

# REFLECTIONS BEFORE AN ELECTION

## A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL

A collection of scripture,  
reflections, and prayers for the  
church and world

*A gift from Lutherans in Pennsylvania,  
compiled by Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in  
Pennsylvania (LAMPa)*



*Beloved of God,*

*In this devotional you will find 40 entries from pastors and deacons to help us discern and pray for the 40 days leading up to the 2024 presidential election in the United States. Most of these come from those serving in Pennsylvania, though we did let a handful of "outsiders" contribute – reminding us that the church and God's work are always broader than we think and transcend all human-made boundaries.*

*These devotions do not officially represent the stances and beliefs of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa) nor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), nor even of the congregations these leaders serve. Rather, they are a testament to the diversity of thought among our rostered ministers, who model for all of us the ways in which we can engage scripture and prayer to inform our faithful action in this world. The difference you'll see in voice, tone, and hermeneutical approach points to how we are church together, without being the same. Thanks be to God for the beautiful tapestry God has made in the church!*

*We are grateful for all who contributed to this project, and we hope all who read and pray with us through these 40 days will be inspired to engage more deeply as disciples in a democracy.*

*Thank you for praying with us,*

*LAMPa Staff*

Note: All scripture references are from the NRSVue, unless otherwise noted.  
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## Day 1: Friday, September 27

But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up. - *Daniel 3:12*

*Reflection by the Rev. Erin Jones*

This probably seems like a strange verse with which to start a devotional...but it is from one of those vibrant and visceral stories of our faith. From a young age, we tell it in Sunday School, and every year we hear it at the Great Vigil of Easter. We are drawn, over and over again, to Rad, Shad, and Benny (credit to *VeggieTales*), who are part of the Jewish contingent that has been exiled from Jerusalem, living in Babylon. It's been several generations since the exile, so they know of no other way to be Jewish except in exile.

Reading this story this year, what I find most intriguing about these three is that they serve in the court of Nebuchadnezzar as political officials. They have gone through some sort of assimilation, some maneuvering of identity and realistic acceptance of where they find themselves and how they and their people can survive. We see that they, and all the people of Israel in exile, are striving to find ways to participate in the community where they find themselves, while also knowing sometimes their faith demands they go another way.

This story tells about when Rad, Shad, and Benny come to a line in the sand. They have been able to serve and live and survive in Babylon, but when the king asks them to worship him, they discover the boundary of their ability to assimilate. They know that this ask is one that requires them to violate the very foundation of their faith, the very first commandment - "There is one God, no other gods." Nebuchadnezzar, by demanding all to bow down to him, is asking them to make him their god. He is demanding proof that, as Luther defines in the Large Catechism, that he is that "upon which [they] set [their] heart and put [their] trust." And while Rad, Shad, and Benny can and have up to this point, faithfully served in a governmental system, they cannot abide when that system demands their faith, love, and trust.

We live in a time where our questions of how to live a faithful life are not entirely unlike Rad, Shad, and Benny's. Sure, there's no hyperbolic despot building golden statues and demanding we bow to them - though perhaps we try to convince ourselves that the leaders of "the other side" are just a hair's breadth away from that possibility. We can struggle, though, with living in a world where norms, realities and priorities feel so different from just a couple generations ago. What does it look like to be faithful in this time? How can we both keep God as the center of our love and trust, while also caring for our neighbors and our community in this pluralistic society in which we find ourselves?

These are questions that we'll grapple with in this devotional. We might not come to any concrete answers about the "right" way to engage at the intersection of civic life and our faith, but by reading scripture and praying together, we might remember what is at the center of our hearts; we might become more confident in who claims our love and trust.

Rad, Shad, and Benny remind us that no candidate, party, office or government in its entirety deserves our worship. One God, no other gods. AND, they show us that as long as we can keep God as the center of our love and trust, we can participate in our communal life with our neighbors.

Trying to find that balance is hard, and we will probably get it wrong nine times out of ten. BUT, when we feel like we have failed, or when we get the balance right and still find ourselves in the fiery furnace, at the mercy or ire of those in power, or even of our friends and family who think differently, we strive to have the confidence and conviction that God will be with us.

Immanuel, Jesus Christ, comes down to earth to be with us. Christ shows up in the bread and wine to be with us. Through fires and elections and angry debates, Christ shows up, broken, wounded, and resurrected so that we might be transformed and moved to worship the God who made and loves us. And when we speak of that transformation, we hold on to our faith even when it is hard or seemingly impossible, so the world might know that transformative love and presence with us. May we do so boldly; may we do so lovingly.

### *Prayer*

Immanuel, remind us that you are indeed always with us. Help us to be bold in our faith, bold in our love, and bold in our trust in you. As we journey through these next 40 days, be at the center of our hearts and minds, guiding us toward deeper love of you, of those we disagree with, and all those in need. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## Day 2: Saturday, September 28

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." - *Luke 10:25-37*

### *Reflection by the Rev. Michael Scholtes*

The cultural landscape of 21<sup>st</sup> century America has been described as "*tribal*." In so many ways, we have divided ourselves into groups and factions, sects and parties. Blue vs. red, "woke" vs. "anti-woke," Black Lives Matter vs. Blue Lives Matter, pro-vaccine vs. anti-vax, and so on. It has become so very easy to view people in the other "tribe" as evil, stupid, *wrong*, somehow less than human. Conversation between people is difficult. Family gatherings have become tense or even impossible. Friendships and relationships have suffered or broken. Americans have divided ourselves into "us" and "them," each side wanting less and less to do with the other.

We're not the first group of people who have fallen into this trap. In the first century, Jews and Samaritans were neighbors, with Samaria situated between Judea and Jewish Galilee. Despite being neighbors, they viewed each other with suspicion, enmity even. Perhaps this was because of religious differences, perhaps it was ethnic, or perhaps by the time of Jesus nobody even knew anymore why – but they knew they didn't like or trust each other.

And so, Jesus' story of the "Good Samaritan" would have been shocking, scandalous even, to his Jewish listeners. The idea that a *Samaritan* would show such extravagant compassion to a suffering Jew would have blown their minds. If Jesus had said that Samaritans are worthy of *receiving* mercy, that would have been surprising enough; but it was downright shocking that they were capable of *showing* such mercy.

And it is good for us to remember this as well. In this contentious election season, it's so easy to view each other with suspicion and fear, with outrage and disregard. And yet, while some of my neighbors may disagree with me on some important things, they are not monsters. They are not subhuman. They are children of God every bit as much as I am, every bit as much as you are. The purpose statement of my congregation says that we will "seek and serve Christ in all people." It's the "all" that's so hard. And yet it's so important – our faith tells us that Christ is in *all* people. In conservatives and progressives. In drag queens and MAGA-hat wearers. In every candidate for every office. Christ dwells in the heart of each of them, just as Christ dwells in your heart and mine.

When we cast our votes this year for particular candidates, and against others, may we remember that those who disagree with us are beloved by God as well, and that they too are capable, like the Samaritan, of great compassion.

*Prayer*

Creator of all, Redeemer of all, send your Spirit into our hearts this election season and always, your Spirit of wisdom and discernment, your Spirit of compassion and love, your Spirit of humility and peace. Amen.

## Day 3: Sunday, September 29

When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,

learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out,  
says the Lord:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they shall be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,  
they shall become like wool. - *Isaiah 1:15-18*

*Reflection by the Rev. Peter Asplin*

As Lutheran Christians, most of us grew up beginning each worship service with confession and absolution; much like this passage from the first chapter of Isaiah. We start worshipping with confession because we are aware, deeply aware of our own personal failures to live out our baptismal promises (and confirmation promises, and affirmation-of-baptism promises – they are all the same).

God, through the voice of Isaiah, here calls the people to not just pray prayers of confession, but to live lives of compassion, lives of love. To live changed lives by learning to do “good.”

And then God, through the voice of the prophet, defines good for us.

“Seek justice” (for those of you who remember an Old Testament class, the Hebrew word is “*mishpat*”). That is, seek to make good decisions, right decisions, out of care for the world God loves. “Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow.” The words of Isaiah

make clear to us that God's imperative command – learn to do good – means learning to care caring for those who the world rejects. This learning is central to the justice – the righteousness – of God.

What we see, though, in this passage from Isaiah is that the call to learning and doing the good and the right is sandwiched between God's despair at our complete failure to live this life and God's confidence that we will nonetheless be made clean. As we seek to learn, as we seek to do, as we seek to prayerfully interact with God, we discern with God how best to learn and to do righteousness. It turns out that as we live life in relationship with the only one who is truly Good, we find that we, despite our sins, despite our weak attempts to be and do good, are fully washed and made clean. We who are in relationship with the Good one are as pristine as new-fallen snow, warm and lovely as lamb's wool.

As we move through this season of anxiety and conflict in the U.S. political context, I invite you to sit with the Israelites at the beginning of Isaiah. Consider how your sins, your decisions, and your life contribute to the poverty and marginalization of those around you. Consider God's call to learn to do good, especially for those on the margins. And remember that through the gift of God's grace your sins are forgiven. Through the gift of Grace, not through your perfection, not through your earning God's love, but through God's grace.

### *Prayer*

Blessed Lord God. Thank you for challenging us, through the words of Isaiah, to learn and do good. In this season of political conflict, remind us to put your invitation to do justice, rescue the oppressed and care for the outcast in our minds and in our hearts. Bless us with your gift of grace and guide us in the way of peace. Amen.



## Day 4: Monday, September 30

Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
Speak out, judge righteously,  
defend the rights of the poor and needy. - *Proverbs 31:8-9*

*Reflection by Madison DeLuca, Seminarian*

I used to study voice throughout my years of grade school and undergrad. When you sing, or even when you speak, if you do not take a low, grounded breath from your stomach, your voice is not supported. If you take a short, shallow breath (which normally sits in your chest), you find yourself gasping for air at a rapid rate, and the true value and timbre of your voice is yet to be revealed. You cannot project without giving your body the time that it needs to breathe deeply and support you sharing your voice.

As I started my seminary career, I felt myself gasping for air as I was trying to fill in the gaps of my Bible trivia, adjust to this new stage of my calling to ministry, keep up with some of the most brilliant scholars, and trying to grasp the everchanging lifestyle of 21st century parish ministry. My ego would like to tell you that I pulled this off flawlessly, but truth be told, I was always short of breath. This all really didn't hit me until I hit my first preaching class, and in my first sermon for the course, I felt myself gasping for air and a heaviness in my chest. After that experience, I realized that I needed to slow down and take some of those low, grounded breaths.

Proverbs 31:8-9 reminds us to use our voices with purpose and clarity. Just as a singer must take deep, grounded breaths to produce a strong and sustained sound, we must be intentional and well-prepared when we speak up with and on behalf of those whose voices are often unheard. If we allow ourselves to rush, to speak without grounding ourselves in prayer, reflection, and the Word of God, our voices will be shallow, and we will struggle to breathe under the pressure of this calling.

