bad things, because I am still a sinner. But God wants me to have integrity; God wants my faith connected with all I think, do, and say. And God’s Spirit helps me to live that way.

God wants to shape me from the inside out. When I belong to him, that’s what I want God to do too.

Lord, for the ways in which my life shows you at work in me, thank you. For the ways in which I need re-shaping to better reflect you, please guide me. In your name, Amen.

## RELIGION ON THE INSIDE

*A person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.*

—Romans 2:29

Every once in a while I get a phone call from someone I don't know who will ask, "Do you do baptisms in your church?" The caller is usually someone who has had a baby and believes that a baby needs to be baptized. They are looking for a church that might do a baptism for them.

I'm glad that there is something positive about our church that leads them to call me. I also value the opportunity to explain what baptism means. Paul was addressing something similar in these verses to the Romans. You can "do the baptism thing," but if all it means is a onetime water sprinkling or immersion, then it's no more than a tradition. It may be religiously correct, but it won't be spiritually what God intends it to be.

There are times when I need to look at the religious things I

do, and to ask, "Why am I doing this?" God doesn't ask me to naively follow a tradition; God wants me to follow Jesus. When my connection is more to the tradition than to the comfort and challenge of belonging to Christ, I'm missing something important.

Baptism, like circumcision and obeying commandments, is not about religion. All these are good things, but they are not ends in themselves. Ultimately, they are about belonging to and living for Jesus.

Lord, you have called me not to religious practice, but to a faith that comes from the inside. Help me to live and grow in the comfort of belonging to you. Amen.

## WHAT I REALLY NEED

*Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. . . . "There is no one righteous, not even one."*  
—Romans 3:9-10

It may seem odd, but consider this: if you're under water and you can't breathe, it's really not significant to boast that at least you are drowning only two feet below the surface while others may be drowning *way* beneath you.

That's kind of what Paul is pointing to in these verses. Apparently people were assessing themselves by comparing their level of sinfulness to that of others. They figured that they weren't so bad because the others were far worse sinners. But what they really needed to do was assess themselves according to God's standards.

When you're drowning, if your main focus is whether you are closer to the surface than others, you might entirely miss what you need in order to be saved. The only thing you really

need is to get out of the water and breathe again.

Why do people so easily get caught up in comparing themselves to others? Why is it so easy for us to read Scripture in terms of what it says about others, and not listen to what it says about us?

God's point is clear: the number-one issue in my life is how I live for God. Wisdom means knowing that when I am drowning in sin, it's my sin that I need to be aware of—and free of—not the sins of others!

Lord, help me to recognize that it doesn't matter whether I am better or worse than others. Help me to walk the path you have put before me. Amen.

## GOD'S JUSTICE IN JESUS

*There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace.*  
—Romans 3:22-24

So there is no difference. You, me, people all around the world, family members, co-workers, and all our neighbors—we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” None of us is in this alone.

Paul's intent, though, is not to clarify that sin has a lot of company. He is setting the stage for what Jesus came to do. God's goal from the beginning, when sin first entered the picture, was not just to judge us; nor was it just to rescue us from eternal punishment. God's goal has always been to get us back *with* him. But for that to happen, there needs to be a sacrifice, which we can't pay. And there is no difference: whoever we are and wherever we live, we all need Jesus to be that sacrifice of atonement for us.

Sometimes we lose sight of why God had things go this way. A

philosopher once suggested that it's really not a big deal; God ultimately has to forgive us because that's his job as God. But God wants us to understand that Jesus' sacrifice is not just some neat and dramatic “love gesture.” It is a big deal because as God, his job is also to be just. The difference is that God gives us Jesus—because his goal is not his job. God's goal is us.

Heavenly Father, your justice is real, because you have given your Son, Jesus, to die in my place, paying the price for my sin. Thank you that through the sacrifice of Christ I may know your love as my Father in heaven. Amen.

## BOASTING IN JESUS

*Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? . . . Because of the law that requires faith.* —Romans 3:27

Paul often asks interesting questions, and this is one of them: “Where, then, is boasting?”

This question is not about the general appropriateness of bragging. Paul is asking whether there is anything we can do in the process of getting right with God, so that we might say: “Hey, this is what I contributed to being okay with God.” If there is, that would be good to know so that we could brag—or at least feel good—about it.

But the answer is that there is nothing we can boast about, because there is nothing we can contribute. That’s what Paul keeps driving at.

Apparently someone also asked, “Well, if there’s nothing I can do to help the process of getting right with God, what’s the point of being obedient?”

Why should I even try to keep the law?”

But the law is given for a purpose. It guides our *living* as God’s children. It also shows us where we fall short so that we can see how much we need the Savior. But it doesn’t do anything toward *making* us God’s children. When all is said and done, the only way to God is through Jesus’ sacrifice.

There is nothing in the whole process that I could boast about. With one exception: I may boast in my Savior.

Lord Jesus, it is hard for our minds to grasp that you alone have done all that is needed for us to be children of God. Increase our faith, we pray, and receive our heartfelt thanks. Amen.

## TRUSTING GOD TO DO IT

*What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*  
—Romans 4:3

In today's verses Paul expands on his thoughts about how we can get right with God. Paul brings the Old Testament patriarch Abraham into the picture. He notes that Abraham became okay with God because he trusted God to take care of the process. Abraham knew he couldn't do that himself. In the words of *The Message*: "He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own."

When my car breaks down, it can't fix itself. In order to get fixed, it needs someone who knows all about it.

Someone might give me some tools to try to fix it. I can start pulling things apart under the hood and looking carefully at the pieces, but that won't go far, because I don't know enough in order to fix it. What my car needs is someone who

can figure out what is wrong and do the right thing to fix the problem. That's why I go to my expert mechanic. I trust him to set it right rather than trying to set it right on my own.

Similarly, I can't fix myself. Only God can fix me. He wants me to trust him to fix what is broken in my life. Jesus paid the price, once for all, to fix my brokenness, and God credits me with Jesus' righteousness. Then he calls me to live for him!

Heavenly Father, sometimes pride, or maybe guilt, makes me think I need to fix myself for you. But I can't. Help me to trust you to set it right. In Christ, Amen.

## I BELONG TO GOD

*The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring.* —Romans 4:16

I am my parents' child. I didn't earn it. I didn't buy it. I didn't plan it, ask for it, or even agree to it. I am my parents' child simply because my mom gave birth to me.

I could talk about laws of biology and sex and physics as a way of explaining how I came to be. But that would miss the point. It would identify how I was reproduced from my parents, but it wouldn't explain how I am their child in terms of their desire and love for me.

I am also God's child. The reading from Romans for today explains that I am an heir to God's promise.

But for some reason we have a tendency to think our good deeds give birth to the inheritance God has promised—as if obedience to the law explains how we become heirs.

God says that “the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace.” This grace comes from God, who gives new life to what is dead and brings change to what needs changing. I am now a “reborn” me.

I am a child of God. I didn't earn it. I didn't buy it. I didn't plan it. God did it because of his desire and love for me.

Has God done this for you too? If you want him to make you his child, he will!

Father God, I am your child in Jesus. I am an heir to your promise. Thank you for giving me new life and working your change in me. Help me to live for you. Through Christ, Amen.

## HOPING IN GOD

*[Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God . . . being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*

—Romans 4:20-21

In hope, Abraham believed “against all hope.” That’s quite a tribute. In fact, it almost sounds as if Abraham’s hope “without weakening in his faith” earned him the righteousness he got. I admire that; I appreciate that Abraham is a part of the “cloud of witnesses” we can read about in Hebrews 11. He inspires me to want to strengthen my hope and faith.

But if determination to have stronger hope and faith is all I get from this passage, I wouldn’t be hearing what God is saying. The strength of our hope and faith does not start with us; it starts with what we hope for and what we have faith in. *That’s* what Paul is explaining here.

