

Church Council Devotions 2021



The Southern Ohio Synod

Greetings Congregational Leaders of the Southern Ohio Synod,

It is a privilege to once again provide this resource for your church council and other committees or ministry teams to use for 2021 as you seek God's guidance and direction for what is sure to be a challenging year to be The Church.

Last year I was able to produce a devotional book with the help of Central Ohio Conference colleagues. This year I have expanded the circle and have recruited some new folks. Here are the rostered leaders from the synod who have written devotions for us this year:

January – Pastor Ralph Wolfe, Clinton Heights Lutheran, Columbus

February – Pastor June Wilkins, Gethsemane Lutheran, Columbus

March – Pastor Jim Wilson, retired, Worthington

April – Pastor Jacquie Buschor, The Church on Oakland Park, Columbus

May – Pastor Mark Combs, St. John's Lutheran, Zanesville

June – Pastor Katie Kerrigan, Director for Evangelical Mission, Southern Ohio Synod

July – Pastor Chris Adams, Christ Lutheran, Heath

August – Pastor Laura Leach-Shreffler, Peace Lutheran, Arnheim

September – Pastor Karen Asmus-Alsnauer, Interim at Ascension Lutheran, Columbus

October – Pastor Matt Byrd, Christ the King Lutheran, West Chester

November – Pastor Rachel Tune, Wittenberg Univ. and Oesterlen Services, Springfield

December – Pastor Scott Nellis, All Saints Lutheran, Worthington

Once again, I encourage you to copy this liberally and share it with members and groups in your congregation, conference or ministerial associations. It is intended to be used by anyone who finds inspiration for life, especially as leaders of worshiping communities.

I also want to thank Pastor June Wilkins for helping to assemble the contributions and edit them into this final form.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten us and lead us to faithful lives of leadership and service in Jesus' name.

Pastor Ralph Wolfe

All Scripture NRSV

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January

Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

I’m an Epiphany baby. I was actually due on Christmas Day, but I decided to force my mother to endure her discomfort through the entire “holiday season” and arrive on the twelfth day of Christmas instead of the first. My memories of a January 6th birthday were not so much that it got lumped in with the celebrating of Christmas, but that I never got the chance to have the fun outdoor parties like my friends with summer birthdays. We didn’t think about half-birthdays back then, so I just enjoyed the gatherings indoors, out of the cold with close family.

Epiphany is closely tied to the story of the magi from Matthew’s gospel. These magi – not kings or wisemen, but probably more fortune tellers – arrived at some point later in the story than on Jesus’ actual birth day. We do not know how many there were – we usually claim that there are three because they had three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh – but we really do not know anything about their number, or their names or where they are from, outside of the fact that they came from the east. There is a book which humorously postulates the missing years of Jesus’ growing up, from his teens through his twenties, claiming that each of these three characters spent some time mentoring Jesus in eastern religions. It is interesting to consider, but not based in any fact or writing. I sometimes wonder about the experiences Jesus must have had during those formative years. Surely, they were important as he grew into the one we worship.

Theories and legends abound in the Christian faith, especially about the lives of the saints. Some have more factual truth to them and some less. Most, though, serve to do the exact thing that we are after when we worship Jesus on Epiphany and the Sundays that follow – to enlighten us to Jesus’ enduring presence in our lives and in our world. The magi travelled by the light of some mysterious star in the sky. It came to rest over the place where the savior lay, as the familiar carol proclaims. Have you ever tried to follow a star to see what is under it? It is not exact science, for sure. I am not even sure it is totally possible, but that star led these interesting figures to their goal – the newborn king. When they arrived, they worshiped him as he was – humble and vulnerable, laying in a manger. His poor parents wondering that the next chapter of their lives would be. And just as they trusted the star to guide them, so we trust the stories, legends, myths and historical accounts to guide us to live this year in worship and service to the one who’s birth changed our lives and our world.

Questions

- Have you ever wondered what Jesus’ life was like between the ages of 12 and 32?
- What stories/myths have you heard that tell you something about the nature of a person or group, like Washington chopping down the cherry tree?
- Does it matter that we don’t have all of the facts about the lives of Jesus or the saints?
- What is God using to guide you in worship and service this year?