In ministry, there is a constant demand to speak—whether it's preaching, teaching, or advocating for justice. But our voices, no matter how passionate, will falter if they aren't supported by a deep, spiritual breath. This breath comes from time spent in the presence of God, from immersing ourselves in the Word, and from taking the time to truly understand the needs of those we are called to serve.

When we slow down and breathe deeply, our voices not only carry further but also resonate with the truth and compassion that comes from God. We can speak up with confidence and strength, defending the rights of the poor and needy, knowing that our words are grounded in something far greater than ourselves.

*Prayer*

Lord, teach us to slow down and take deep, grounding breaths in your presence. May our voices be strong and clear as we speak up for those whose voices may go unheard. Help us to root ourselves in your love, so that our words may carry the weight of your truth and justice. Amen.

## Day 5: Tuesday, October 1

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. -*James 1:27*

*Reflection by the Rev. Eric Damon*

Back before I was ordained as a pastor in the ELCA and before I entered seminary, I was a self-employed carpenter. I was too small to have regular employees and would call upon people I knew in the field when a job came along that was too big to do alone. They in turn would call me when they needed help. None of us were ever the "boss," but it was understood that the person who made the call was making all the decisions of how the job would be done. That's how decisions are made on a job site. One person is in charge.

I learned quickly that churches don't run like that. There are councils and committees that often have very different visions of how the congregation will serve its mission from that of their pastor. I've walked into countless council meetings with very different plans than the ones we adopted by the time we walked out. I've learned that's not a problem. I've learned that's part of being a healthy congregation. I've learned to pay more attention to how the decisions are made than which decision we make.

We can agree that we are tasked to care for widows and orphans and still have vastly different visions of how to go about it. We can have long, heated discussions about it. If we hold to the principles of our faith and the rules of our constitutions that we agreed to govern how we make these decisions, those of us who didn't get our way are still able to participate as full members and siblings in Christ the following day. That's what I have come to believe it means to "keep oneself unstained by the world."

I don't think it means we avoid the nitty gritty discussions and disagreements. It's the ability to have them and still see one another as siblings united in mission. Lord knows we're not perfect at this as Christians, but since the Council of Jerusalem (see Acts 15) it has at least been a part of our DNA. We argue, disagree and arrive at decisions while trying to honor our shared baptismal identities.

That identity is not shared by everyone in this nation, but the process of respecting the humanity of those with whom we disagree is vital in both cases. It's the only way we can implement decisions and go about caring for widows and orphans once they are made, and I think it's an example we can offer this nation as we head towards a significant election. It's something we should take pride in and strive to get better at, so I offer this prayer:

Dear Lord,

Grant us each the courage to speak openly, honestly, and directly about our wishes for the policies that govern our churches, local communities, nation, and world. Grant us the patience to listen openly and honestly to those with whom we disagree, and the strength to accept the decisions at which we arrive. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, trusting that your kingdom comes with or without us, but with the boldness to ask that it comes for us as well.

Amen.

## Day 6: Wednesday, October 2

Is not this the fast that I choose:

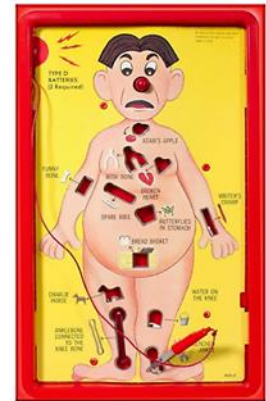
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of Adonai shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and Adonai will answer;  
you shall cry for help and Adonai will say, Here I am.

- *Isaiah 58:6-9a*



*Reflection by the Rev. Dr. Elizabeth C. Polanzke*



The most terrifying thing for me about working at Christ House, a residential medical facility for homeless men in the Columbia Circle neighborhood of Washington D.C., was the alarm system at the residence where I stayed. I have always found alarm systems rather unnerving, like the game "Operation" or "Perfection" with their timers, buzzers, and things flying at gamers. For the same reason, I also dislike anxiety producing video games where survival is on the line. When my husband and I watch one of those movies where aliens invade or an asteroid is about to hit earth, like *Independence Day*, I know with absolute certainty that I would be dead in the first five minutes.

What that amounts to is I dislike surprises. I am known for saying, "There is no such thing as an emergency in ministry." There are times of urgency, but it is not the same thing to me as an emergency. Emergencies are for first responders. Urgency is a matter of priority. Emergencies are anxiety producing, like those games with timelines, noises, and threats of extinction. Urgency energizes concern and empowers works of justice. What emergencies and urgency have in common is that they can both be a matter of life and death, but one is a lightning bolt striking without warning and the other is seeing the oncoming train and needing to step off the tracks.

Through Isaiah, God points out that fasting for our own justice, freedom, and satisfaction is not the fast God desires. The fast we are called to choose is a matter of urgency where the oncoming trains of injustice, oppression, and material insecurity can become matters of emergency if left untended. The fasting God seeks is to sacrifice and labor for those who suffer in the bonds of injustice and under the oppressor's yoke; to deny the power of being an oppressor or the source of injustice so that all God's creation may be free and fulfilled. This kind of fasting is self-denial for the sake of another regularly as a matter of priority. It is accompanied by a sense of urgency because (in summary of the words of Fannie Lou Hamer), "No one is free while others are oppressed." Or as Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer. If one member rejoices, all rejoice (1 Cor 12:26)."

This fast is not reserved for only one kind of people or for special occasions. It is not only a call for the "haves" to fast for the "have nots." It is a call to all God's people to serve all people all the time, for it is only in consistent equitable service that all of God's creation can be satisfied and set free.

It would be easy to be discouraged by the enormity of the tasks or freaked out by anxiety. It would be tempting to think these matters are too hard, and so the easiest thing to do is abandon the tracks and let the oncoming train do its thing.

Fasting from injustice and oppression means seeing the need in all people. It is believing that the injustice of bondage to sin affects everyone. It is understanding that we are all oppressed by Satan. That the only true food that satisfies is the body of Christ; the only true home is Paradise; and the best clothing is being clothed in eternal life. The fasting God chooses is that which sacrifices so that all may know freedom from Satan, liberty from bondage, and the true gifts of God entrusted to the church to lovingly and equitably share.

*Prayer – adapted from ELW, "Renewers of Society," pg. 60*

Adonai, your Son came among us to serve and not to be served, and to give His life for the life of the world. Lead us by His love to serve all those to whom the world offers no comfort and little help. Through us give hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, peace to the troubled, and rest to the weary. through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## Day 7: Thursday, October 3

"[F]or I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."-*Matthew 25:35-36*

### *Reflection by the Rev. Matthew Best*

Matthew 25:35-36 is one of my favorite passages of Scripture. It's a passage that has guided my life. Long before I entered professional ministry, I worked in campaign politics. I loved the thrill of it all, the creativity, and, of course, winning. And we would do all sorts of things to try to win. But over time I felt drained, exhausted, and frustrated. What were we winning, after all? Election day came and on the day after, the next campaign started. It was a never-ending soul- sucking cycle.

As we approach this election, let us not get caught up in the horse race or the spin of the campaigns as if they are some sort of us-versus-them game. Instead, let us be faithful disciples, seeing the image of God in others. The best way to serve others as well as to engage in politics is by seeing Christ in the other person. People hunger and thirst for more than just food – they hunger and thirst for meaning, purpose, and belonging. People seek welcome by being listened to. People desire to be clothed in love and acceptance. So many are sick and imprisoned in despair and fear that they yearn to be healed and find hope. This is how we are called to follow Jesus with the material needs of our neighbors and with political engagement with those we disagree with.

### *Prayer*

Gracious God who made us in your image, we ask that you make your presence known in this electoral season. Remind us that our hope and salvation is not in a political party, politician, ideology, or even the nation, but rather in you. Regardless of our thoughts about the outcome of an election, we are called to be faithful to your ways and to see Christ in others. We are called to be in community. We are called to serve. We are called to love. That's not easy. Thankfully, you have done all of this with us first. Amen.

## Day 8: Friday, October 4

[Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." - *Matthew 22:37-39*

*Reflection by the Rev. Tedd Cogar*

This text comes from the larger pericope (Matthew 22:34-46) where the Pharisees question Jesus, after he shut down (the NRSV text says "silenced") that "other" religious group, the Sadducees. Although it is not included in the verses above, verse 40 states: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In verse 37, Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5. It is important to note this is from what is known in Hebrew as the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4-8,

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."*

The Israelites are called to remember who they were and whose they were just as we are called to remember who we are and whose we are. Remember your baptism! The *Shema* is central to daily prayer in the morning and in the evening, especially for our Jewish siblings. And it should receive more adoption of practice by us Christians today. We might modernize the beginning of verse 4, the "Hear, O Israel" to "Wake up" or "Pay attention." Moses, in Deuteronomy was attempting to get the people to focus on God, to remember the time in the wilderness, to know that the center of their lives should be worshipping God. In the same way, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther asks the questions in the Small Catechism "*Was is das?*" or "What is this, what does this mean?" and our response is "We should fear and love God." We are always called to refocus on what is central to our faith.

I recently attended a Pride Celebration in Indiana, PA. Across from the welcome table was a group of protestors. I have no idea what the group was, aside from they had some flag indicating they were Christian Nationalists. They were dressed in similarly clad pants, shirts, and face coverings. This group did not want their faces known, yet they were protesting the LGBTQIA+ community's right to exist. There was also a "minister" - it hurts me to call this person a minister, a member of the clergy, when this person was spewing a condemnation of everyone in attendance at the Pride Festival. Such a message is antithetical to the Gospel. I wanted to shout at him, "Wake up! You're way off center!"



In the second part of our passage, Matthew 22:39, Jesus is quoting from Leviticus 19:19 "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." We are called to love God and our neighbors—when we do one, we do the other. There is no distinction. When we vote, we exercise that civic duty which is a right and responsibility. As Lutherans, we are called to follow Christ Jesus where "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). To harm one individual or part of God's good creation is to harm all, including ourselves.

When we look at our vote as a voice for the voiceless, as an extension of our faith, we should look at proposed policies based on how they help the community treat those in need, how they reflect our central concerns of God and neighbor: LGBTQIA+ individuals, those who are seeking asylum, those who are immigrants seeking a better life. We should look at how they advocate for others, feeding those who are hungry, ending discrimination against individuals, how they advocate for creation, how they treat people as holy individuals. How do the candidates express love and how do they express hate? How do they inspire us to express love? We should think about the ways in which we too need to "wake up" to deeper accompaniment and love. These two commandments – loving God and our neighbors—should ground our lives as well as our votes!