*God* made a promise, and *God* keeps his promises. This is the God who raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead. Having delivered Jesus to death for our

sins, God raised Jesus to life for our justification. My faith and my hope didn’t make that happen; God did. My faith and hope simply embrace what God promised and did.

Even Abraham didn’t always understand. His wife hadn’t borne a child, so he tried helping God to fulfill his promise by having a child with his wife’s servant (Genesis 16). But God didn’t need Abraham’s help, and God doesn’t need our help. He is God, and our hope is in him, not in the power of our hope.

Father, help us to put our hope in your power and love. Strengthen our faith to embrace your promises. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## RESTING ON PEACE

*Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
—Romans 5:1

Paul has pointed out that my hope and faith are not based on my ability; they are grounded in the power of God. This is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and who says that if we believe, then we are his children. Well, I believe, so I am a child of God. God has given birth, as it were, to a new me.

That does not make me perfect; it makes me a child of God. It means I am part of his family and that God is my Father. Therefore I have and am at peace with God because I am now safely within the family fold.

What I need to keep remembering is that this peace with God is not just something I desire. It's something God desires to have with me! That's why God sent Jesus, and it's why he wants me to know that obedi-

ence to the law won't earn me a place in his family.

Understanding that I am part of the family means something more. It means that when I suffer, I don't need to wonder if I still belong. Whatever happens now happens within the context of God's family. In fact, when I put my hope in God, God pours his love into me. God wants me to rest peacefully in that. It's what a heavenly Father desires for his children.

Dear God, in all the talk about sin and justification, we can lose sight of your goal to make us your children. In Jesus, help me to know myself as your child, and to rest in your love and peace. Amen.

## AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME

*At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*  
—Romans 5:6

Having hope and a faith that doesn't weaken is not as easy as some might think. I know this is true in my own faith journey.

But what is important to me is that God knows this too. And in our reading for today God gives some reassurance about some doubts we might have.

It's as if God is saying, "Okay, so you still think you need to *do* something to belong to me. You think that somehow you need to qualify for this gift of grace in order for me to give it. As if somehow I might have missed seeing some sin in your life, some part of you that is dirty or ugly, that would make me say, 'Well, my gift of grace is not for you. You're just too sinful!'"

God anticipates that you or I might wrestle with that. So God says, in effect, "Guess what? Your hope and faith *can't be* in

having your life and religion all in order. Your hope and faith *have to be in me*. When it comes to what it takes to become my child, you are powerless. And you don't deserve it. So you don't need to go there. But understand this: In Jesus, I've taken care of it. You see, at just the right time, I sent Jesus Christ to die for you!"

Can you think of any better news than that?

Lord Jesus, I wish I wasn't powerless. I wish I was perfect in godliness. But this is my reality. Thank you that at just the right time, you died for me. You are an awesome Savior! Amen.

## JESUS TRUMPS SIN

*Many died by the trespass of the one man . . . God's grace and the gift [of righteousness] . . . came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ.*  
—Romans 5:15

To understand reality, you have to be a realist. The Bible is not about a religious practice or a lifestyle choice. It is about a problem and a solution. The first man, Adam, made a choice that allowed sin to enter the world (see Genesis 3). I not only carry that sin like a virus, but its infection has also handicapped my life. As long as sin has control over me, I am quarantined from God. One sin messed it up for us all. I may not like it, but that is the reality in the world today.

Only in that reality can I understand the cure that Jesus made possible. What Jesus has done makes sense only in the context of what happened way back with the one man, Adam. Adam and Eve's choice infected us all. But that infection doesn't stand a chance against the aggressive forgiveness of God.

While it took the death of Jesus to make the antidote, that is all you need to be free of the grip of the infection.

It's not easy theology any more than understanding antidotes is easy biology. But it is our basic reality.

That's why God sent Jesus Christ to be our Savior. God's grace in Jesus trumps the infection of sin.

Have you received the gift of God's grace and Jesus' righteousness?

Lord Jesus, what a gift of grace you give. Though we still live in an infected world, we thank you that we no longer have to live in the grip of sin. Help me to live accordingly for you. In your name, Amen.

## UNITED WITH CHRIST

*We were . . . buried with him through baptism into death in order that . . . we too may live a new life.* —Romans 6:4

Sin has the value of showcasing God's grace. Grace is good, and our sin makes grace more obvious and necessary. This makes just enough sense that someone in Paul's day apparently suggested that we should "go on sinning so that grace may increase"!

I try to imagine how that might work with my wife: "Honey, the ways in which I will offend you today will be wonderful opportunities for you to show grace through forgiveness"!

That doesn't work because sin is not simply a matter of something that is bad. The problem of sin is that it affects who I am at my core, and it affects all my relationships with others. That means sinning against my wife is not just about badness that needs forgiveness; it's about our relationship. Conversely, doing what is good in my marriage is

not simply about goodness that gains me credit. Doing good is about building a relationship with the one I love.

That's what Paul is talking about when he speaks of being united with Jesus. It's why baptism symbolizes "drowning" the badness of sin that gets in the way. The point is not just about getting rid of sin. It's about wanting to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

Heavenly Father, I know my lifestyle choices affect my relationship with you and my relationships with others. Please lead me in building good relationships rather than just focusing on my behavior. In Jesus, Amen.

## ALIVE TO GOD

*Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

—Romans 6:11

In today's verses, Paul responds to a question he asked earlier: "[W]e died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:2). The simple answer is this: We can't. If we have died with Christ, who died and paid for our sin, then we can't live in sin.

At least we shouldn't. And here is where this can get complicated.

I love God. I want to live in a way that reflects what God has done in me. I don't want to live in some remnants of my old self. I want that stuff nailed to the cross and hung out to die. I want to be alive in Jesus.

But I still sin; what do I do with that?

I need to check to make sure that I honestly love God and want to live in Christ. And then I need to understand this: Being alive in Christ does not mean

I will be totally free from sin (1 John 1:8-10). It means sin can no longer run or ruin my life. It means I don't treat every choice as an option, but I ask first, "What would Jesus have me do?" It means I start my day by asking God what I can do to serve him.

Being alive in Christ means I will fight for him. And when I fail, I will be honest and confess to him, and then, with his help, I can get up and serve him again.

Lord, because I belong to you, I do not want sin to reign in my life. You are my Master; I want to be your servant. I offer myself to you this day. Amen.

## LIFE IN CHRIST

*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
—Romans 6:23

It seems some Christians in Rome may have been suggesting that if the law is no longer the master, then the law shouldn't be a big deal. If I were Paul, I might have been banging my head on the table, muttering, *Don't they get it?*

Apparently they didn't get it. That's why God inspired Paul to write this to them, and then gave it to us—because we don't always get it either.

God is pretty intentional—and intense—about helping us understand the problem of sin. So Paul again points out that it's the law that helps us gain that understanding. God's intent is not that we just disagree with sin; God wants us to understand that sin messes up who we are and how we connect with God and each other. God wants us to recognize that if nothing is done, sin will increasingly sepa-

rate us from God until finally it separates us forever.

Satan, on the other hand, wants us to ignore that fact and to let sin destroy us.

Today's verse is not just a biblical truth. It reveals God's desire and his offer of life. Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

That's why I must take sin seriously.

Lord, you came so that we can have life to the full. Forgive me for the ways I rob myself of that fullness. I desire to follow you. For your name's sake, Amen.

## CONNECTED TO JESUS

*So . . . you . . . belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. —Romans 7:4*

In today's verses, Paul uses the example of marriage to illustrate his point about the law.

I am married. I know some things about marriage and how it's supposed to work. I have preached sermons about marriage; I have helped couples prepare for it; and for 30 years I have experienced it. None of that means I am a good husband. But at the same time, even if I'm poor at it, I am still a husband.