Prayer

Almighty and ever-living God, you revealed the incarnation of you Son by the brilliant shining star. Shine the light of your justice always in our hearts and over all lands, and accept our lives as the treasure we offer in your praise and for your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

February

Mark 1:9-15

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The first reading in Lent is always about the temptation of Jesus. What do you think of when you hear temptation? Most people think of decadent desserts like chocolate cake or cinnamon rolls (depending on the kind of dessert-eater you are.) Some people think of sex when they hear the term temptation. And some think of vices like cigarettes, or drugs, or alcohol. Temptation has been reduced to things we want to consume or do.

But as we see from the stories of Jesus temptation in the desert, those were not Jesus temptations at all. Jesus was tempted by bread, yes, but just for basic sustenance (the devil didn't even offer any butter with it!) He was tempted by unlimited power. And he was tempted by saving himself. Jesus was not tempted by what he could consume, but by a state of mind. Basically, what tempted Jesus was to put himself in the place of God. He was tempted to do the things that he was supposed to rely on God for. In the end, even Jesus didn't give into that temptation, and he was God's son!

The temptation to put ourselves in God's place is our worst temptation too (aside from the chocolate cake!) Sometimes this manifests itself as us over-functioning and trying to do and be everything to everyone. Sometimes this manifests itself as despair and not trusting that God will act. Sometimes this manifests itself as a lack of trust in God's abundance, in greed and hoarding our resources. Sometimes this manifests itself as fear, not taking risks and acting with apathy or indifference. Church leaders and church councils have been guilty of yielding to all of these temptations at one time or another, haven't we?

The devil would love it if we, as church leaders, never trusted God and we only acted on our own impulses and relied on our own power instead of following God's ways. To resist temptation is to trust and wait for God, and to always remember who we serve and why we have come together.

Questions

- What is your favorite dessert?
- What is your greatest temptation as a member of this council?
- What do you think this council's greatest temptation is?
- How can we resist temptation?

Prayer

Faithful and ever-present God. Help us to navigate the wilderness. Be with us in our struggles and temptations. Help us to trust you, wait for you, and to always remember that you alone are God. Amen.

March

Mark15:37-39

Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

It's Lent. We are recounting and reliving the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Pontus Pilate, consummate politician, ordered Jesus to be flogged and crucified to secure a false security, then washed his hands of responsibility for killing an innocent man. Religious leaders provided Pilate legitimacy by claiming that God demanded Jesus to die for being a blasphemer, as if the pantheistic Roman occupiers were not. They fomented the crowds for gain, insisting Jesus had to die. Roman soldiers followed orders, drove the nails, pierced his side, rolled the stone and stood guard.

They all acted immorally, and sadly, with familiarity. Someone 'had' to die. But did he? Hasn't God always loved all God's creatures from the beginning?

Matthew (27:51), Mark (above) and Luke (23:45) all recount that at the moment Jesus breathed his last, the temple curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom, emphasizing that God is destroying all systems of blame and sacrificial scapegoating. God proved it by raising his scapegoated son from the dead! Nothing separates any of us from the love of God in Christ Jesus! (Romans 8:38)

Some suggest our enduring original sin is to shift blame and scapegoat others. Why do you think it is easier to project rather than accept blame? In Christ's death and resurrection we have both forgiveness and a 'new way' to live! Amen!

- Take a moment to discuss why that is so very important in our lives and our church today.

Prayer

We are turning, Lord, to hear you; you are merciful and kind, slow to anger, rich in blessing, and with love to us inclined. Amen."

April

John 20:11-18

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

As the Church, we often remind ourselves that we are "resurrection people." The story of Jesus rising from the dead is central to our faith - definitive to our understanding of what God is doing in the world. Our God is most famous for making new things out of old, bringing new life from what we thought was dead and gone. But for all this talk of "new," how often do we expect and hope that the new thing God is doing will look exactly like the life we had before?

Just like Mary meeting Jesus at the tomb, we are so often surprised when the life God calls forth from death looks nothing at all like the life we once knew. But death unavoidably changes things. Death changes us. After the resurrection, Jesus was with the disciples, but so much had changed. When Jesus appeared to Thomas, he still carried the scars of his death, and the disciples still carried the wounds from their own fear and grief at his passing. Jesus was risen, but life didn't just go back to normal.

Life is not likely to go back to normal for us either. At least not how we knew it before. Through this pandemic season, we have lost people, experiences, and shared moments together that we cannot get back. We have suffered grief and trauma that will undoubtedly leave their marks on our lives. We are changed. And yet, we are still here and signs of new life are all around us. Just like the risen Jesus, this new life may look nearly unrecognizable against the life we once knew, but it can still be good - will still be good - because God is still here with us. Love is still here with us, moving all things toward wholeness and life. And that truth alone will never change.