### *Prayer*

Almighty God, you loved us before creation. You lowered yourself to live among us in Jesus Christ, our brother. You offered your life for the world. Bless us to live together in unity and harmony, loving our neighbors around the world and next door. Turn our hearts and minds to you, help us to be wise in our decision-making, make our conflicts end and reconcile us to one another and you. Unite us in peace, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## Day 9: Saturday, October 5

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the rights of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. - *Psalm 82: 3-4*

*Reflection by the Rev. Melissa Stoller*

Elections often feel like trials. So much so that they have been described as such by campaigns and politicians: If you don't like the platform, it is up to you, the voter, to serve as jury and perhaps even judge. However, the psalmist reminds us that we are not the presider in this universal court. That role has been reserved for God. The mandates that have been set before us -- to give justice to the weak and the orphan; to maintain the right of the lowly and destitute; to rescue the weak and the needy -- are not ours to adjudicate on behalf of others, but rather to engage with and alongside others.

The first social statement of the ELCA, [Church in Society](#), reminds us that we are a community of moral deliberation. No single one of us can claim the full knowledge of a system, but together, as a community of Christ, we can listen to, learn from, care for and hold gently the experiences, fears, hopes and dreams of our human family. If we approach one another's perspectives with love, compassion and curiosity, we are less likely to fall back on the certainty and judgement that only serves to harden our hearts.

The results of this election will not deliver a verdict, but they will reveal the hopes and fears that define and differentiate us as a human family and as a church. What would it be like to use these results to learn more about our communities of faith? What can we do now, a month out, to prepare space for these deliberations?

*Prayer - ELW, "The human family," pg. 79*

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son.  
Look with compassion on the whole human family;  
take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts;  
break down the walls that separate us;  
unite us in bonds of love;  
and through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth;  
so that, in your good time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

## Day 10: Sunday, October 6

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. - *Galatians 3:28*

*Reflection by Vicar Larry Herrold*

"Things have never been this bad before." "We have never been so polarized." I have heard folks say these and similar statements over and over again. With each year and election season that passes, I wonder whether anyone stops to think if this sentiment is true or not. I'm only 27 years old, but as of this year I will have voted in three presidential election cycles. I cast my first ballot in 2016, and my second in 2020 against the backdrop of Covid-19. The hateful rhetoric in both of those elections is hard to forget, and it makes the 2024 campaign feel rather unremarkable.

The truth of the matter is that these recent elections, and the campaign we're in now, have a context. I remember Barack Obama's election and the myriad of reactions that came with it. Jubilant celebration, hope, disappointment, and unfortunately, racially motivated outrage. The polarization in our nation is nothing new, it is now decades old, and it continues to deepen and take on new dynamics that reflect the country's cultural and racial divides.

Our democracy, its politicians and its voters, would do well to remember Galatians 3:28. St. Paul reminds the church, then and now, that despite our perceived differences, we are all one in Christ Jesus. If one believes, as I and many do, that God is the creator of all, and loves all God's children, how can our rhetoric, our relationships, be anything but based in love? Our society has been shaped by, and some would say founded upon, Christian values. If we as God's people are to live up to those values, we need not look any further than how it is we treat those with whom we disagree. If, as this passage says, religious and cultural differences, economic and social differences, and gender differences do not matter to God and to the Body of Christ, shouldn't we behave accordingly?

The 2024 race to the White House has already fallen short of this vision. Derogatory statements about a candidate's race and heritage, or apocalyptic claims about another candidate's ambitions and motivations, only stoke the kind of hatred that divides; a kind of hatred that can kill, as we saw in Butler, PA, this summer. We, as Christians, are called to be gracious and pray for our enemies. Ideally, though, we should do more than this. I believe God calls us to see our fellow Americans not as enemies, but as fellow siblings in Christ, worthy of love, just like us.

*Prayer*

Sovereign God, king of the universe, we your children are so quick to ascribe our loyalty to others, before seeing our unity in you. Guide us this election season, and open our hearts to see your presence, your grace, your love, in the lives of all people. Break down the walls that divide us and raise up for us a society built on the firm foundation of the love we find in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## Day 11: Monday, October 7

Then was given to [Jesus] the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Most High is upon me,  
because God has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to those who are poor.  
God has sent me to preach liberation to those who are captives  
and recovery of sight to those who are blind,  
to liberate those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Most High's favor.

- *Luke 4:17-19; Translation by the Rev. Dr. Wil C. Gafney*

*Reflection by the Rev. Jay C. Mitchell*

These are some of my favorite verses in the New Testament. In fact, I chose this passage as part of the gospel reading for my ordination. I figured who better to model myself on that Jesus in his first reading and sermon as part of his ministry in Nazareth?! Well, except... Except, maybe not...

I still hold these verses central to my idea of what ministry looks like—not just for pastors, deacons, and other clergy, but for all of us who are Jesus' disciples. This is at the very heart of the gospel message, the good news of God in Jesus come near to us. The proclamation is to those who are poor, held captive, blind (more a metaphorical blindness than those with physical visual impairment), and oppressed. The call is to not only proclaim such things but also to act for them. Notice God has anointed us to proclaim and preach, yes...but then we are also sent to liberate those who are oppressed. That is not just about proclaiming anything but acting, too.

The thing is, as dearly as I hold these verses to my sense of ministry, my sense of how Christians are called to be in the world, what I have come to hold even more dearly is the verse that follows: "Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down and every eye of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. Then he began to speak to them, saying, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" And while I often like to think I am living into the hope of these verses, sadly, I don't think any of us can say that this good news, this proclamation of liberation and jubilee has yet been fulfilled. It is still a work in progress.

In this season, in this seemingly swirling time of anticipation and anxiety, in this overtly political season, I think that is the reminder for us in this text. Yes, in Jesus, all this has been and will be fulfilled. In Jesus, the love of God is known in its fullest and most perfect way. In Jesus, all the anticipation and the anxiety, all the partisanship and the polling, all the swirling of the seasons

will come to their completion. But in the meanwhile... In the meanwhile, it is for us to continue to live into who Jesus has called us to be, who God has created us to be, who the Spirit continues to empower us to be. It is for us to realize that the proclamation of the good news is still so necessary in the world today; that there are still those who are as weary and wounded as when Jesus first offered love and hope; that until we all can rejoice in the fullness of the favor of our God, there is still work to do.

So, I invite you to join me in taking these verses to heart, to let them rest deeply in you as you continue to live out the mission God has given you. Let us not rest simply in knowing that they are fulfilled in Jesus but let us live each day as if they mean something in our lives. Because they do. They are as much for us as they ever were for the world. And they mean for us life itself.

### *Prayer*

God of anointing, fall fresh on us. Open our ears, our eyes, our hearts to see those weary and wounded, to dwell with those who are blind and those who are poor, to listen to those who are oppressed and those who are held captive. Then turn us, O God, to live your words of promise for them. That through us your love may be known, your favor experienced, and jubilee be shared in you. All this we ask in the name of the One who fulfills all your perfect will for us, Jesus. Amen.

## Day 12: Tuesday, October 8

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. - *Romans 12:2*

*Reflection by the Rev. Dr. Lisa Barnes*

I voted in my first presidential election as a sophomore in college. Not really knowing much about politics, I cast my ballot for the same candidate as my father, which is not an uncommon thing for first-time voters. I was barely an adult and just learning about the process. I didn't know anything about what differentiated the political parties, and I was only just discovering what issues mattered to me.

When it came time for my second presidential election, I was more mature and better prepared, and my political ideology was coming together. As it turns out, I was not of the same political persuasion as my father. In fact, we were pretty much polar opposites, ideologically speaking (which remained a sore point with us). But I felt empowered. I knew that my vote mattered, and I was going to cast it for the candidate who best represented my interests.

By the time my third presidential election came around, I was just starting seminary. This time, I found my vote informed not only by secular ideas, but by faith. My desire to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8), became the driving force for my politics. I also began to see that it wasn't just my interests that mattered, but the interests of all God's good creation. I was now seeking a transformative leader; a president who would take seriously their role as a servant leader, meeting the needs of all, regardless of the color of their skin, their socioeconomic status, who they love, what religion they practice.

As the apostle Paul writes, our faith in the Risen Christ guides us not to conform to this world but be transformed for the sake of the world. Our faith calls us to be alert, astute, mindful of the world around us. It informs all that we are. God, in Christ Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit invites us to be re-formed, conscious of who we are and whose we are. And that extends to all aspects of our everyday lives. To be good citizens of the world is to be in the world—but also recognize that we are not of the world—and to be in continual discernment about what God desires for us.

*Prayer*

God of the cosmos, you invite us to discern your will for your good creation. You invite us into the transformative nature of your beautiful creative work. You invite us to create a world of possibilities, where all are fed, clothed, sheltered, cared for. May we answer your transformative call in all that we say, in all that we do, in all that we are. Amen.

## Day 13: Wednesday, October 9

[W]ith all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. -*Ephesians 4:2-3*

*Reflection by the Rev. Brian Evans*

In parliamentary systems of government, the party not in power is often referred to as the “loyal opposition.” I like this term, first, because it suggests that those on the other side of the aisle are equally loyal to the same overarching ideals as me. As Luther would put it in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment in the Small Catechism, we are to “interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” Second, it casts the other not as an enemy, but as merely an opponent.

In the Hebrew bible, an enemy is “one who hates.” A loyal opponent, though, is one who respectfully challenges our perspectives and stretches us to try to see through our neighbor’s eyes. We can safely oppose one another in the smaller things while still sharing loyalty to bigger things like democracy, country, and the kingdom of God. It seems the safety that allows us to respectfully disagree can be rooted in nothing less than love—love for God, love for country, love for justice and peace, and love for neighbor.

The radical wisdom that Jesus teaches us, though, is to also love one’s enemy. I wonder how long and to what extent one must love the enemy before they are no longer an enemy, becoming merely an opponent—or even a friend. On the flip side, if we do not love our opponents, how long will it be before they become our enemies?

I am convinced that no amount of reasoning or logic, no matter how loud or flashy the rhetoric or artful the argument, can change an enemy’s heart. Only love can do it. I have seen it. It’s not easy. It takes humility, gentleness, and patience. And it is a risky business. When we are vulnerable, we can get hurt. But in a time where division threatens those greater ideals themselves, Jesus’ radical way of loving remains the greatest power and hope of all.

*Prayer*

Gracious God, your Son called us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. By your Spirit bless your people with all humility and gentleness, and with patience, bearing with one another in love, so we may know now a glimpse of the unity and peace which will know fully when your kingdom comes. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



## Day 14: Thursday, October 10

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. - *Matthew 5:9*

*Reflection by the Rev. Martin Rafanan*

A Confession: I'm at war with my neighbor. It started in an innocuous way but now it is a full-fledged, strongly voiced confrontation of intolerance and grievance. It's entirely nonproductive and I don't like it, but it's true. I know I break the 5th commandment. I know it's not the intention of God for my life. I lack humility. I lack courage. I find it impossible to share God's heart of peace. And yet, this is the way it is. My pride and ego drive the retaliatory vitriol in my voice and the violent emotions emanating from my own heart.