Paul's point is that marriage is not based on performance, or on the application of laws to the situation. Marriage is about two hearts and lives connected in close relationship. In my marriage, with all the good and the bad and the indifferent, one thing I know for sure: as a husband, I belong to my wife. And because my marriage is about a *living* union, the "laws" of mar-

riage only apply while both of us are living.

That's the point Paul is making about Jesus and the law. Belonging to Jesus is not about living within certain laws about faith. It's about a living union in which Jesus and I are in active relationship. It means that Jesus as my Savior has my heart and that I am fully devoted to him, putting him first in my life and forsaking all other claims to my top loyalty. Jesus has my heart, and that's where my passion needs to be.

Lord, be alive in my life, and help me be alive in yours. Guide my growth in the freedom of loving you. Help me to live "in the new way of the Spirit." Amen.

## HOLY LAW

*So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.*  
—Romans 7:12

If it weren't for speed limits, I might not realize I was going too fast until I lost control on a curve in the road. Speed limits and signs—and the people who help us observe them—are all good, even if I try to get away with breaking them.

But not all laws are precautionary. For example, a basic law of nature says that poison will kill me. That means it would be both foolish and deadly to take poison and hope I could get away with “breaking the law.”

Paul wants us to understand the law of God in a similar way.

It's not the law that causes death; the poison of disobedience does. The law simply identifies the issue. You might still say that the law of nature works death in me if I drink poison. But the simple truth is that the law of God helps me

to see what the issues are, and to understand why disobeying them causes problems.

I don't know the effect of every poison. I don't understand the reason behind every speed limit. But I accept the place of God's law. It's why I'm a follower of Jesus. Both in law and in Christ, God always intends for my best.

Heavenly Father, sometimes your law feels like a burden on my freedom. Help me to better understand its holiness. Guide me to live in its goodness. Through Jesus, my Lord, Amen.

## I STILL BELONG TO JESUS

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*  
—Romans 7:15

There's something about Paul's writing here that resonates with me. Paul is being honest and vulnerable, and here we see him wrestling deep inside himself and not simply with the theology of faith. God apparently wants us to see and understand that.

So Paul, a significant church leader and follower of Jesus, says there are times when he doesn't understand himself. I feel bad for Paul because that isn't pleasant, especially not for someone who wants the pieces of his life to fit and have integrity.

Though I feel bad for Paul in this situation, I am also thankful that he dares to say what he did, and that God chose to pass that along to me (and all of us). It clarifies for me that being a follower of Jesus, even when I do plenty of honorable things,

doesn't mean that everything in my life falls neatly into place.

But Paul identifies something more. Even in those areas of my life that don't fit with my desire to follow Jesus, my heart still knows this: *I belong to Jesus*. Even though I sin, I do not belong to sin. I don't understand myself sometimes, but I know to whom I belong, weaknesses and all. And that's the point.

Do you belong to Jesus too?

Lord, thank you for Paul's honest words. I'm sorry for ways in which my living doesn't reflect belonging to you. But I know I belong to you, and that you love me—weaknesses and all. In your name, Amen.

## THE PLACE OF EVIL

*So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.*  
—Romans 7:21

God's Word not only notes the reality of evil, but it also goes so far as to say that evil is always present. This means that belonging to Jesus does not by itself keep us away from evil. "I find this law at work: . . . evil is right there with me," says Paul.

I don't like that, but knowing this law helps me keep perspective. Rather than being surprised by the presence of evil and temptations in my life, and wondering what their presence might say about me, I can instead focus on standing against it, with Christ's help. I can admit that evil is here, with me. It was present for Paul, and it was present for Jesus. The question is: What am I going to do about it? How am I going to cope with its presence?

Sometimes what hurts us in the battle against evil is that we don't openly admit there is

a battle. Then we may end up either not fighting, or simply fighting on our own.

So a place to start is to recognize the presence of evil and its temptations and to ask for God's help in battling it. In addition, ask for the counsel and prayers of a trusted Christ-follower when you're engaged in a specific battle with evil. The point is not to deny it, but to claim our place in Christ, and to keep fighting.

Lord, I don't want to be ignorant of the evil that is right here with me. I belong to you. Help me fight what is evil and do what is good. In your strength, Amen.

## IT'S A NEW DAY

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*  
—Romans 8:1

To understand what Paul is saying here, we need to remember what he has said in the preceding sections. That's what the "therefore" is there for. Paul has said that sin is a problem not simply because it is wrong but because its wrongness poisons who we are with God. We try to do good, but evil is right there beside us. At times we don't even understand why we get stuck in it.

But we belong to Jesus. That is both the starting and the ending point in this discussion.

I belong to Jesus, and regardless of the battle, or the reality of evil and sin in my life, or the damage it does, or what I do, or how well I understand myself, I still belong to Jesus. That is why I keep going to him for guidance, strength, confession, and forgiveness. Who I am is not about the battle in which I

find myself; it's about whom I follow.

This statement is crucially important: "There is now *no* condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." When I genuinely come to Jesus, it doesn't matter if Satan or anyone else points a finger. In fact, in place of condemnation, God gives me the Spirit by which I am to live.

That's my focus, my freedom. It's a new day. Thanks be to God, who says it's true!

Lord Jesus, regardless of yesterday or the days before, today is a new day with you. Help me to live in the freedom of all that this means, in love for you and for others. In your name, Amen.

## SET YOUR MIND

*Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.*  
—Romans 8:5

In Romans, God makes clear that evil is always right there with me. But even more important—and more powerful!—God also makes clear that if I belong to Jesus, then the Spirit of God is right there *in* me. This means that in the very presence of evil the Spirit is at work to give me life and to set my mind and body on living for God.

That is an impressive comfort. God does not save me and then leave me to live this out on my own. The Spirit is working in me so that my body, the very members of which I might at times give to sin, become dead to sin and alive to honoring God in what I do.

But of course I need to cooperate with God in this. I can't just sit back and say "Go for it!" to the Spirit and expect God to work it all out without my participation. This whole business

of belonging to God is one of partnership, as it has been from the beginning.

Where does that start? Paul mentions the mind five times in these verses. My living, to some degree, follows how I focus my mind. So if I want my life to reflect the one to whom I belong, then I need to pay attention to where I set my mind.

That's why it's important to take time to read and reflect on God's Word. Scripture and prayer help to align our minds and lives with Christ each day.

Is your mind set on Christ today?

Holy Spirit, I want to set my mind on what you desire. Please live and work in me, that I may focus on and align with Christ, my Lord. Amen.

## SUFFERING VERSUS GLORY

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* —Romans 8:18

Claiming what this verse says is easier for some than for others. It depends on what kind of suffering you have experienced or are currently enduring.

Paul is being realistic. Whether it's trying to make sense of ourselves, fighting off sin, struggling in relationship, bearing wounds of brokenness, being limited by health, enduring the pain of depression or a host of other situations, suffering is real for Christians as well as non-Christians.

Paul wants us to gain perspective, so he invites us to compare our suffering to the glory that will be revealed in us. But Paul does not define that glory as life without adversity, as if we won't have health issues or financial needs or marital struggles or the like. Our goal is not so much to beat suffering as it is

to live fully and completely as children of God.

God reminds us that we have his Spirit—always. And the Spirit will help us in all situations, interceding for us even if we struggle to pray. *Even in the worst of times, we are not alone.* I find great comfort in that.

When I suffer, I need that reminder. I may want an easier life, but what I need most is to know that God is continually with me and at work in me.

Heavenly Father, in times of struggle and suffering, assure me of your strengthening presence in my life and remind me of what that means for the future. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

## GOD WORKS FOR OUR GOOD

*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.*  
—Romans 8:28

With these words, Paul keeps building on the positive results of belonging to God in Christ. He has been brutally honest about sin and why we need Jesus. Now Paul builds further on what it means to have God as our Father. In a nutshell, it means that in all things God works for our good.