Questions

- What things within the church have died away in the last year, and how might we honor that loss?
- Where have you been surprised by signs of new life?

Prayer

Holy One, help us to remember that we are resurrection people and that you are a God whose very presence is life. Grace us with your mercy and compassion as we grieve together the things we have lost. And then, God, grant us eyes to recognize the signs of new life all around us, even when it looks nothing like what we used to know. Help us to not cling so tightly to what is familiar that we miss the blessings of the newness you have promised us. Amen.

May

Exodus 33:12-15

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.'"¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."¹⁴ He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.

I have always found that I personally relate to the story of Moses. To be fair, I have always felt a somewhat kindred spirit with the Old Testament prophets. How many times have we all wanted to say something along the lines of, "Lord, you want me to do what"?! Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh; Moses didn't want to go back to Egypt; the list goes on.

The trouble with this is that we all know what God wants us to do as his children in the world. We are supposed to take care of the widows and orphans, lift up the down-trodden, take care of the sick and suffering, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and yet another list goes on.

As we gather around the table to have our monthly council meeting, I find myself wanting to complain to God, "Hey, we are doing the best that we can! We have volunteers at every food distribution at the local pantry. We take our turn to staff the feeding ministry. We make blankets for Lutheran World Relief. We are doing..." If that were not enough, it's May. It is the time of year when we start to really put into place the plans for summer – things like vacations where we can get some rest and relaxation!

But here we are, gathered around to decide how to best do the work of the church in this place – and it seems there is no rest in sight. How many times do we ask about what happened to the days when summer seemed to slow down? So, to feel that kindred spirit with the prophets, I think, can give us an answer about what to do as we face the challenges of looking ahead to summer.

Moses gives us a great example here of what to do when we are weighed down with responsibility – take it up with God, be persistent in prayer. Moses was challenged with dealing with all the silly things that the people were doing. Our passage comes not too far after the problems with the golden calf. In spite of everything the people had done, Moses was still charged by God to lead them. Feeling overwhelmed, Moses takes it up with God and God reassures Moses again that he is not alone, that God will go with him.

Is it any different for us? Do we ever feel like God is going to leave us abandoned and alone? Sure we do, but we are challenged to remember God's promises to us as adopted children. When we feel overwhelmed, what we have to do is take it to God in prayer and trust that God will be with us to see it through.

In my office, I have a sign that says, "Relax, God's in charge." I tell people who ask about it that it is there both for their benefit and for mine. Trusting that God can will take care of us is a great comfort in the midst of the unrest of our world and that is a place to find rest.

Questions

- What things are you worried about in your life and in the life of your congregation?
- How do those worries line up with God's expectations for us as the people of God in the world?

Prayer

Lord, you know how hard it is to stay focused on your calling in this world. The pressures and concerns of our world often weigh us down. Help us to let go of all of the stress of trying to do it on our own. Give us the courage to trust your guidance as we do the work you call us to do. In Jesus name. Amen

June

Romans 8:14-17

⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ . . .

One Sunday I was sitting in an emergency congregational meeting to consider whether the congregation should approve a contractor’s bid to repair the roof. It was—as if to make the case—raining. Drops of water were plunking into the buckets that had been placed strategically all over the sanctuary. The congregation debated for some time as they struggled to decide between another round of patching and a complete reroofing. Paying someone to patch the holes could be managed with funds readily available in the bank, while a new roof would require cashing in a CD—a step that this highly-anxious congregation did not want to take. And then someone said, “But that CD is our rainy day fund,” and someone else said, in some exasperation, “It IS raining!” and that carried the vote.

That congregation closed its doors some years later, but it wasn’t the expense of repairing the roof that closed it (indeed, they closed with enough money in the bank to pay for another roof—the result of strict economies and very careful saving). In the end, it was fear that closed them down. For the last twenty years of their life, they were afraid that each year would be their last and none of the leaders wanted it to close “on their watch.” It’s fair to say that their mission during that time was almost entirely “keeping their doors open,” and that mission was so exhausting that they had nothing left for anything else. Their fear permeated everything they did—but they were unable to see how that fear eclipsed their joy and undermined their witness.