But the light of the Gospel shines on the darkness of my soul. The war with my neighbor is debilitating for me emotionally, spiritually and physically and doesn't do anything good for my neighbor. I know that war and violence destroy communities and make *koinonia* (fellowship) impossible.

The path forward: We stay out of each other's way. That seems to be the best answer at the moment. Praying for peace is helpful. Praying for the good of my neighbor brings to mind God's intention for us all. Living in a non-provocative way is a step toward peace. Living with love and reconciliation as an alternative response to violence is required, but I'm not there yet.

The Promise: Can I de-escalate with grace and compassion rather than respond with an attitude of violence? I haven't managed it yet, but I live in hope and seek God's blessing. I know that I am already blessed as a peacemaker. That peace must begin in my heart. The Peacemaker is in me. Jesus' life is my own. God will get me to the finish line in the work of true nonviolence and laying down my life for others, even my enemies. In baptism, I am a Child of God. That is enough.

*Prayer*

Gracious God, put me on the path to peacemaking as Your child. Help me to embody Your peace in all areas of my life. Grant me the courage to step into difficult situations with a heart of reconciliation. Give me the wisdom to know when to speak and when to listen, and the grace to bring Your love into every interaction. Use me as an instrument of Your peace. May my efforts to foster harmony reflect Your heart and draw others closer to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## Day 15: Friday, October 11

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. - *Romans 13:10*

*Reflection by the Rev. Eileen Ruppel-Doan*

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded time and time again of our obligation to our neighbor - and the unmistakable truth about just how broad that category of "neighbor" is. In seasons of political change or uncertainty like this election season, it can be hard to see one another as neighbors. Our many differences are highlighted and picked apart daily, publicly, and for months on end. Even if we don't outright see others as enemies, we may still tend to look at those with opposing views through a wary side-eye. We may talk down to or belittle or condescend. The best of us are guilty of it.

Paul's letter to the Romans succinctly reminds us of how we are to deal with our neighbors, even across differences: do no wrong. But Paul, that leaves us with a tricky question: what is wrong? Can my "right" be wrong for someone else, and still be right for me? Can "wrong" to me be someone else's faithful, authentic, wholehearted right?

This is where translations lend a helping hand, as this word wrong in Romans (NRSV) can also be translated simply as, "harm." Love does no harm. That seems much more clear-cut, plain and simple. It's easier to see harm, to tell when someone has been physically, emotionally or spiritually harmed. Harm is on the faces of people denied rights or care. Harm is in the suffering of people living in poverty or experiencing climate change. Harm is in violence caused by racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Paul reminds us to do no harm. Instead, we are to fulfill the law through love. Love fulfills God's law, keeps us from inflicting harm, and prevents us from wrongdoing. As we prepare to vote this election season, let us remember to see our neighbors as just that: neighbors who deserve no harm; neighbors who God so loves.

*Prayer*

Good and gracious God, help us to use our voices and our actions to love our neighbors. Help us to intervene in the harm and wrongdoing around us. Inspire us to use our vote to fulfill the law in love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## Day 16: Saturday, October 12

One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, how he entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions?" Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath." - *Mark 2:23-27*

*Reflection by the Rev. D. Mike Bennethum*

They missed the point. That happens a lot when someone focuses more on their ideology than on the people around them. The Pharisees were so preoccupied with clarifying what constitutes work and what constitutes rest, they lost sight completely of God's purpose in giving the command to keep the sabbath – so that God's people would have opportunities to take a needed break and attend to their spiritual and emotional wellbeing. As a result, instead of experiencing life-giving rest and renewal, people were burdened with a new layer of stress, all in the name of piety.

Jesus reminded the Pharisees, his followers, and the crowd that *people* matter to God. God cares more about the welfare of people than about rules, customs, philosophies, or ideologies. Martin Luther made the same point when he stressed that the heart of Christian ethics (how we act in response to what we believe) is compassion for and service to our neighbors. In his 1520 *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther wrote: "God's commandments drive us to our neighbor's need, that by means of these commandments we may be of benefit only to others and to their salvation" [LW 44:71].

In today's polarized political climate, we hear many public figures speak passionately about their economic philosophy and their political theories. Sometimes the rhetoric can become so focused on abstract notions of justice or good government that concern for the wellbeing of actual people, especially those affected most by their policies and proposals, falls to the wayside. I think both Jesus and Luther would say, "They are missing the point."

As I pray and ponder regarding how I will vote in November's election, I will ask God to keep me centered on the needs of my neighbors. How can my participation in the electoral process be of benefit to others – in particular to the people who are most often overlooked, most often burdened, and whose lives will be most impacted by the actions of those who are elected?

That's the point.

*Prayer – ELW, "Social Justice," pg. 79*

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may move every human heart; that the barriers dividing us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; and that, with our divisions healed, we might live in justice and peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Day 17: Sunday, October 13

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor,  
you will cry out and not be heard. -*Proverbs 21:13*

*Reflection by the Rev. Dr. Martin Otto-Zimmann*

We are all connected through the living Christ who is in, with, and under all of creation. The cry of the poor is the cry of a neighbor whom we are commanded to love. This goes against the grain of our postmodern culture which is chained to a civil religion of extraction and appropriation of all the resources around us. Consider the following sobering facts:

- 1) Americans live less sustainably than any other nation. According to researchers at Washington State University, [we represent 5% of the global population yet consume approximately one quarter of the world's energy resources.](#)
- 2) The United States wastes 30 – 40% of our food on an annual basis according to the [University of Michigan Center for Sustainable Systems.](#)
- 3) The [Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future](#) reports that Americans eat three times more meat than the global average, and one quarter of this meat is in the form of a highly processed consumable (hot dogs, deli meat, etc.). Much of this meat is imported from lands where pasture is created from deforestation, and the methane output from these animals is one of the key factors driving global warming according to the [World Resources Institute.](#)
- 4) According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, the [federal poverty level](#) for a family of four is \$31,200, or \$7,800 per person, which equals about \$21 per person per day.

These statistics are a tiny part of the detrimental results of our consumption mindset that creates the conditions for domestic and international poverty. Our grasp exceeds our reach, and we are taking from those who lack the agency and autonomy to fend for themselves. The cry of the poor is a warning cry to the world. We cannot continue in this way. St. Basil reprimands us in this famous quote:

*The bread which you do not use is the bread of the hungry; the garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of him who is naked; the shoes that you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot; the money that you keep locked away is the money of the poor; the acts of charity that you do not perform are so many injustices that you commit.*

Most Americans tend to vote for whomever will ostensibly serve their own self-interests. Christ compels us to vote in the manner which benefits not just ourselves, but also serves the needs

of our neighbors in need. My oath of ordination forbids me from using my office to persuade anyone to vote a certain way, yet I can safely say that I am testing the spirit and moral content of each candidate from the presidency to the local school board in order to vote in a way that is consistent with Christ's imperative to love God and neighbor. The cry of the poor is the cry of our kin. We ignore it at our peril.

*Prayer – ELW, "Creation and new creation," pg. 81*

Sovereign of the universe, your first covenant of mercy was with every living creature. When your beloved Son came among us, the waters of the river welcomed him, the heavens opened to greet his arrival, the animals of the wilderness drew near as his companions. With all the world's people, may we who are washed into new life through baptism seek the way of your new creation, the way of justice and care, mercy and peace; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

## Day 18: Monday, October 14

Proclaim the message; be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. -2 Timothy 4:2-4

*Reflection by the Rev. Ted Cockley*

I saw a production of *Godspell* recently. It was the first time I had seen the show since it was revised and restructured for its fiftieth anniversary. It was terrific; one of the best shows I've seen in some time. It still starts with Socrates coming onstage to answer charges against him for corrupting the youth of Athens. He is joined by other thinkers/philosophers including Confucius, Luther, and Nietzsche, all spouting their teachings, until it is almost impossible to hear anyone say anything. The noise continues until John the Baptist appears, blows the ram's horn, and begins singing, "[Prepare ye the way of the Lord.](#)" After all these years, it is still a dynamite opening.

I'm old enough to remember when *Godspell* was new, along with *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Both shows were often condemned as "demonic," or "satanic," or "blasphemous" and sometimes all three. But both shows endured and became parts of our theatrical landscape. And, yes, back in the 1970s, these two shows made people's ears itch, because the times were uncertain, and some challenges to accepted norms were not to be tolerated.

Well, the times are still uncertain, the challenges are different and more daunting, and people's ears still itch. What are we to do? Paul's counsel to Timothy still packs a punch: Be persistent. Convince. Rebuke. Encourage people. Be patient. Teach. The truth still matters because the truth is still the truth. The times may be unsettled, and people may be unsettled because the times are, but the Gospel's call continues: In all that you do, be faithful to the message, and the message will speak for itself. So, for these times and the choices we all face, let us be faithful to the message and let the message speak. With God's grace, it will be more than enough.

*Prayer*

Almighty God, these are troublous times, but the times have always been troublous. We face difficult choices, but choices are seldom easy. Be with us as we watch and work and pray. Grace us with your guidance. And above all else, keep us faithful to your truth; for to tell the truth, where else are we to go? Amen.

## Day 19: Tuesday, October 15

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. -*Isaiah 56:1*

*Reflection by the Rev. Brian Bennett*

About ten years ago or so, I was running a Pub Theology at a bar in Pittsburgh. This particular night, no one showed up for our discussion, so I ended up sitting at the bar in my collar and as almost always happened, got into a conversation with a law student who attended Pitt's law school. I don't remember much about the conversation except at one point as we were talking about what we each did, he said, "When it comes down to it, you and I are doing the same kind of work. We spend time interpreting texts for the good of others." This statement surprised me, although given that Jesus spent time debating lawyers, I suppose it shouldn't have.

Interpreting civil law is an important task, as is interpreting scripture. No matter how carefully legislation is written, there is always room for people to narrow or broaden its scope. Specific wording can be challenged in the courts as our multiple branches try to interpret and execute the law as they understand it. In the biblical world, there was not a separation of religious and civil. All the law encompassed both the civil and the sacred. We hear this in Isaiah. The NRSV translation of Isaiah 56:1 is a bit too vague. Keep the law (the Hebrew word *mishpat* is used here) and do righteousness (here the Hebrew word *zedakah*). *Mishpat* is a judgment regarding law, and not a mere parallelism or synonym for righteousness. Isaiah reminds the people to keep the law.

But again and again, throughout the witness of scripture, *mishpat* does not stand alone. We are accustomed, I think, to the voices that want to turn to the Law as the thing that keeps order in our world, even if it might be used as a cudgel. The important part of this verse is precisely the following phrase, "do righteousness." This righteousness is not a synonym for mercy alongside a phrase that means justice. This righteousness is a reminder that the law comes from God. Doing *zedakah* is a way to remember its loving source and not turn it into a cold, rigid entity.