It's easy to misunderstand this statement. It does not say that all things are good. Nor does it say that all things will turn to good. In line with what he wrote earlier, Paul affirms that becoming children of God does not mean that automatically all that we do is only good. Sin and evil—and even our own selves—still get in the way.

But this passage wonderfully clarifies God's involvement in our lives. In fact, God is involved in all matters in our lives. God doesn't just observe what I

do, or judge or challenge or encourage. God himself "gets his hands dirty" by getting involved in my life.

That's partnership. And it means that what is going on in my life is never the end of the story. No matter how difficult or challenging or depressing my daily life might become, God is still doing something to work for good.

I'm not the only one working on God's goal for my life. God is right there with me all the way. How awesome is that?!

Heavenly Father, sometimes I resent your hand in my life. But in the end, I know that's what I need. Thank you that in all things you work for the good of those who love you—including me. In Jesus, Amen.

**NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US!**

*[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
—Romans 8:39

In the first eight chapters of the book of Romans, Paul has moved from the honest reality of sin, to our need for salvation (made possible only through Jesus), to the incredible reality of being God's child. Now Paul wants to draw a conclusion. So he says, in effect: "If you understand these things about God—that he wants you, that he has done everything needed to save you, and that he gives you his Spirit so that you can be part of his family in Christ—then ask yourself, 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'"

It's as if God is saying, "Hello!? Think it through. You who worry about if you belong, about the status of your sin, about earning my favor, about how to understand life—if I did all this, and am doing all this, do you think I will just give you up, or give up on you?"

While sin does separate us from God, God's goal, from the time sin first occurred, is to remove what separates us. And when, through Jesus' sacrifice, he makes us his very children, do you think God will let anything separate us from his love? "Neither death nor life . . . nor any powers"—no "trouble or hardship" of any kind can separate us from God's incredible love!

This is the story of God. And it makes all the difference, whether you are in Rome or anywhere else.

Almighty God, your love knows no bounds, your pursuit is relentless, your justice is real, and your forgiveness is complete. Thank you for making me yours! In Christ, Amen.

# december

## Waiting for the Kingdom of God

**Norman Visser**

Much of life is spent waiting: in traffic, in grocery store lines, in airports, or for doctor's test results, to name just a few examples. But not all waiting is the same. Some waiting feels like killing time. Sometimes waiting is filled with anxiety or uncertainty, while at other times it may be colored with anticipation and hope. Sometimes waiting can even be productive.

Advent is a season of waiting. We are looking forward to Christmas and to the coming of Jesus again. This month we will meet different biblical figures who were waiting for the coming Savior. Through these characters and various Bible passages we will see different aspects of what it means to trust in God and to wait quietly for his salvation.

*Norman Visser has served as a pastor of churches in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and South Dakota. He states that while he is "not known for waiting patiently," he is "working on it." Norman and his wife, Marcia, have three children.*

## WATCHMEN

*I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning,  
more than watchmen wait for the morning.* —Psalm 130:6

In the town where I live, the Christmas season begins with tree-lighting ceremonies. That is fitting, because Christmas is a season of light. In addition, the fact that these tree lightings take place in the darkness reminds us that Advent is a season of waiting.

One of the Bible's strongest images for waiting is watchmen who are looking for the morning to come. The psalmist who uses that image is crying out to God from the depths. In the psalms, depths and darkness describe trouble. We are not told what trouble the psalmist is in. We just hear the psalmist begging for mercy. When he says, "If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" he confesses that he has no more reason to expect God's help than any other sinner. Yet in his trouble he waits, "more than watchmen wait for the morning."

To wait like a watchman is to wait with confidence that the darkness will not last, even if the night seems long. Watchmen wait for a dawn they know is coming. The psalmist was waiting for God, who comes with forgiveness, unfailing love, and redemption.

No matter how long our night or how deep our darkness, Advent reminds us that we wait for God, who has come in Jesus and who is coming again. In his word we put our hope.

Gracious Father, whatever troubles we face, whatever sins haunt us, assure us that morning comes with your forgiveness and love. May we wait for you more than watchmen wait for the morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## SIMEON

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim . . . that her sin has been paid for.*

—Isaiah 40:1-2

We are not told his age, but I tend to picture Simeon as an old man. He'd been told that he would not die before he'd seen the Lord's Christ. He is also linked in the story with Anna, who was "very old" (Luke 2:36). In his prayer Simeon says that he is ready to die. Whatever his age, Simeon is described as a man who was in tune with God. "The Holy Spirit was on him." Simeon was righteous, devout, and "was waiting for the consolation of Israel."

"Consolation" might not be a word we'd expect to find here. In our minds a consolation prize is second best. The Greek word for this term in the original text can also be translated as "comfort."

Comfort, or consolation, is also what the prophet Isaiah promised exiles who had lost everything. The comfort that

the Lord proclaimed through Isaiah includes the promise of a homecoming and the assurance that the people's hard service was completed and her sins were paid for.

Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. When he saw Jesus, he said, "My eyes have seen your salvation."

Have you found the Lord's salvation too?

Father of compassion and God of all comfort, may we find our consolation in Jesus, that we may share with others the comfort and assurance of the salvation we have received. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## NOAH

*Noah . . . waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.*  
—Genesis 8:11-12

Noah waited. There was not much else he could do. Noah was in a huge boat, the ark, and the earth was covered with water. Waiting for the water to recede was all he could do, and it was a long wait.

When the ark came to rest on a mountain, Noah waited forty days before opening a window and sending out a raven and then a dove. Then he waited seven more days before sending the dove out again, and another seven before sending it one last time.

There was not much else Noah could do, but each time Noah sent out a bird, his hope was bolstered. The raven “kept flying back and forth,” perhaps landing to roost on the ark sometimes, or on floating debris, or on the nearby mountains that were visible. When the dove returned, it came to land in Noah’s

hand. When it came back with an olive leaf, Noah knew the waters had receded nearly all the way. Then, after more than a year since the flood had begun, God called Noah out of the ark.

As we wait for Christ’s coming, we look for signs that God remembers us. Sometimes the sign is hard to read, like that of a raven “flying back and forth.” Sometimes the sign is as small as an olive leaf. But these encourage us in our waiting and ensure us that God remembers us in our need, even as God remembered Noah and all who were with him.

Almighty God, as the days of our waiting stretch ahead of us, assure us that you remember us, that we may continue to find our hope in you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## CHRISTMAS LISTS

*[Jesus] said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."*

—Luke 12:15

We know better, but we still get caught up in the retail madness of Christmas. It is hard to avoid when stores announce the countdown of shopping days till Christmas, when ads keep putting gift ideas in our heads, or when the kids give us a sad look and tell us what they really want for Christmas. It's hard not to think that our worth is measured by an abundance of presents under the tree.

We know better. But if we are kids or teens, we also know that our friends will ask, "What did *you* get for Christmas?" while eagerly cataloging their haul. And while we as adults may be more subtle, we are not immune from the comparison game. We might not ask our friends, "What did you get?" but we can't help noting someone's remark about a vacation or new bling. Especially in December

we need to be on guard "against all kinds of greed."

A friend who grew up in a large family said that he and his siblings noticed something while remembering past Christmases: "We noticed that the stuff we did together was what stood out, not the stuff we got." In his story about a man who built bigger barns, Jesus reminds us there is more to life than hoarding stuff. Having things will never satisfy, but waiting for our faithful God will!

Giving God, teach us to measure our worth in our relationship with you, not in the goods we accumulate. Help us to be as generous to others as you have been with us. Amen.

## WORKING WHILE WAITING

*Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands.*

—1 Thessalonians 4:11

I used to work with a couple of guys who did not seem interested in anything beyond the weekend. Granted, it was a summer job. It was a good job, as summer jobs went, requiring some skill and attention, but it also had its share of drudgery. The days could be long under the hot sun. But there were also days when a lot seemed to happen. Still, whether it was busy or not, these guys didn't seem interested in the work. They only talked about the next weekend.