While fear is a useful defensive response in the face of imminent bodily danger, it is also the most corrosive and undermining of emotions. Acute fear can jump-start an appropriate response in the face of imminent bodily danger, but it can also immobilize, narrowing vision and paralyzing thought, often at the precise moment when we need to both see and think clearly to discern the best course of action. Chronic fear or anxiety is actually detrimental to our health, severely stressing the functioning of bodily systems—and this is just as true of congregations as it is individual human beings. It doesn’t help that fear is pervasive in our society and amazingly contagious—and chameleon-like in its appearance, often taking on a veneer of virtue, masquerading as caution, “good sense,” or even “good stewardship.”

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June *continued*

That spirit of fear is a liar: it denies the victory that Jesus has already won for us over everything that deals death and blinds us to the abundant life that God continues to create all around us. Fear whispers caution as new opportunities present themselves and magnifies challenges until they seem insurmountable. Fear denies that God is with us, that Jesus walks with us, that the Spirit empowers us with exactly the gifts we need to do the work God is calling us to do.

The spirit of adoption, on the other hand, reminds us of who we are and who we belong to: we are children of God, siblings of his son, Jesus, carriers of the Holy Spirit which confirms our close relationship with the Most High every time we recognize our kinship with the God who has made—and is making us over—in God’s image. That spirit of adoption empowers us, encourages us, and sustains us as we join in God’s ongoing work of restoration in the world. When we dare to dream of a better world, a more loving world, a more just world, when our spirits ask tentatively and longingly, “can we?”, that spirit of adoption responds with confidence, “We can!” and then helps to bring those dreams to reality.

It is that Spirit that gives us both life and joy when we give it free rein to blow among us.

Questions

- Which spirit—the spirit of slavery or the spirit of adoption—is the “prevailing wind” in your congregation? In your Council?
- As you wrestle with difficult decisions, what fears cause hesitation? What hopes encourage you to move forward?
- When it is hard to come to a decision, does it help to name the “spirits” that are contending with one another?
- Recognizing how prevalent and contagious fear is in our society, how can your leadership keep it from influencing your congregation’s decision-making?
- How is prayer helpful when making difficult decisions?

Prayer

O God, open the hearts of your faithful people by sending into us your Holy Spirit. Direct us by the light of that Spirit, that we may make a right judgement in all things and rejoice at all times in your peace, through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (adapted from the Prayer of the Day for Pentecost A, ELW, p. 36)

July

Micah 6:8

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Thank you for your willingness to serve on the Church Council, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic and its eventual aftermath. Your congregation is depending on you to debate and to implement various protocols and policies in light of the coronavirus in addition to the regular ministry and administrative decisions Councils make: budget, curriculum, mission emphasis, and property concerns. In light of these debates, you will ask yourselves which means and methods you all need to adopt that will empower your congregation and its members to better communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the midst of this maelstrom of questions and options, let us remember the following: there is no one right answer to those questions. Times change as well as the situations and conditions that are part of those times. What does not change are the words God to Israel in the courtroom scene of Micah 6. God calls us do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Whatever decisions your Church Council makes as you work in partnership with your pastor, your congregation trusts that you will act in ways that strengthen our commitment to living into justice for all, kindness to all, and relationship with God in all. So when in doubt as to what to do, let God's hope for us guide you.

I encourage you to see the joy in your role of empowering the rest of your congregation to live into each person's passions for Jesus, each in their own manner.

Prayer

Loving God, you have called each of us to be here and to serve on Church Council. In the midst of our decisions, let us rely upon your guidance, grace, and love to support us. Please bless our labors of empowerment where our congregation may deepen its union with Jesus in the Restoration of the World through justice, kindness, and partnership with you. Amen.

August

John 6:35

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

This is Year B, the year of the Gospel of Mark, but for five weeks in July and August, it becomes the year of the Gospel of John. These are the bread readings, as we go through John 6. We are blessed to have plenty of "bread" songs to choose from, but the choice gets pretty narrow by the fifth Sunday! I loved having different bread and Holy Communion songs to sing, but it was difficult when I had churches not yet celebrating the Eucharist each week. Now I am blessed to be in a church that celebrates this gift every service, every week.