Isaiah continues in this chapter to remind Israel that foreigners in the land will not be excluded just because they are wanderers or migrants. Eunuchs too will find a place in the family of God, even though they do not fall within the roles of men or women as understood at the time. The law given, Isaiah reminds the people, is not meant to be a tool for the hard-hearted. The law will reveal God's own righteousness. People of faith are called upon to interpret the law in ways that forget that the lives of real people are at stake here because of the One who gave the law and the love rooted there.



*Prayer*

Holy God, you gave us laws that we might keep our world ordered even with the hardness of human hearts. Help us always to advocate for laws that keep love at the forefront of our desire for justice. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

## Day 20: Wednesday, October 16

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. - *2 Corinthians 5:14-15*

*Reflection by Deaconess Dottie Almoney*

As a Deaconess in the Deaconess Community of the ELCA, this scripture verse is on the cross given to us at our consecrations/ordinations, "For Christ's love compels us." This piece of jewelry is a reminder that we are called daily to work for peace, love and justice because of the love of Christ through his life, death and resurrection.

With the upcoming presidential election, we as Lutheran Christian voters have the opportunity to vote discerning a vision of a society which will work for the benefit of all people. We remember that Christ died for all of God's children – even those we deem as our enemies. As the verse in 2 Corinthians tells us, we no longer live for ourselves but for Christ.

In Luther's *Treatise on Good Works*, (vol. 44, p. 94) Luther has this to say about those in authority: "He stands at the head and leads the multitude and must not go or do as he wants but as the multitude are able. He has to pay more regard to their needs and necessities than to his own will and pleasure." We are to carefully choose elected officials that will work for the benefit of all people in God's earthly kingdom, ones who can sacrifice their own wants and needs. In other words, they need to lead as Christ would lead sacrificially and justly, with mercy and in love towards God and God's commands.

We are compelled by the love of Christ to advocate for just rulers. We are compelled by the love of Christ to work on behalf of those who are on the margins of our society. We are compelled by the love of Christ to vote for leaders who will shepherd our country with grace, dignity, love, justice, and mercy.

*Prayer – ELW, "Responsible citizenship," pg. 77*

Lord God, you call your people to honor those in authority. Help us elect trustworthy leaders, participate in wise decisions for our common life, and serve our neighbors in local communities. Bless the leaders of our land, that we may be at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

## Day 21: Thursday, October 17

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. -*Romans 12:18*

*Reflection by the Rev. Becky Horn*

Each of us has the capacity to live with love, kindness, respect, and peace towards and with all of creation. So often our humanity or selfishness or insecurities or fear influence our decision making, impacting our actions, words, and deeds; when that happens, someone gets hurt. I believe each time we hurt another we are also harming ourselves. To not show love to another is to also not show love to ourselves. So, while we cannot control another's actions, choices, words, beliefs, or anything else, we can and do control our own actions and reactions.

It is possible to live in peace with all, or as Paul writes, "live peaceably with all." Even though it is possible, this isn't easy, and most of the time it is just hard. One of the sayings I'm fond of is reminding myself that I am to love my neighbors, all of them, but that doesn't mean I have to always like them. I must do my best to respect and live in kindness, but I know that I will not agree with everyone else. What does it mean for you to live peaceably with all? Does it include respect, kindness, care, self-sacrifice, intentionality, prayer? What else could you include in this list of ways of being that can help you to strive for peace in your heart to extend beyond yourself?

This year, like so many others, we have found our world anything but peaceful. The presence of war, famine, fear, hate, bigotry, and harm seem to be impossible to get beyond, and yet we are called to strive for peace. It is this call, a call to love and not hate, a call to hope and not fear, a call to live as God guides us, that we share with our neighbors throughout the country and indeed the world. May we do as Paul writes, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all," to the best of our abilities and always with the help of God.

*Prayer*

Holy God, You speak in our hearts in love and guide us towards your peace. Strengthen us to be loving and allow us to live with the peace you have shown, the peace you have given, the peace that brings hope. Guide our hearts and minds as we prepare to engage in our civic duty, inspire us to speak peace through our voices and with our votes. In your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

## Day 22: Friday, October 18

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. - *Leviticus 19:33-34*

*Reflection by the Rev. Ryan Pusch*

It is perhaps worth mentioning at the onset that there is no substantial archeological evidence for the story of the Exodus as it is recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, the Exodus is considered a central story for the people of Israel, and therefore also, through Christ, an essential story for Christians to understand the nature of God as one who liberates from oppression and slavery. Who God is in God's own nature is not one who oppresses, not one who enslaves, but one who undoes those very things in our world. And there are other lessons from Exodus, too. God forms people into community during dire circumstances. God gives the promise of freedom and abundance. God walks beside us in our wanderings. God teaches and gives the Torah, the way of life. And, lest we forget, God gives the heave-ho to oppressors who won't listen or remember God's teachings.

So, what does this mean for us during an election year?

First, we must remember who we are and where we're from. There are no people, anywhere, whose ancestors always have been from the place they currently reside. There are indigenous and first nation people in almost every land whose ancestors have lived there a very long time, and those folks' relationship to the land should be honored and protected. But if you go back far enough, nobody ended up right where they started from. People move, species move, continents move! Everything is in motion- just very, very slow motion. I am from Wisconsin, then I moved to Minnesota, and now I live in Pennsylvania. I have three homelands, each with its own wonderful relationships and memories. I remember where I have lived over the last 39 years. But before me came my dad, Glenn, and his dad, Wallace, and his dad, George, and his dad, Charles, and his dad, Christian, who moved to Rubicon, Wisconsin in the 1860s from Ruppertenrod, Germany, near Frankfurt to start a farm and a family. Sadly, I don't have the same historical timeline for my mother or grandmothers, but it was my great-aunt Pearl who treasured the family history and shared the stories that she discovered in her research. I know more about who I am and where I'm from because of Aunt Pearl.

"If you're not an alien now, then you, your children, or your grandchildren may become one soon." This might be another way that we think about this text from Leviticus. Who knows where the human species will have to relocate as we contribute to the blanket of pollution suffocating the Earth's atmosphere and accelerating climate change? We are already witnessing a large migration of folks from Central America seeking refuge from unchecked violence and

economic instability, both of which are exasperated by a changing climate. They are seeking new life as asylum seekers to the United States, but the system that grants asylum is woefully unprepared to process the folks who are seeking it. We are now seeing politicians on both sides of the political spectrum calling for either mass deportation or at least tougher enforcement at the border, neither of which bodes well for these neighbors of ours. The words of Leviticus call to us from the ancient past and resonate with the stories of our own ancestors, whether they came from Europe, Africa, Asia, or the Americas. Can we remember our humility? Can we remember our compassion? Can we remember who we are and where we came from? Can we remember who God is in God's self?

### *Prayer*

Spirit of refuge, help us to know you in our own lives. Help us to feel safe, and free, and kind, so that we do not fear our neighbors, but walk with them, as you walked with the people of Israel in the wilderness, and as Jesus walks among us. Help us to remember who we are and who you are, the God of refuge, freedom, and love. Amen.

## Day 23: Saturday, October 19

Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you. - *Deuteronomy 16:20*

*Reflection by the Rev. Jennifer McCurry*

Our mainstream political discussions rarely focus on the land in which we live. We may discuss policies that protect the land, demanding more from businesses or residents. Quickly those conversations shift to be centered on the costs, financial or otherwise. In general, our American discourse engages land as an instrument; it's merely property or resource, though an important one as we consider issues of sustainability.

In contrast, for the Israelites, land was a more fundamental part of how they envisioned their life together. They had been enslaved in Egypt for generations; even the elders who were with them could not remember what it meant to have power to structure their community. They were healing from that trauma, as they learned to live differently. God responded to their challenges with the gift of Torah, or the law.

When they were wanderers in the desert, their destination and hope was the promised land, which was inextricably intertwined with their sense of agency in that land. Much of the book of Deuteronomy is an exposition of how the Israelites should live the great commandment: that they love the Lord "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut. 6:5). It taught about how to honor the Lord in worship and live with justice and righteousness in community life.

In chapter sixteen, the Lord instructed them to "appoint judges and officials" and to trust them to lead with integrity. (Deut. 16:18) That leadership involved making just decisions that focused on what was right in God's eyes. Judges were not to be swayed by personal interest, and they were to keep in mind the needs and integrity of all the people, including those who had few choices. Verse twenty says, "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you." (Deut. 16:20)

The care of the land was reflected in the goal of just relationships and economics. They would have to decide who would make choices about the land and who would spend their time working on it. They would need to organize who had food and drink in what quantities and how they were delegated. If they pursued "justice, and only justice," as they ordered their life on the land that God gave them, they would receive gifts, including social and economic stability, and strength and protection in the face of enemies. They would be prepared to weather all the changes that come with human life together. These just relationships with one another and with their land would form a faithful community life.

Our nation's story is different, but we have similar, shared hopes for social and economic stability and international security. The God of Israel's advice rings true for us, even in our pluralistic society. In order to seek these communal goods, we must "pursue justice" in our economics and in our relationships. As we prepare for the November election, may we discern faithfully and choose wisely.

*Prayer – ACS, "Faithful living in society," pg. 50*

Sovereign God, your Son Jesus lived within the structures of society even as he spoke truth to those in power and challenged systems of oppression. Empower us to be courageous disciples and responsible citizens. Grant that our life in the public realm be grounded in love for our neighbors, care for the most vulnerable in our midst, and respect for the common life we share, following the example of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

## Day 24: Sunday, October 20

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. -James 2:14-17

*Reflection by the Rev. Joel Folkemer*

Lutherans who recall that Martin Luther calls James an "epistle of straw" may wonder why today's reading is included in this devotional. In Martin Luther's Prefaces to the Books of the Bible, 1545, he also shares these words:

*"In a word, he wants to guard against those who relied on faith without works and is unequal to the task...and would accomplish by insisting on the Law what the apostles accomplish by inciting [human beings] to love. Therefore, I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him."*

It's true that Luther may not come across as an enthusiastic fan of the book of James, but Luther recognizes that there is still some value that can be found. Other theologians view James in a different light. If James is not dwelling on how to earn our way into heaven, then we can see the book of James as a call to action on living out our lives of faith. As people of God, who have already been saved by grace and through the work of Jesus, then these verses from James help to remind us that the law is important to help push us to loving and serving our neighbors, to living out our baptismal covenant to work for justice and peace. Without the tension of law and Gospel, we can find ourselves in the trap of neglecting our call to love and serve, and falling into, what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, "cheap grace."

Grace becomes cheap when it allows us to recognize sins of injustice, inequity, and human selfishness in and all around us, but it doesn't propel us into living out our baptism's call to action, to being God's hands, feet, and voice in the world around us. Cheap grace can be heard in often shallow words of "we'll keep them in our thoughts and prayers." Of course, I'm not saying that prayer is shallow. Rather, prayer is much deeper than just a cliché being shared so others think that you care. This is where James is going with these verses.