Work might seem like an odd subject for Advent devotions, but sometimes we think that our work gets in the way of what we really want to do. For the guys on that summer job, the work got in the way of their weekends. For us, our jobs might get in the way of preparing for Christmas. For

some of the early Christians in Thessalonica, work got in the way of waiting for Christ's return. Certain that Jesus was coming again very soon, they apparently put down their tools and spent their time being idle.

Paul's advice to "work with your hands" assures us that what we do in our daily work matters to God. Even humble work is an arena in which we can use the gifts God has given us to serve others, while we wait for the coming of Jesus.

In what ways are you honoring the Lord in your work today?

God of all creation, help us, whether employed or unemployed, engaged in our work or feeling stuck, to serve you in all we do, striving also to help others. In Jesus, Amen.

## ANTICIPATION

*I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."*  
—Psalm 122:1

"Are we there yet?" As much as we value Sunday worship, it would be unusual to hear these words from our kids in the car as we drove to church. We generally save that kind of anticipation for something less common.

Though we adults might nonetheless want to quote Psalm 122 on the way to weekly worship, the psalmist was more likely anticipating one of the great festivals of the old covenant. These were held at the temple in Jerusalem, and going there would have been more like attending a convention than a weekly worship service.

Still, as exciting as a festival would have been, that wouldn't explain the depth of the psalmist's joy. The psalmist was looking beyond the festival to something greater. As the city of David and the city of God, Jerusalem was where God's rule

connected with human reality and the pilgrim would glimpse the kingdom of God.

In a similar way, the joy we anticipate in the Christmas season looks beyond the holiday to something much greater. We believe that in Jesus' birth the kingdom of God has come near. The child in the manger gives us a glimpse of the heavenly kingdom. As much as we look forward to it, our Christmas joy merely anticipates a joy that is still to come. It whets our appetite so that we ask, "Are we there yet?"

"O Jesus, joy of loving hearts," fill us with anticipation in this Advent season so that in our celebration of your birth we might catch a glimpse of your joyous heavenly kingdom. Amen.

## WAITING FOR FREEDOM

*[Anna] gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*

—Luke 2:38

The temple must have been busy the day Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there. They kept bumping into people who were waiting. One of these was a woman named Anna. Anna was devoted to God. She worshiped day and night, fasting and praying. She was one of a group of people who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Redemption can be understood as paying a price to set someone or something free. The people Anna spoke to might have been looking forward to redemption because the holy city was under the control of Rome and they wanted political freedom. In the books of the New Testament, however, we discover that others were also longing to be free. They were yearning for freedom from religious customs that burdened

them, from sicknesses that plagued them, from spirits that oppressed them, and from the sin that condemned them.

Though we value our freedom, we often find ourselves trapped. If not in prison, we might be trapped by debt, scorn, or circumstance. Sometimes this is because of something we have done. Sometimes it's a result of what others have done to us. Either way, we long for redemption.

In Jesus, Anna saw what she was waiting for: the One who could pay the price and set her free.

Almighty God who gives freedom to the oppressed and recovery of sight to the blind, open our eyes, that we might see your redemption in Jesus. Amen.

## ANXIOUS WAITING

*As he looked out, he saw a man running alone. . . . The king said, "If he is alone, he must have good news." —2 Samuel 18:24-25*

King David was waiting for news that he hoped would never come. David was on the run as his own son threatened to take over the kingdom. Even so, he seemed to care more about his rebellious son than about the kingdom and all who were loyal to him. David's earlier instructions to his army and his only question of the messengers concerned the young man Absalom.

David pinned his hopes on the smallest of signs, just as we might while awaiting news we would dread. Each time a runner was sighted, David tried to believe it was a good sign. But in his anxiety, David could not hear the good news the messengers brought. He heard only the news that he hoped would not come. Absalom did not survive, and David wept.

It can be hard to hear good news when we are concerned about other news, whether we are waiting at a doctor's office, or looking up exam results, or answering a late-night phone call. In our anxiety, it can be hard to hear that God has delivered us.

But the message the runners brought to David included good news as well as sad news. God had preserved the kingdom of David, and through Jesus, born in the line of David, God has delivered us. In Jesus we learn that God is with us even when bad news comes our way.

Lord, guard our hearts and minds so that we may have peace in you even while waiting for news we might not want to hear. In Jesus, Amen.

**DO NOT FRET**

*Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways.*  
—Psalm 37:7

We were in line at a discount store to make a small purchase. When our turn came, something went wrong with the register. The clerk reset the system only to have the problem happen again. She then helpfully suggested that we move to another register, not knowing that a complicated return and exchange was being processed there. As we waited, I could see the line we'd just left begin to move. I got annoyed. The purchase we were making no longer seemed worth the wait. I wanted to put it on a shelf and just leave. I was tempted to act in ways that I would regret later.

"Do not fret," the psalmist says, "when people succeed in their ways." The psalmist is talking about bigger problems than mere annoyances in a check-out line. The psalmist is thinking about people who succeed

even though they care nothing for God. When such people prosper while the righteous wait, God's people can be tempted to get out of line or act in ways that dishonor their maker.

None of the people in that store were evildoers. Each one was doing their job and even trying to be helpful. But I got annoyed anyway. Sometimes the small annoyances in life test our character the most.

"Do not fret," the psalmist says. "It leads only to evil."

Faithful God who makes the righteous shine like the dawn, help us to be still and to wait patiently, trusting that you will give us the desires of our hearts, in line with your will. In Jesus, Amen.

## KEEP CALM

*"Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid."*

—Isaiah 7:4

My son came home from a school trip with a souvenir tea canister printed with the Union Jack and bearing the words, "Keep calm and carry on." I'd never seen that slogan before, but suddenly those words were everywhere. The slogan was originally printed on posters in the days before World War II as part of a campaign to reassure British citizens. The posters were never used, however, and the phrase was forgotten until a copy was found in a second-hand bookstore 55 years later.

Jesus gave similar words to his disciples. He saw a time of anxiety coming when false saviors would deceive many. He cautioned his followers, "See to it that you are not alarmed." Keep calm. Though times will be hard, Jesus promised, "The one who stands firm to the end will be saved." Carry on.

The stakes may not seem as high in our corner of the world, but these days are also filled with turmoil and false promises. News reports remind us of terror attacks around the world. Ads promise happiness and comfort in this gift or that toy, and every special on TV claims to offer the "real meaning" of Christmas. Too often that "real meaning" doesn't include Jesus. In days like these we are called to keep calm, trust that God is with us, and carry on living as Jesus has taught us to live.

O God, our Rock and Refuge, help us to put our confidence on your sure foundation. Assure us that we will never be shaken when we rest in your salvation through Jesus. Amen.

## DISAPPOINTMENT

*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."* —Luke 1:18

Sometimes one word can convey a lifetime of disappointment. Like others in the first chapters of Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth were devoted to God. They were descendants of Aaron. They were upright and blameless in the sight of the Lord. Zechariah was serving as a priest before God. They were everything a child of God is supposed to be. Then we read that word, *But*: "But they were childless."

Unlike other people in these first chapters of Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth were not described as waiting. When the angel Gabriel appeared and told him that he would be a father, Zechariah pointed out that he was "an old man" and that his wife was "well along in years." It seemed their time for expectation was over.

It is not easy to remain expectant after a lifetime of disappoint-

ment. Some might suggest that it is better to lower our sights and modify our expectations. But Zechariah is not commended for resigning himself to his situation. The psalms say that God brings joy to the barren (Psalm 113:9), and the apostle Paul reminds us that Abraham, whose "body was as good as dead," believed in God's promise "against all hope" (Romans 4:18-19).

God promises hope to those whose hopes have dried up. And Zechariah reminds us that even those who have almost lost hope will sing for joy.