I love good bread. I like making quick breads and muffins. I like eating the tasty breads offered in restaurants (the rolls at Texas Roadhouse with the cinnamon butter, am I right?). Then in January 2020, I was diagnosed with diabetes. People without diabetes often think it's the sugar we have to stay away from. Yes, that's a part of it, but it's all about the carbs. So goodbye quick breads and muffins, homemade melt-in-your-mouth bread from a fine restaurant, pancakes and waffles, and comfort foods like macaroni and cheese. Through trial and error, you find what makes your blood sugar shoot up (tempura), and what keeps it low (hard-boiled eggs). My dietitian has said she will not forbid me to eat anything because then I'll just want it more. The most important part of my diet is for me to count my carbs. So yes, once in a while, I make muffins and pancakes and waffles. I have learned how to eat so that I have lost weight and have my A1C and blood sugar at a reasonable and healthy level.

So bread is not the staple of my life that it once was. I am blessed, however, to have the Bread of Life as a staple of my life. When I could not celebrate Holy Communion every week, I wanted more and more of it. When my church did not meet, I longed for Holy Communion. Now that I am able to celebrate every week and more, I am so grateful to come to the Bread of Life so that I will never again be hungry or thirsty. At the beginning of John 6, when the disciples saw scarcity, Jesus and a young boy with a lunch of five barley loaves and two fish saw an abundance. I could see a scarcity in the food I am now allowed to have -- the food that will keep me healthy. But I have an abundance of bread -- bread that will sustain me in this life and the next -- in my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Gracious God, you have given us the Bread of Life -- bread in abundance. We give you thanks for the One who gave his body and blood for us -- what a gift! Amen.

September

Mark 8:27-30

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus asks the question, "So who do you think I am?" I think I've always heard that questions as if Jesus was running an old fashioned Sunday school class, waiting for the kids to give the right answer. How about "Elijah" or "John the Baptist," or you've always got the kid that hedges his bets, "Ummmm, one of the prophets?" Everyone ventures a guess until Peter hits the nail on the head, "You are the messiah."

Of course, Peter totally misunderstands what it means to be the messiah. He assumes that it means being number one, or certainly a chance to run those stupid Romans out of the capital. It never occurred to him that the way of the messiah was about letting someone else be first, or welcoming the stranger, or interpreting your enemies actions with charity and kindness. It didn't occur to him that the mystery of new life is found in being last, not first; not in gaining the whole world but in losing it, dying and being raised from the dead.

I'm not sure Jesus wanted a right answer, but a chance to draw his friends more deeply into his life. It wasn't a test question. It was a relationship question. Perhaps this is the heart of what Christians teach; what we invite our children to learn as they begin another Sunday School year; what we want our confirmation students to understand: namely that the heart of God beats in the heart of Jesus, and we are the people drawn into that relationship. We are invited to be shaped by the love of God; held by it; forgiven by it; challenged by it; changed by it. We are asked to let go of all those things that keep us from entering into genuine life, allowing us to stand in solidarity with those who will never be first or worthy or acceptable in the eyes of the world.

Since this devotion is being written one year in advance of when it will be read, I wonder what the world will look like a year from now. Right now, we are in the middle of an escalating pandemic, many of us are worshipping remotely, outside, or limitedly in-person, a presidential election, racial injustice and unrest, the threat of creation.

Of course, the good news is that God provides us with ever-new ways of going deeper. Sometimes, even the most difficult things that we face become mysterious ways of growing into a new fullness, a new life. And maybe that's the most profound way that God works: in our dying, in our devastation, in our terror at facing what is before us, God manages to bring new life. God's promise is to raise us up, to give us what we could not do for ourselves—a life that is never outside the love of God.

Questions

- How are you shaped by this love of Christ?
- Who do people say that Jesus is?
- Who do you say that he is?

October

1 Corinthians 15: 55

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

The woman sat across the table from me and leveled an expectant stare. “You aren’t going to hold a Halloween party are you? I don’t want the church to be associated with all that evil.” I was a brand new youth director in my first full time youth ministry position. I had no idea how to respond. She continued her intense stare and said, “I think we should have a Harvest Party or Fall Festival instead.”

I have always loved Halloween. I grew up in churches that celebrated Halloween with cross-generational parties. I identify Halloween with connection to a larger community and abundant generosity. Anyone can ring the doorbell and get a treat regardless of who they are or where they come from. It is the one night a year when we wander our neighborhoods and meet our neighbors in common purpose; to wear costumes and get candy.