Every time I read this part of James; it reminds me of something shared by the Rev. Dr. Mark Oldenburg during a class while in seminary. "Be careful what you pray for, God might expect you to do something about it." Prayer is about our relationship with God as well as our relationship with our neighbors and the world around us. Prayer drives us to being God's representatives of healing, life, and peace.



I agree with much of what Luther writes about the book of James. I agree that we cannot use the book of James to find a good explanation of our salvation being about God's love and God's grace, but James is a great reminder of where our faith calls us to action. James is a powerful book to consider what we are called to do with our salvation, the gift freely given to us. Now that we are saved... how can we turn the focus from ourselves to God and to others. As we pause to reflect on scripture and to pray, may our hearts and minds be opened to the relationships we have, as well as to opportunities for relationships, and to situations that surround us. May we become more attentive and responsive when the Holy Spirit calls us to act as individuals and communities of faith.

*Prayer*

God of costly grace, send your Holy Spirit to stir us, to move us beyond clichés and shallow words, and to encourage us toward living out our faith. Grant us the will and the strength to do works of love following in the steps of Jesus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

## Day 25: Monday, October 21

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets." - *Matthew 7:12*

*Reflection by the Rev. Dr. Angela Otto-Zimmann*

Several years ago, my husband and I were out for dinner in Gettysburg, where we live. When we arrived home, he realized, to his dismay – and with that sinking feeling in his stomach – that his wallet had not made it home with him. He quickly called the restaurant; they did a thorough check, yielding nothing. I scoured the inside of the car, dipping my head beneath seats, running hands along the center console: nothing.

Suddenly, an alert popped up on my phone – I had a Facebook message from an unknown user. A woman was reaching out to me; she saw that I had the same last name as the man whose driver's license was in the wallet she had just discovered on the sidewalk on the circle in Gettysburg, and my profile said I lived in the town: were we related?

"Yes, yes!" and off we rushed to recover the wallet from the good Samaritan who had taken the time and made the effort to track us down.

We pulled into the circle and heading toward us in brightly colored shirts displaying the logo of every political tenet we didn't believe in was a couple extending a hand, a smile, and a missing wallet with the cash still in it. In gratitude, we thanked them profusely, accepted the wallet, and left. Had I seen them coming under other circumstances, I likely would have crossed to the other side of the street and turned my head away.

I learned a tangible and humbling lesson that day: even if we can't find common ideological ground, we can still behave with decency in our daily interactions. When a person loses a wallet, return it. When a person needs a hand, offer it. When a person is unkind, forgive them. In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you – this is the law, the prophets, the gospel, and good common sense, too.

*Prayer*

Jesus, you crossed all sorts of fraught boundaries in order to show compassion and solidarity with people whose ideology was very different from your own. In our daily lives, help us to live out your grace. May we cross boundaries, too, with tangible acts of kindness. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

## Day 26: Tuesday, October 22

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

*-Galatians 5:22-23*

### *Reflection by Deacon Dawn Talley*

As a Chaplain in an inner-city trauma hospital, I encounter people in their most vulnerable states. This vulnerability has been heightened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and especially for the past two to three years. I am observing people with heightened levels of negative mental and emotional states with a decrease in an openness to a positive heightened spiritual state that affects their physical states.

As Christians, we are to live out our baptismal call and let the living waters of the baptism flow in and through us to the world around us to allow those we encounter to feel the presence of the triune God who takes great care of all of creation. This could be locally, regionally, nationally, or even globally.

Our global society is hurting terribly right now; and through the multiple areas of communication and the interconnectedness that exists within all of creation, everyone is experiencing the vexing energy that has sprung forth. My vocational and professional positions bring me into contact with many people, and they are all searching for answers.

The answer is in plain sight through the words of the apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 with the fruit of the Spirit. By allowing the Holy Spirit to comfort, advocate, and guide you, you may put forth in our tumultuous world these impactful and influential fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If this is done with focused intent, others will respond positively.

In my own life, I show kindness, compassion, and respect to all those I encounter. Most people are in a very vulnerable state. Because of this, we need to meet people where they are and allow them to maintain a sense of dignity. Jesus commands us to love one another. If we are to model ourselves after Jesus, then we should be focusing on the qualities that Paul provided in his epistle to the Galatians. Then, a positive cultural and social transformation will truly occur.

### *Prayer*

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the fruits of the Spirit that you cultivate in our lives. Help us to walk by the Spirit, displaying love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in all we do. Transform our hearts and minds to reflect Your grace and truth. May our lives be a testimony to Your love and power. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

## Day 27: Wednesday, October 23

She opens her hand to the poor,  
and reaches out her hands to the needy. -*Proverbs 31:20*

*Reflection by Sue Ellen Spotts*

Years ago, I was in a bible study of the Magnificat being led by a theologian from South America. The verse that often makes uncomfortable those of us who live in privilege is verse 53, "God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." The leader invited us to think of this verse in a new way. Instead of hearing a message that God strips us of what we have in condemnation, we were invited to consider it as an act of grace. Consider that we can be open to others if our hands are freed from stuff.

This image of available hands came to mind when I read the verse from Proverbs. How can we reach out to those who are in need if our hands are encumbered by our own possessions? How can we be in solidarity with those in need if we are clinging to our position of privilege?

In this verse from Proverbs, I am also struck by the effort that is described. "She reaches... she stretches..." These verbs show intentionality in moving toward those who have need. And, in this reach, we are not offering stuff, but ourselves. Stretching can be unnerving; it can throw us off balance. But regular stretching also changes us. Reaching toward those in need, joining hands with them, brings us into their sphere of experience.

As we approach the elections, I wonder how my decisions on candidates and policies will be shaped by letting go of encumbrances. What might it look like to live with the grace which allows me to reach, to stretch, to grasp the hand of those who suffer injustice, poverty, hunger, and violence?

*Prayer*

God of grace, empty us of that which hinders us from reaching out to others. Fill us with Wisdom from you as we make choices in this election season. In Christ, Amen.

## Day 28: Thursday, October 24

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. *-Matthew 5:9*

*Reflection by the Rev. Lauren Applegate*

As a pastor and person in recovery, I have the honor and privilege of leading Bible Study in a drug rehabilitation facility. I hold the space for individuals to experience the stories of Jesus: "the embodiment of God's awesomeness." Through these experiences, I am moved to a state of awe, as the participants find the living water and daily bread that they need to continue on their journey of recovery, as they build lives that honor God, self, and neighbor.

In a recent session, I invited participants to hear and reflect on the words of the Beatitudes.

In the conversation that followed, we shared how in seasons of active addiction, we acted as the opposite of peacemakers: we were chaos-orchestrators, manipulation-masters, and connection-resisters.

We recognized the unhelpful patterns of carrying the resentments of what once was and expectations of how it should be, to seed division in relationships and communities.

We were remorseful for how we treated ourselves and others as a commodity to be used, as opposed to communities to live and love together.

We lamented the ways we denied ourselves and others the freedom to live our lives joyfully and tenderly.

We came to notice together that the blessing of the peacemakers is an invitation to act in ways that make peace possible: like speaking truth, honoring pain, and allowing time and space for healing.

As we prepare to vote in the upcoming election, may we notice opportunities before, during, and after the election, to act in ways that align with Jesus' invitation to be a peacemaker. May we align our actions with our truth, honor the pain of this world that we have felt and witnessed, and make a way for a future of love and life together in unity.

*Prayer*

God of blessing and promise, be present with us. Move us by your Spirit so that we may find ourselves among the peacemakers of this world. May we be known as your children, forever in awe of your goodness through all times and seasons. Amen.

## Day 29: Friday, October 25

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. -*Matthew 5:16*

*Reflection by the Rev. Thomas Lang*

Rhonda showed up at the church one Sunday and then every Sunday from then on. She was about 12 or 13 at the time and came from a broken family. For a long time, no member of her family came with her. But she always found a way to get to church and was always eager to participate in worship and even in catechism classes! As time went on, she grew to become a leader among the youth of the congregation showing a love for the Jesus she came to know through the bible and the care of members of the congregation. Rhonda gained a clear sense of what it meant to live as a follower of Jesus, and this had a very positive impact on the other youth as well as many adults in the congregation. After several years of coaxing her mom to come with her, she finally did and got as involved as Rhonda.

Although it has been a long time since I have seen Rhonda, having moved on from that congregation to serve several other calls, the words of Matthew 5:16 bring her to mind, probably because she exhibited what I believe is the intention of Jesus' words coming from the Sermon on the Mount. She was humble, gentle and kind, never seeking to grab the spotlight or to argue. She always seemed to be full of joy and enthusiasm motivating others to step up. She showed a good deal of patience when something didn't go the way she had hoped. Rhonda was as loving and faithful as any teenager I have ever known. She was blessed to bear many of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), making her light shine bright!

I am not sure how Rhonda sees herself fitting into today's world with its bitter divisiveness, highly judgmental attitudes and extreme prejudices. But I do believe that people like Rhonda, who come to know that the light shining within them is meant to be reflected outward, still make a difference in this world full of so much darkness. And this leads to the questions I believe we each need to ponder as we prepare to vote for local, state and national office holders in just a few days.

First, what does the light of Christ shining in your heart reveal about who you are and how you view the world in which you live, serve, work and play? Second, how best can you reflect this light in the way you vote on the issues and candidates which appear on your ballot? And finally, how will the way you vote reflect the gifts of the Spirit given to you?

*Prayer*

Come, Lord Jesus, with me in my discernment. Come, Lord Jesus, with me into the voting booth. Come, Lord Jesus, and shine your light so brightly within me that I cannot contain it, but can only shine it brightly before others in this time of decision and action. Amen.

## Day 30: Saturday, October 26

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor— let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart, those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.

In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, "God will not seek it out"; all their thoughts are, "There is no God."

Their ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of their sight; as for their foes, they scoff at them.

They think in their heart, "We shall not be moved; throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity."

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.

They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent. Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

They stoop, they crouch, and the helpless fall by their might.

They think in their heart, "God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it."

Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.

Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, "You will not call us to account"?

But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan.

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none. The Lord is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land.

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more. - *Psalm 10*

*Reflection by Vicar Amy Kelly, Seminarian*

One of things I discuss with my kids is "inside voice" and "outside voice." Sometimes it's okay to be loud - like when we are outside running with friends - but sometimes it's inappropriate, like during dinnertime. And of course, sometimes you need to be loud inside, to alert people to a danger or to advocate when you need help. And sometimes we forget the importance of an inside voice.

For me, election season often feels like it's not just running on an outside voice, but almost as if we are all screaming while riding a rollercoaster. We are confronted daily with ads, mail pieces, yard signs, and our friends' opinions on social media. I feel like every two years I must talk with my kids explaining that the advertisements and opinions are not a true representation of the person running for office, but rather a characterization. We miss seeing the humanity of the person, and focus on the advertised pride and deceit, and often end up echoing those attributes on the top of our lungs.