God of hope, fill us with joy and peace as we trust in Jesus, that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## SHILOAH

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. . . . God is within her, she will not fall.*  
—Psalm 46:4-5

This passage delivers bad news while it reminds Isaiah's listeners of God's ever-present goodness. The people of Jerusalem had sought alliances with the kings of other nations instead of trusting in God. Now they are accused of rejecting the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, the stream that brought water into Jerusalem, the city of God.

Water was important for a city threatened by foreign invasion. Unlike the major powers of the day, Jerusalem was not built on a major river. Its water supply was a spring called the Gihon, whose waters came into the city through a channel called Shiloah. It must not have seemed like much to a city under siege.

But Jerusalem had more than water. As Psalm 46 sings of streams in the city of God, it promises, "God is within her,

she will not fall." Though not a mighty river, Shiloah was a sign that God was with them. In rejecting Shiloah, Jerusalem rejected God.

The "gently flowing waters of Shiloah" became a sign that God is often present to us in ways that may not seem obvious. God is with us in the birth of a child called Immanuel (see Isaiah 7:14; 8:8; Matthew 1:23). God shows his love for us in the life and death of his Son, Jesus. These are signs that God is with us, even when we feel most vulnerable.

Ever-present God, help us to trust that your grace is sufficient for us, that we may always place our confidence in you. Amen.

## WORTH WAITING FOR

*"The bridegroom was a long time in coming.... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."*

—Matthew 25:5, 13

Sometimes people will wait, and wait, and wait.

The hosts of a news show described how people waited for hours in the rain because they'd heard a rumor that a famous entertainer would give a surprise concert that night. Another host told of a time he'd been in an amusement park when a ride was delayed by mechanical problems. Even though the people in line knew it could take hours, not one person moved out of the line.

Sometimes during Advent we forget that people will wait. We think we must build anticipation to get people ready for Christmas. We fear that without it many will be unprepared, like the unwise maidens in Jesus' parable. But the long lines of people who greet the release of the latest smartphone remind

us that people will wait if the promise is good enough.

How much more we should anticipate the coming of God's kingdom! Jesus compares the kingdom to a wedding feast, a great banquet, or the return of a king. When Jesus comes again, our deepest hopes will be realized and our greatest sorrows will be eased. What's more, God has shown us this in the life of Jesus and allows us to taste the joy of his kingdom even now.

People will wait for hours on the strength of a mere rumor. But our waiting for Christ is based on much more. Jesus has come, and he will come again!

Almighty God, assure us that your kingdom is worth waiting for, and help us to be ready for your coming again. Amen.

## THE ONE

*The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. —Luke 3:15*

It makes sense that people were wondering whether John was the Messiah, the promised deliverer of God's people. John attracted attention. He looked and sounded like the prophets of long ago, and he could draw a crowd. People came from all over and asked him, "Teacher . . . what should we do?" And John was not afraid to tell them. He spoke the truth, even to people in power.

People were wondering about John, and his teaching tells us something about them. Some had two coats while others had none. Some had food, when others did not. They were told to share what they had with others. Tax collectors, soldiers, and other officials had to be reminded to be content with their pay. People were ripe for change, and John promised that a new day was coming.

When we are ripe for change, we can be tempted to follow the crowds and listen to anyone who promises a new program for a new day. Not everyone who draws a crowd is the One, however, and not everyone who attracts attention can do what John did. John explained that he was preparing the way for someone greater.

In a season filled with claims that a new product or program will change our lives, we need to remember that the crowds are not often right. We need someone who can point our way to Jesus.

Gracious Lord Jesus, may we hear the messengers you send to turn our hearts back to you, that we may be prepared to receive you. In your name we pray. Amen.

## IMPATIENCE

*[Samuel had told Saul:] "I will surely come down to you...but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do."*

—1 Samuel 10:8

Saul's sin may not seem so bad to us. He just didn't wait for the prophet Samuel to come to offer sacrifices to God, and he offered sacrifices himself. What could be so wrong with that? But Saul had been told to wait till Samuel came.

Saul did wait, but the situation changed while he was waiting. The enemy Philistines had assembled to fight. Saul's men were greatly outnumbered and were hiding in caves, thickets, pits, and cisterns. Quaking with fear, they were beginning to scatter. Worse yet, Samuel did not come when they expected him. Saul waited for seven days, but then just before Samuel came, Saul took matters into his own hands and offered sacrifices to God.

Sometimes any course of action seems better than waiting, especially when it seems as if every-

thing is falling down around us. We reason that we are at least doing something instead of nothing. But in our impatience we often make things worse rather than better. We show that we don't really trust God to guide us and give us what we need.

Saul thought the people needed a leader who could take action. Samuel knew they needed one who could show them how to trust and obey. But Saul did not obey, and his disobedience cost him a kingdom.

Are you willing to trust, obey, and wait?

Everlasting God, help us to understand that you are not slow in keeping your promises, so that we may wait patiently in Jesus. Amen.

**WAIT QUIETLY**

*The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him . . . it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

—Lamentations 3:25-26

We were driving home one snowy night. Two plow trucks were ahead of us, one in each lane of the highway. Traffic was slow. Over the next few miles we observed one car after another pull right up to the bumper of the vehicle in front of it, as if that would help them get to their destination faster. Soon there was a long line of cars jockeying for position.

We get impatient when things do not move as quickly as we think they should. We push. We grumble. We question the plow driver's character. We might even ask why God is allowing this to happen to us. We try to make something happen.

The author of Lamentations was living through the worst experiences anyone could imagine. Jerusalem had fallen. Its people had been carried into exile. Its rivals were mocking and rejoic-

ing. Worst of all, God seemed to have abandoned them. Yet in the midst of his mourning the writer says, "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD."

To wait quietly is the opposite of trying to make things happen. Instead of grumbling, complaining, or shouting, waiting means trusting in God. To wait quietly is to trust that even when things are as bad as they could be, God is faithful and his mercies are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness!

Lord, your compassions never fail. Help us to wait quietly for your salvation, trusting that we have seen your great faithfulness revealed in Jesus. Amen.

## HASTEN THE DAY

*Live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.*  
—2 Peter 3:11-12

For children, Christmas can't come soon enough. They fidget while trying hard to be nice, and they wake each morning hoping the wait is over. As we grow older, we lose interest in hastening the day. Honestly we'd rather slow time down if we could. In our adult realism we wonder what Peter could possibly mean when he tells us to speed the coming of the day of God.

Commentaries say that a Jewish tradition had grown from Isaiah 60:22: "I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly." This tradition wondered what would have to take place for God to act swiftly. One interpretation claimed that if everyone would be righteous for just one day, then the Messiah could come.

Some of that thinking may lie behind Peter's comment. Peter teaches that the day seems de-

layed to us because God does not want anyone to perish. Could it follow that if everyone repented, then the need for God's patience would be removed and we could speed the day's coming?

But that would leave too much in our hands. Scripture teaches that Christ's coming is not up to us. But our realism can also dilute our motivation for living holy and godly lives. To inspire this kind of living, we need to find a little of the childish faith that hopes this will be the day.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

Patient God, grant us child-like, trusting faith that is eager for your coming. May we always turn to you and live in the way you call us to, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

*A man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man . . . was waiting for the kingdom of God.*

—Luke 23:50-51

At the end of his life, as at the beginning, Jesus was attended to by the upright among God's people. When Jesus was brought to the temple, he was met by Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:22-38). Now Jesus is buried by Joseph. Like Simeon and Anna, Joseph was in tune with God. Joseph was "good and upright" and was "waiting for the kingdom of God."

The kingdom of God is a huge, breathtaking reality. The kingdom includes the consolation Simeon was waiting for and the redemption Anna was looking forward to. The kingdom encompasses God's complete rule, and people waiting for the kingdom were looking forward to the day when wrongs would be set right, injustice would be addressed, and proper order would be restored so that ev-

eryone could live in peace and flourish as God intended.