Halloween’s deep roots in the Christian church - All Hallows’ Eve, the night before All Saint’s day - provides us an opportunity to laugh at death. We can dress up as the things we fear the most, which for children can help them to overcome and overpower those fears. We can play at being spooky monsters without fear of celebrating or promoting evil. Because we know that death and evil have no power over us. We have been redeemed by Christ on the cross.

Changing the name of Halloween, trying to soften its impact, or to pretend our “wholesome” activities are better than those of the world outside of the church only serves to create an atmosphere of shame. Regardless of whether we have a Fall Festival or a Harvest Party, people will still be celebrating Halloween with their neighbors. Martin Luther said that a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. The church is uniquely situated to speak to death, to suffering, and to the gift of life we are given in Christ. Our witness to that life in Christ is more powerful when we work to meet people where they are.

The year the woman asked me that question we held a Fall Festival, because I was new and young and worried about my job. The next year we hosted a community Halloween party. Four times as many people showed up.

Questions

- What makes you feel most afraid? How can you address those fears in a healthy way?
- In what ways can our congregation better adapt to and engage with the traditions of our surrounding community?

Prayer

Help us to witness to our communities with grace and compassion. Help us to overcome our fears, whatever those may be and trust in the promises you make to us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

November

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus .

Psychologists have found that specific gratitude intervention exercises, such as writing down five events for which you are grateful, even just once a week, can improve alertness, determination, optimism, energy. College students who completed this exercise reported less depression, stress and physical symptoms, exercised more, made better progress towards their goals, and felt better about their lives as a whole than those who wrote down events that were neutral or those who wrote down events that were negative. Similar exercises also helped those with chronic neuromuscular disease.*

The Apostle Paul already knew that gratitude, even when life is difficult or challenging, can make a positive difference. He encourages us to pray about everything, and to be thankful. It's not that we should gloss over the hard times, or never speak about low feelings. He tells us to bring all of that to God! But he has found, even in prison, where he writes this letter, that looking for things for which to give thanks, even when things aren't going perfectly, makes a difference. It might be a person, a place, an event, an emotion, something in God's creation, a word spoken at just the right time, staying sober one hour, one day at a time, a problem addressed or a prayer answered.

I hear this every week in campus ministries at Wittenberg University and with residents at Oesterlen Services for Youth. Every Sunday, someone will pray a simple prayer of thanks: "Thank you, God, for getting me through that paper." "Thank you for this beautiful day." "Thank you, God, for a new day." "Thank you for the staff." "Thank you that I made my phase this week." Simple words of gratitude that help to ground us all in God's abundant grace and loving care for us.

*Emmons, Robert, *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, 2007

Questions

- What are you thankful for today?
- Who are you thankful for?
- Where have you seen God?

Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us, for your love which sustains us from day to day, and for the gift of salvation in Jesus. Help us to see that all the good we have comes ultimately from you, and free us to open wide our hands and hearts to share with others. In Jesus' name, Amen

December

Luke 21:25-36

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

I'm sure most of you have encountered a scenario like this: You're casually speaking with a stranger — maybe while waiting to get your oil changed, or at a park, or in a line at the store — and they spring upon you this kind of statement, "Well, you know that the Bible talks about all this stuff happening, the stuff we're seeing in the world today. The end has to be coming soon, y'know?" (If you're especially lucky, they'll look you in the eye and ask, directly, if you think the end of the world is near.) And while this gospel lesson, which guides us into the season of Advent, appears to predict a pending apocalypse, it is ultimately about not letting fear and worry weigh heavy upon us.

Luke wrote this gospel with a deep sense that faith is a living in between — knowing that our Lord Jesus is with us now, even as we await his eventual return. It's as if Jesus is saying to us (as to people of all times and places), "The world is, and will be, a scary place. Things will unfold that will shake your faith. Expect these things . . . but know, also, that I have overcome the world." In the days when Jesus spoke this parable, and still today, the confusion and chaos of the world are unrelenting. And, what's more — it's always easier to live in fear rather than to claim a calming trust in God. In life, we are to live in both expectation and promise: the expectation of a world that is filled with both astonishing joys and arduous sorrows — and the promise of God's presence to guide and keep us as we live in this world.

Questions

- Do you find parables, such as this one found in Luke 21:29, helpful or troubling? Why?
- How can we faithfully live with both expectation and promise — knowing that this world is often so difficult to navigate, and yet knowing that we don't navigate it without the help of God?
- What worries and fears might God be calling your congregation to let go of today, in order to more fully trust God's faithful presence?