But when we take a moment to quiet our surroundings, we can hear the Holy Spirit and see where God is working to lift up the oppressed. We can hear their voices. When we have these moments, we can better discern how we are called to support our community and country, including who to vote for. Our vote can be a voice of justice rather than loudness.

*Prayer*

Holy God, give us moments of silence this election season, so that we can hear your voice amongst the commotion. Help us see the humanity in all people and remember they are made in your image. Help us do the work of your justice and remember who you have called us to be. We pray this all in the Son's name, Jesus Christ. Amen.



## Day 31: Sunday, October 27

From this time many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." - *John 6:66-68, NIV*

*Reflection from the Rev. Dr. Aaron Fuller*

*Editor's Note: The Rev. Dr. Aaron Fuller serves the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as a Global Missionary and pastor of the Bratislava International Church. All ELCA Missionaries are part of the Service and Justice Home Area, where ELCA Advocacy and State Public Policy Offices like LAMPa are also housed. Rev. Fuller wrote this reflection for the Service and Justice Home Area and was gracious enough to share it with us for this project. We hold the value of accompaniment not only at the center of our missionary work, but in our advocacy and discipleship generally.*

I have been reflecting a lot on Accompaniment lately, which probably isn't surprising since I am a Global Missionary! I can recite from memory, "Accompaniment is walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality." I can recall the five values of accompaniment: mutuality, inclusivity, vulnerability, sustainability, and empowerment. Yet, I sense that something is missing from those definitions, especially as I consider our ministry in Central Europe.

This past week, Bratislava International Church (BIC) co-led a Kids' Day Camp at the invitation of our partner Slovak Lutheran congregation. Earlier this summer, when we announced the news about the camp, some people wondered about the motivation behind the effort. A few assumed it was due to the ELCA's priorities in Central Europe, a strategic move to demonstrate BIC's value to the Slovak congregation we borrow space from, or I wanted to show my effectiveness as the pastor and missionary. Upon further reflection, the motivation was much more straightforward. It was the recognition that to experience God's life-changing love, we need each other.

Turning to the gospel of John, many of Jesus' followers turned back because they could not see the benefit of following him any longer. They did not understand who Jesus was and what he was about. They could only understand it through the narrow view of the physical world they knew. Similarly, I wonder if the same isn't true for us. We are always looking for the benefit of our mission and work. The worth and value of our work and identity – as a church and as followers of Jesus - are tied to our productivity. Reflecting further on accompaniment, the word 'resistance' resonates. Accompaniment is resistance to an ideology that reduces all of life and humanity to its usefulness and what it produces.

Simultaneously, accompaniment is resistance for a vision of life that flows from the divine and the good news of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we are like the Twelve, exhausted but sensing there is more to life than the thin promises a capitalist ideology offers. Like Simon Peter, while still unsure, we also respond in faith, "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

As Kelly and I work with four new YAGM volunteers this year and continue to serve BIC, the Central Europe Teaching volunteers, and our Slovak and Hungarian Lutheran partners, we hope to instill in those we serve a practice we embody. We look to the practice of accompaniment as resistance, a way of living that resists the notion that people's productivity and usefulness define their worth and value—at the same time, that resistance turns us to a more abundant and eternal way of life, rooted in our need for each other and also in the One who is the source of all life.

*Prayer – ELW, "Global mission," pg. 75*

Almighty God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to yourself. We praise and bless you for those whom you have sent in the power of the Spirit to preach the gospel to all nations. We thank you that in all parts of the earth a community of love has been gathered together by their prayers and labors, and that in every place your servants call upon your name; for the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.

## Day 32: Monday, October 28

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. - *Jeremiah 29:11*

*Reflection by the Rev. Erin Jones*

This verse is so well known; it's posted online often, and pasted on t-shirts and coffee mugs for graduation presents. It's a beautiful and comforting sentiment that we wish fervently on all experiencing a time of transition.

And it is rarely placed in its proper context. We too easily forget that these words were first given to the people of Israel in the midst of the exile. They are without a temple, without their homeland, at the mercy of a foreign power, and with very little cause to believe in "a future with hope."

Even the verse before the beautiful words of verse 11 warn that one should not think these promises are imminent. It will only be after a long, hard time of exile in the midst of Babylon that the Israelites will even begin to see these promises of "God's plan" come to fruition. And verse 9 sets the stage further by warning that these promises will not be the ones we dream of for ourselves.

God's plans and promises are not knowable by us mere mortals. There are some days where that terrifies and frustrates me; and there are days when that is beautiful and comforting. Terrifying, because I like being in charge and I enjoy the illusion that I am somehow the one calling the shots. Comforting because at the end of the day, I know that the one who is in charge is God, who is loving and steadfast and merciful.

The same God who walked with the Israelites through the uncertainty and hardship of the exile, who has consistently been a presence with the oppressed and marginalized, who became human and suffered death on a cross, walks with us now. God takes the plans of mortals and oppressors and always transforms them into God's vision for good. As we continue to make our own plans – for voting on November 5, for what happens in our country next year, for what the world looks like in the next 10 years – we know that it is not ultimately our plans that are important.

Our plans, however well-intentioned, will certainly fall short. God's plan, though, will not. It might not be discernible now, or even in our lifetime. It will certainly look far different from whatever we might expect or hope for, but it will be for our good and is something we can look toward with hope.

*Prayer – "The Crucifixion was" by Eric Krewson, member of Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Atonement, Philadelphia, PA, inspired by Jeremiah 29:11.*

The Crucifixion was  
God's plan, God's  
work (our hands).  
So, too, the destruction of both  
temples, of two  
nations, their desert  
wandering. All caused God  
terrible grief in accordance with  
his will—his will to turn  
our sin against itself, to save us  
from its natural consequence. Invisibly,  
like Jacob, God crosses  
his arms, grants us  
life; cheats Death.

## Day 33: Tuesday, October 29

Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble.  
-*Psalm 41:1*

*Reflection by the Rev. Dillon Epler*

Psalm 41:1 is a prayer for healing and wholeness. The psalmist writes that the poor (or weak) are to be considered and that those who consider the poor (or weak) will be happy and delivered in the day of trouble. As followers of Christ, we, like our Jewish ancestors, are called to aid those who seek healing and wholeness, especially those who are sick, dying, and in need of good quality affordable healthcare.

In many ways, Psalm 41:1 makes me think of a quote from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's social statement titled, "[Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor](#)," which reads "The United States does not currently have a health care system that is capable of caring for all people. Significant changes in financing and structure are therefore required" (35).

During my time in seminary, like many seminarians, I was required to complete a hospital chaplaincy program known as CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). CPE, for me, was a life-changing experience that not only made me think of what it means to care for those who are sick and dying as a pastor, but also to advocate for families who are unable to gain access to good quality affordable healthcare. During my time in CPE, I couldn't agree more with the ELCA's social statement on healthcare—as I witnessed many families who struggled with trying to balance their healthcare needs with crippling costs and complicated systems to navigate.

This November, may we seek to act on the words of the psalmist in Psalm 41:1, as we go to the polls. May we be guided by the Holy Spirit to walk in the ways of Jesus to love and serve all people, especially those in need of healing, wholeness, and good quality affordable healthcare. This November may we strive to cast a vote not only for our needs, but the needs of our neighbor too—by calling for a healthcare system that is fair, just, and affordable for all.

*Prayer – ELW, "A prayer of Julian of Norwich," pg. 87*

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen.

## Day 34: Wednesday, October 30

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? -1 John 3:17

*Reflection by Connor Watson, Seminarian*

I am the type of person who enjoys answers. I enjoy knowing the "Why?" behind something or some decision, and I was relentless when I was young in asking "Why?" for everything. If I'm being honest, I'm still relentless in asking, "Why?".

Through discernment in my call to rostered ministry, however, the "Why?" has changed more into "How?" How can I help others? How can we be church together? How do I feel God's love and grace? How do I understand Jesus' teachings? So, it would be natural to ask the same question the author asks in verse 17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

As with many questions in this life, I've found, there is no direct answer to this one. How?

I believe God's love knows no bounds. After all, the Creator calls all of creation "Beloved." Yes, even those who may possess the goods and riches of the world and do not help their siblings. However, how often have we, as followers of Christ, not helped our sibling in need? How often have we passed by one of God's beloveds in need without so much as making eye contact? All this to say: we are not perfect individuals. Followers of Jesus Christ are far from perfect—all of us. And Jesus walks with us anyway. God loves us anyway.

Let us vow to one another to be more mindful of how we love our neighbor. How can we embrace all God calls "beloved" in our lives? How can we extend our love to those who maybe believe differently than us? Worship differently than us? Live differently than us?

"Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth."

Live our truth. Live out good deeds for one another, including those who may not do the same for us. Be charitable and kind in our deeds. Lead by example—and show God's love.

*Prayer*

Holy God, make me an instrument of your love. Guide me toward embracing all who you call "Beloved." Even when it's hard, God, help me to see my own strength amidst the greed and turmoil of this earthly world in sharing your love with everyone. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Day 35: Thursday, October 31

Speak out, judge righteously,  
defend the rights of the poor and needy. - *Proverbs 31:9*

*Reflection by the Rev. Ross Carmichael*

This call concludes the first of two poems in Proverbs 31 ascribed to a Queen Mother as she instructs her son, the king, in ways of leadership.

“Speak out” – there is certainly no shortage of people speaking out in our society, but we know well that so often what is spoken is negative. It is far easier for us to speak about what we are against rather than what we are for and what we believe. This first imperative in Proverbs 9 is followed by a call to judge righteously and defend the rights of the needy and the poor. Both are pro- statements: pro-justice and pro-people.

“Judge righteously” – We can be so quick to judge others whose beliefs or voting preferences don’t match with ours, falling into self-righteousness in our captivity to sin. This call to the leader is more about discernment – seeking in humility to understand and make assessments and decisions based on God’s measure of righteousness and justice.

“Defend the rights of the needy and the poor” – A consistent theme in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament is God’s special concern for those who experience poverty and need (e.g. Deuteronomy 15 and 24, Isaiah 25 and 26, Amos 4: 1, Matthew 5, Luke 4, 7, and 16, Romans 15: 2, Galatians 2: 10). Providing for those vulnerable is essential to our faith and preserving all citizens' rights is a key aspect of our civic life together.

This brief line from the Wisdom literature of Proverbs can serve as a guide in our approach to civic engagement as people of faith. Do we support leaders and policies that promote righteousness and justice as God and Jesus have revealed them to us in Scripture? Do our leaders operate with care and compassion for the good of their neighbors, all of their neighbors? Do they follow Martin Luther’s explanation of the eighth commandment in the Small Catechism? “We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors ...” but “come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light. As we ask these questions about potential leaders, we would be wise to first ask them of ourselves.

*Prayer*

Gracious and loving God, grant us the humility and understanding to discern what is right and just according to your reign. Help us to respond faithfully to our baptismal calling to serve all people, following the example of Jesus and to strive for justice and peace. By your Spirit, give us the strength and inspiration to proclaim what we believe and support, and the will to speak and act and vote in ways that will reflect your love and grace, so that all your people may know the hope of full and abundant life through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.