Joseph's appearance before Pilate shows that the death of Jesus did not extinguish the hope of the kingdom. Instead a man like Joseph, a leader in Jerusalem, was emboldened to show he had sympathy for Jesus, even when everyone else denounced him. This suggests that Jesus' death is not the end of the story. There is still more to come. Joseph is never called a disciple, and yet he brings hope to those who are attentive and open to the possibility that God is at work in Jesus.

Almighty God, as you provided people to attend to Jesus, grant us your grace to be upright followers anticipating your kingdom. Amen.

## SEARCH ME, O GOD

*“Go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father . . . who sees what is done in secret, [and] will reward you.”*

—Matthew 6:6

The news recently reported on fears that a popular book and toy is grooming children to live in a surveillance state. The book tells the story of scout elves who watch and tell Santa what they have seen. It comes with a toy that can be put in different places in the house in the days before Christmas. Critics worry that we are getting used to being watched.

We might wonder what the fuss is about. The concept is just an extension of an idea that has long been used to encourage good behavior before Christmas: “He’s making a list and checking it twice” (in the song “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”). On the other hand, the world has changed. There is less privacy today than in past generations. We know we are being watched, and we worry about how the information gathered

about us will be used. It can make us uneasy.

We might get a similar uneasy feeling reading the Bible. In Psalm 139 the writer concludes that there is no place to escape God’s searching eye. While that could leave us feeling exposed, it’s actually a reason for praise and comfort. The One who is watching us is the very God who made us and cares for us. When we invite God to search us, we trust that he will lead us “in the way everlasting.”

All knowing God, you sees what is done in secret, and you know what we need before we ask. Help us to trust in your goodness, that we may open our hearts to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## A FLOURISHING JUNIPER

*"I will answer him and care for him. I am like a flourishing juniper; your fruitfulness comes from me."* —Hosea 14:8

Christmas trees were not allowed in the churches I grew up in, even though most families had trees in their homes. I am not sure this was ever fully explained, but people feared that a Christmas tree might draw attention away from Jesus.

Where we find "juniper" in our verse for today, some Bible versions use the words "green fir-tree," which may make us think of a Christmas tree.

Years ago some church leaders warned against the use of evergreen trees as Christmas decorations because people from ancient times used and revered trees, especially evergreens, in their worship of false gods. Such gods were believed to promise life and prosperity but were not easily satisfied.

That might sound familiar in our Christmas preparations too.

Every year our traditions, habits, and "must haves" seem to ask more of us. But no matter how much we spend, the well-being we long for remains out of reach.

When God said, "I am like a green fir-tree," he declared that he is the source of the life people were looking for. He says, "Your fruitfulness comes from me." So when we consider the celebration of Christmas this year, may we remember that Jesus said not to worry but to seek God's kingdom above all things (see Matthew 6:25-34).

Provider God, you feed the birds of the air and clothe the flowers of the field. Teach us that our work and worry do us no good. It's your blessing that gives life, in Jesus' name. Amen.

## READY FOR SERVICE

*"The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of." —Luke 12:46*

It can be hard to imagine Christmas taking anyone by surprise, especially when it is just a few days away. But when Jesus was born, only a few people saw the kingdom coming. Luke shows that people like Simeon and Anna were waiting, but many others were surprised.

Jesus says they were like servants who forgot their place. Because their master was a long time in coming, they began to act as if they owned the place. They beat their fellow servants and ate and drank to excess. It's a harsh picture, but it fits the leaders of Jesus' day who left people like sheep without a shepherd and did not welcome Jesus' coming. It is also a picture we should pay attention to in a time when parties tempt us to excess, when our celebrations grow ever grander, when we

are encouraged to spend ever more on ourselves.

In Jesus' parable the wise and faithful servants are the ones who are ready for service when their master comes. In today's world they are feeding their fellow servants, sponsoring refugees, volunteering at food banks and shelters, and more. In these last few days before Christmas let us consider how we can serve others all throughout the year so that we will not be taken by surprise when our Master returns.

Gracious Master who came to serve, "fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you," that we may be ready for your coming. In your name we pray. Amen.

## BLUE CHRISTMAS

*"The virgin will . . . give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").* —Matthew 1:23

In northern parts of the world some churches hold a "Blue Christmas" service on or near December 22, the shortest (and saddest) day of the year (the day with the fewest hours of sunlight). "Blue" services are meant to remind us that not everyone embraces the Christmas season with eager anticipation. Some people find themselves in the midst of loneliness and grief. Christmas reminds them of empty places at the table, of people who are not coming home, and of loved ones who have died.

In our reading today the apostle Paul offers encouragement to people who are grieving because some in their fellowship have fallen asleep in death. The circumstances of their sorrow might be different from ours, but the comfort Paul offers is the promise of Christmas. At Christmas we celebrate that, in

Jesus, God is with us. Paul uses the word "with" several times, saying, "God will bring *with* Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." Also, "we who are still alive . . . will be caught up together *with* them." And most important: "We will be *with* the Lord forever." Many of the details in this reading may puzzle us, but being *with* God is the heart of the matter. Our believing loved ones are *with* Jesus, who is "God *with* us." May we be encouraged and comforted by these words.

Comforting God, you promise to wipe every tear from our eyes in that day when there will be no more death. Help us to be comforted now, we pray, and to bring your comfort to those who grieve. In your name, Amen.

**“HOW WILL THIS BE?”**

*“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”*

—Luke 1:34

For Mary, the news came too soon. Unlike her relative Elizabeth, who was married, far along in years, and said to be barren, Mary was a young, unmarried woman. She had a future. Her whole life was ahead of her. Still, like her uncle Zechariah, she was greatly troubled when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. When she heard the announcement that she was to give birth to a son who would be great and whose kingdom would never end, she asked, “How will this be . . . since I am a virgin?”

Sometimes the call comes too soon. We have not been prepared to do what’s asked of us. We feel that we do not have the age, the education, the training, or the experience that is needed. Humanly speaking, we think that what’s being asked of us is impossible. But when

Mary asked how this could be, the angel said that the power of the Lord would overshadow her. Gabriel then told Mary that Elizabeth was expecting a child even in her old age, and he added, “No word from God will ever fail.”

Gabriel’s words assure us that God brings about his salvation in ways we cannot begin to imagine. By answering, “I am the Lord’s servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled,” Mary became a mentor for all who trust, even if the call comes too soon.

Almighty God, you give life to the dead and call into being things that are not. Help us to respond to your call in the confidence that nothing is impossible with you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## LAST MINUTE

*“People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came. . . .”*  
—Luke 17:27

Today stores will be filled with people looking to buy something—anything—for some of their closest family members. If asked why they waited till Christmas Eve, some will claim they enjoy the rush that comes with last-minute shopping. Others will offer different reasons, but many will just say they have been too busy. Doing other things, they have had no time to shop, and now it is Christmas Eve.

Jesus warns us that people will be busy on the day of his coming. People will be busy in the way they were in the days of Noah and Lot. When Jesus says this, he does not say that people in those days were busy being wicked. Jesus says that people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, buying and selling, planting and building. They were going

about their daily lives and were busy doing everyday sorts of things.

We often keep ourselves busy in similar ways even when we know a special deadline is approaching. We know that Christmas is coming, but we still leave some of our preparations to the last minute because we are “so busy.”

On this Christmas Eve, may we set aside our busyness and simply enjoy the gifts God has given us. May we be ready to rest in God’s goodness as we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Gracious God, the day is almost upon us. Forgive us for leaving some things undone. Help us to rest in your grace and to receive the joy of your salvation revealed in Jesus. Amen.