## Day 36: Friday, November 1

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. - *Galatians 6:2*

*Reflection by the Rev. Kerri Clark*

One time as a children's sermon illustration, the pastor asked for a volunteer to move about 25 hymnals from one side of the sanctuary to the other. A tiny but tenacious second grader volunteered. After a few trips back and forth carrying one or two hymnals at a time, she started to slow down. Her arms were tired, and she was getting a bit discouraged by how long it was taking and how hard it was. The pastor then invited all the kids who had come forward to lend a hand, and in 30 seconds the job was done.

Part of our life in community is to be attentive to the needs and burdens of our neighbors. Some burdens and struggles are visible, and others are harder to see. We can listen, ask questions, and pay attention to the things happening in our communities, with our neighbors, and around the world to notice what burdens are present. We can talk about the burdens we are carrying, and ask for help ourselves. Then, once these burdens are named and made known, we join together to bear them. We know that many hands working together helps the work go faster, and also helps us know we're not alone in the struggle.

As Christians, we give thanks for the ways Jesus bears our burdens. In becoming human, he took on our nature and our lot, bearing the burden of our sin and grief in his own body. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened, empowered, and reminded that we are not alone, whatever burdens or challenges may come. Having experienced this powerful, life-giving grace, we are called to bear burdens alongside one another.

In this election season, one way we can bear one another's burdens is through our vote. We can elect public servants up and down the ballot whose policies, priorities, and programs will work to alleviate the burdens of our most vulnerable neighbors. Even if hunger or housing or education aren't direct concerns for us because we have a well-paying job or our children are grown, bearing the burdens of our neighbors, these become our burdens, our concerns, too.

The burdens of the world are heavy, and they are not ours to bear alone. But even noticing one neighbor, one need, and offering our presence, our action, our vote to bear it alongside them can make a difference. In bearing one another's burdens, we proclaim the good news of God's love and grace, living and active in the world. In bearing one another's burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ.

*Prayer*

God of grace, we give thanks that you are present with us always, bearing our burdens. Help us notice the needs and burdens of our neighbors and strengthen us as we bear them together. Grant wholeness and flourishing to all communities and fill us with your love. Amen.

## Day 37: Saturday, November 2

For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; he will save us. -*Isaiah 33:22*

*Reflection by the Rev. Casey Dunsworth*

If your social media feeds are anything like mine, you have seen post after post about the upcoming election. Maybe you have mostly like-minded friends, who share similar ideas and reflections. Maybe you move in several different circles, and you are seeing posts about all sorts of issues from all sorts of angles. Maybe you have seen posts that are just dripping with judgment: anyone who thinks this or votes for this person is morally bankrupt—anyone who thinks that or votes for that person is living on another planet and needs to get real. It's tough out there.

As Christians, we are called to work for the betterment of our communities. One of the ways that we do this, here in the United States, is through voting. We elect leaders all the way up the ticket from City Hall to the White House, and each of those leaders has an important role to play. As voters and as elected leaders, we should always remember that it is God who ultimately presides over our common life. In our [Social Message on Government and Civic Engagement](#), Lutherans are invited to ask one simple but all-encompassing question: "is the neighbor being served?" (9).

It is easy to get swept up in the drama of an election, in the incendiary rhetoric and mudslinging. We cannot let this distract us from the real work—serving our neighbors. Our participation in civic life should always build up the body of Christ. Our role is not to engage in the tearing down of those we disagree with, but the building of the world we want to see. Together, we can imagine a future where all are fed, housed, clothed, educated, healed, and welcomed.

*Prayer*

Good and gracious God, we seek your wisdom as we navigate the complexities of our civic life. We yearn for a world where your will is done in us and in those we elect to lead us, where justice and righteousness guide our work.

Empower us to be instruments of your peace; grant us the courage to speak truth to power; fill us with compassion to serve those in need. Above all, give us collaborative hearts and minds that build kinship across lines of difference. Help us to work alongside one another, seeking the common good.

As ballots are cast, we pray for all those who stand for election, that—win or lose—they will continue to seek positive change in their communities, protecting the vulnerable and promoting the flourishing of your creation.

Across the nation, fill us with hope. May we be a beacon of light, reflecting your glory as we strive to build a just and equitable society. We offer these prayers in faith, trusting in your promises. Amen.

## Day 38: Sunday, November 3

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. - *Jeremiah 29:7*

*Reflection by the Rev. Carla Christopher*

In the 29th chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet offers comfort and consolation in practical, user-friendly language. Tasks are simplified into manageable chunks. Healing actions that start with relationship and accessible activities are prioritized. Jeremiah was using the principles of trauma-informed care millennia before it was the needed continuing education of choice, supporting people of faith likely overwhelmed and grieving the effects of violence and division in their communities.

Redeeming the world is a powerful witness, and sometimes it happens with a miraculous 3-day journey through death's shadow and ends with glowing beings behind immovable stones. More often, Biblical narratives of Jesus and the Apostles include a word of comfort to a social outcast, a single provided meal, healthcare and healing to a sick person. These seemingly simple and direct interactions create disciples, launch communities of believers, and change lives - one or a handful at a time. The handfuls join with curious students from education events and inspired observers of public actions to become a global movement lasting more than 2000 years.

This "trinity" of awareness raising, education, and taking direct action, all with a hearty dose of celebration of victories, rest, and prayer, is the bread and drink of faith community organizers and Biblical disciples alike. When rebuilding a crumbled temple feels too big, we find the 'temples' that Jesus brings to us. That temple may be a class, a book or Bible study, a listening event that appears on your social media feed or in the congregation newsletter. It may be your local school district debating a book ban and seeking comment from resident taxpayers or a clean-up of local storm drains and waterways and a newspaper that would love to share the story if invited.

Focused actions and advocacy that affect the daily lives of people we interact with regularly give us opportunity for trusting relationships, joyful celebration and shared grief, mutual support, and first-hand experience with a difference made. Sometimes in legislative change, sometimes in the encouragement that comes with knowing someone cares enough to come alongside us in our struggle. When people and neighborhoods unite, that unity can become counties and then a Commonwealth. Sustainable movements that cross generations begin with the "next best step".

Where might you begin today?

*Prayer*

God of every place, who makes every person in your image, help us remember our connection in you as part of the body of Christ. Knowing that our congregations and their communities are one, inspire us to be a beacon of your love in our neighborhoods. Let the Spirit move through our relationships and shared action, creating sustainable change that uplifts you and consoles your people. Amen.

## Day 39: Monday, November 4

"[S]o that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." -*Ephesians 3:10*

*Reflection by Quentin Bernhard, Seminarian. Reprinted from the [ELCA Advocacy Blog](#) by permission (1/10/24).*

Praying for our leaders, especially those in elected office, came up in conversation during a fall 2023 meeting of the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa) Policy Council. Several people mentioned that it was difficult for members of congregations to do this in front of their fellow churchgoers, especially when it involved naming specific leaders and offices. Mere mention of an elected official's name can elicit a sharp response, especially in our times of political polarization. It is at play in our expressly political institutions as well as in our families, our communities and our church.

This polarization, and how to begin to depolarize both ourselves and our interpersonal relationships, was the topic of a LAMPa fall workshop on depolarization as an act of discipleship in a democracy. While the conversation did not linger on prayers for elected leaders and the role of these prayers in worship, it did bring to the surface the challenges we all face in embracing others in their fullness and complexity – across our sense of division, brokenness, and different understandings of our values. That fullness and complexity is at the heart of our common humanity and yet is so often overlooked in our world. This happens in part because of polarization but also because of the harms and injustices of colonialism, white supremacy and other dehumanizing modes of oppression.

For me, praying for elected officials and candidates—and for all our leaders and community members, regardless of title or status—is a call for them to bring open hearts and minds, to open to the “mystery” of God, and to be open to be changed by it through Christ. It is also an act of hope, that peace and justice might be made real and that the Spirit of wisdom and revelation will allow our leaders to see our neighbors as they really are, fully human and fully loved by God.

Caring about what our leaders do, and acting on that care, is an expression of our love for our neighbors and our faith in a future, transformed by Christ, that we are part of bringing about. When officials and candidates belittle our neighbors here and around the world, consider them deserving of unending bombardments and military assaults, and name them as threats to the United States and its supposed way of life, often defined in Christian nationalist terms, we fall short of seeing that humanity.

Our prayers are important. And our actions make our witness known to our leaders—as disciples and agents of change for God's world.

*Questions for Reflection*

- Is praying for elected leaders part of your Christian practice? How do you view it?
- What does it mean in public life to see one another as fully human and fully loved by God?
- What might candidates for elected office be talking about more if they demonstrated that same commitment to seeing our common humanity and belovedness?

*Prayer – ELW, "Those in civil authority," pg. 77*

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, bless the public servants of this nation, and all who are candidates for public office, that they may do their work in a spirit of wisdom, charity and justice. Help them use their authority to serve faithfully and to promote our common life; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



## Day 40: Tuesday, November 5

Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the city gates. -*Proverbs 14:31*

*Reflection by the Rev. Brenda Martin*

It's Election Day 2024, but it feels like this day has been a decade in the making. It's been a decade of questioning what the truth is; a decade of name-calling and insults; a decade of fractured families and friendships and even faith communities; a decade of people being divided; a decade of upheaval and bitter discourse and chaos and anything but peace. Kindness has sometimes seemed in short supply.

We could hope and pray that the outcomes of this day might end this bitter divide. Yet building peace is a long and jagged road, and never a straightforward path. It is also a road to which we are called.

We know the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. We know the commandments that tell us how to treat our neighbors by not speaking ill of them, stealing from them, lying about them, or doing anything else to harm them.

The Book of Proverbs, from the great Biblical Wisdom literature, invites us to question, to form an ethic, to ask how the God who created all that we see wants (and expects) us to live. It is into the world's chaos that Wisdom comes.

Proverbs tells us that those who oppress the poor insult God, but those who are kind to those in need honor God.

We honor God with kindness to those in need. We also honor God with kindness for those who don't look like us, who don't think like us, who are not from the same tribe, who are outside looking in. We honor God by lifting up other people.

But because we do not each have an endless supply of time, treasure and talent to give to lift up others, we can extend our care for neighbors through public policy, for the sake of overturning the systems of the world that are not life-giving. What public policy gives people more freedom, rather than less? What public policy includes more people, rather than excluding? What public policy helps to feed and provide shelter, and gives all people access to education and health care? What public policy curtails violence and makes people safer?

This is the road that we travel, the road that can heal divides, can bring people together, can usher in the world that more looks like the kingdom that God promises.

*Prayer*

O God, you call us onto this road where people can live in harmony, sharing what they've been gifted so that no one is excluded. Grant us the Wisdom to know that honoring our neighbors honors you. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.