## THE GLORY OF THE LORD

*We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.*

—2 Corinthians 3:18

On Christmas day we want everything to be glorious. We hope our family celebrations will be filled with joy and light. We go to worship expecting that the decorations, the music, and the readings will be uplifting. We join our voices with those of the angels, singing, "Glory to God in the highest." We long to experience what the shepherds did when "the glory of the Lord shone around them." Could there be a more appropriate way to celebrate the birth of Jesus?

In our hunger for glory, however, we might not notice that the angel points away from the circle of light to a dimly lit stable. The sign given to the shepherds was not the glory that shone when the angel appeared; nor was it the praising of God by the "great company of the heavenly host." Instead

the sign was a child born into the most humble of circumstances, "wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

In his teaching Jesus used a word that means "glory" (*doxa*) when he instructed us to choose a humble position at a banquet. Jesus explained that when we sincerely humble ourselves, we will be "*honored [doxa]* in the presence of all" (Luke 14:10). When we follow the example of Jesus and humble ourselves, then the glory of the Lord shines around.

God of light and glory, instill in us the attitude of Jesus, who humbled himself by becoming human, like us, and was honored and exalted, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

## DRESSED TO SERVE

*“He will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.”*

—Luke 12:37

In some parts of the world the day after Christmas is a holiday. The custom goes back to a time when servants, who had to work on Christmas day, were given a day to visit their families. In some accounts the day might include a role reversal in which the wealthy put on a banquet and acted as servants to their servants.

If it is hard to imagine an aristocrat keeping the water goblets full while his servants feasted, it is even harder to imagine the scene Jesus describes in this parable. A master comes home late from a wedding banquet. Instead of just slumping off to bed or ordering his servants to fix him a late night snack, this master changes into work clothes and waits on his servants.

If that doesn't sound strange to us, it might be because we

recognize Jesus in this master. When Jesus was born, he dressed himself to serve, so to speak. Jesus demonstrated this again when he wrapped himself with a towel and washed his disciples' feet (see John 13). And when his disciples wondered who was greatest, Jesus emphasized that he came to be among us as one who serves (Luke 22:27).

Jesus indicates that we honor him best when we dress down and serve others—and not just on the day after Christmas.

Humble Savior, we are used to getting our way, and we love to be served. Humble us, that we may look to the interests of others, not just our own, and so honor you. Amen.

## HOLDING ON

*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*  
—Luke 2:20

Every year I try to hold on to Christmas for a little while longer. But it never seems to work. Christmas carols just don't sound the same on the Sunday after Christmas. Even when that Sunday is only two days later, we are already returning to an after-Christmas mode.

Luke tells us that the shepherds returned after they had seen the baby lying in the manger. That makes sense. The shepherds could not stay in Bethlehem. There were sheep that needed watching. But if they could not stay in Bethlehem, Jesus could not either. When Luke tells us that Mary treasured these things and “pondered them in her heart,” he signals that Christ's birth was only the beginning. There is much more to the story than what the shepherds saw and heard.

Though we cannot stay at the manger, there are ways we can hold on to Christmas. When we are called back to the tasks we have been given, we can join Mary in pondering and seeking to grow in our understanding. We can also join with the shepherds, who spread the good news about all they had heard and seen. Though the shepherds returned to their fields, nothing would ever really be the same.

Gracious God who brought good news to the shepherds, fill us with your good news in such a way that we may praise and glorify you in everything we do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE ONE THEY DID NOT SEE

*"We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place."*  
—Luke 24:21

The mood of the disciples on the way to Emmaus could describe our mood after Christmas. "They stood still, their faces downcast." A time of anticipation is often followed by a letdown. In December everything looks forward to Christmas morning. But once Christmas has come and gone, what is left to look forward to? Gifts need to be returned, the tree disposed of, decorations stored, and credit cards bills sorted out. We try to put off the letdown for as long as we can. We still have New Year's to anticipate. But New Year's is soon followed by another long year.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus had hoped that "Jesus of Nazareth" was "the one." In their disappointment they did not pay much attention to the person who came to walk along with them. They were surprised

that he did not seem to know what had happened. They told him how their hopes had not been met in the way they had expected. They listened when he told them how the Christ had to suffer and then enter his glory. But they did not see who was with them until he broke bread with them.

The mood after Christmas can be a bit muted. In these days, may we recognize that the one we have been hoping for has been with us all along.

Ever-present God, revealed in the Word and sacraments, lift the veil of disappointment from our eyes, that we may see you are with us always, in Jesus. Amen.

## PERSEVERENCE

*“Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”*

—Luke 5:5

Sometimes our response to a request depends on who is asking.

Simon had worked hard all night without catching anything, so going out again and expecting a different result would not have been a likely plan for success.

By the time Jesus asked, Simon’s boat was moored and the nets had been washed. It was time to call it quits. So it is easy to imagine Simon brushing Jesus’ request aside. What could a builder’s son possibly tell a fisherman about fishing?

But this was Jesus asking. Jesus had been teaching people from the boat while Simon was cleaning his nets. Perhaps Simon had heard something that made him pay attention.

So when Jesus asked him to put out into deep water and

“let down the nets for a catch,” Simon said, “Because you say so, I will.”

As the year comes to an end, it can be easy to feel as if we’ve worked hard all night without catching anything. For all our efforts we still struggle with the same problems and temptations. Our children give us the same worries, and our neighbors seem no more open to Jesus than when we first befriended them. Even so, we keep on putting out our nets. Jesus has asked us to, and sometimes it all depends on who is asking.

Lord, may we not grow weary in serving you. May we persevere, trusting that you will keep working through us for your sake. Amen.

## MAKING IT RIGHT

*David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"*

—2 Samuel 9:1

David was in a good place when he asked whether anyone was left of the house of Saul. After many years of struggle he had been confirmed as king over Israel. David had secured Jerusalem as his city and had brought the ark of the covenant into it. The Lord had given David rest from his enemies and peace to Israel. Even more, God had promised that a son of David would rule forever, a promise that would be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

But David had some unfulfilled obligations. Long before, David had made a covenant with his friend Jonathan, Saul's son. Though anyone else might have forgotten, David did not. David set out to find someone from the house of Saul to whom he could show kindness.

We accumulate obligations as we go through life. We make

promises that we don't fully keep in spite of our best intentions. We also accumulate hurts that we have never really forgiven. Worse yet, we often cause hurts for which we do not fully apologize. Over the years our debts pile up.

The end of a year is a good time to consider what we have left undone, and our celebration of Christmas has assured us that God has given us peace. In this peace we can make peace.

Are there any obligations you need to attend to?

Loving God, your faithfulness endures forever. Help us to be faithful, keeping the promises we make and forgiving others as we have been forgiven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE BEST FOR LAST

*"Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine . . . but you have saved the best till now."* —John 2:10

Some years ago, an advertising jingle for a popular candy asked, "Do you eat the red ones last?" There was really nothing special about the red ones. They were candy-coated chocolates, and the red ones tasted the same as all the other colors of candy-coated chocolates in the pack. But the commercial suggested that the red ones were special, or the best, and it made people think they should save the best for last.

The banquet master at the wedding at Cana did not know who had provided the new wine. He just knew that it was better than the wine that had been served earlier. He also knew that this was unusual. Most hosts served the best wine first, but at this wedding the best was served last.

Though it was unusual at a wedding in those days, this miracle of Jesus suggests some-

thing about the kingdom of God. The best is yet to come. The blessings we experience in our life with God, the goodness of God's creation, the joy of Christmas, the consolation that comes from God's presence, the freedom that comes with forgiveness—all these are just a taste of the new life God has promised in Jesus. As the year ends, we look forward in hope, for God saves the best for last.

Faithful God, you have prepared what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind can conceive. Help us to keep looking forward in hope to that day "when our faith shall be sight"! In Jesus, Amen.



## STOKING THE SPIRIT'S FLAME AT HOME.



MARRIAGE



DATING



PARENTING



SPIRITUALITY



GRANDPARENTS



SEXUALITY

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