



St. John's Lutheran Church & School

Lenten Devotional

2026

BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

An Introduction to our Lenten Devotional Booklet

Lent is a season uniquely Christian in its character. It is a quiet and reflective time for the followers of Jesus. This is a time for healing.

One of the beloved scriptures associated with the Lenten season inspired the title of this book. The prophet Isaiah saw a sacred mystery, a divine paradox, an unlikely remedy that we contemplate throughout this journey, “By his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5). The wounds of Jesus unleash incomprehensible power to heal all of our ills. We barely scratch the surface of the implications of His healing work in us, but each week of our journey we see a different aspect of His healing power.

For decades, St. John’s has led a devotional journey for a broad audience. Congregation members and friends share personal stories and meditations on the scriptures in the pages that follow. We are shaped by different experiences, careers and faith stories. We’re not professional writers, only fellow travelers who share the journey of healing we have found in the wounded healer—Jesus. It is our mission and labor of love to offer blessing and healing through these writings to all whom it may touch.

Let us enter the season of healing and, “fix our eyes on Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” (Hebrews 12:2)

February 18, 2026

Ash Wednesday

THE BLAME GAME

Then the man and wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” Then the man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the Lord said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, “Cursed are you above all livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Genesis 3:8-15 (NIV)

On the first day of Lent, we are to think of our sins which we all commit. God created Adam and Eve and gave them a beautiful place to live in. They had all they needed. People go on vacations seeking to find something like it, but, of course, they will never find it.

We look at the scripture reading and find that Adam and Eve hid when they knew God was in the garden. Then it started...the blame game. Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. God punished all of them. We are like the first people and make all kinds of excuses as to why we sin. As a teacher and a principal, I have heard all kinds of excuses for doing something wrong, which sounded somewhat like Adam and Eve.

We are all guilty of sin. Just look at the commandments and check to see which ones we have broken. If we are honest, we don't look very good. It is amazing that God still loves us and sent Jesus. Praise the Lord for his love for us!

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for forgiving us for our sins, Amen.

Don Wachholz

February 19, 2026

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and will bind us up. After two days he will revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight. Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth. Hosea 6:1-3 (KJV)

Hosea was a citizen of the northern kingdom. His ministry lasted from about 770BC to 725BC and ended a few years before Assyria took the northern kingdom into captivity. Hosea has been known as the brokenhearted prophet because his personal life mirrored the Lord's brokenhearted relationship with Israel. Hosea's wife, Gomer, was an adulterer and God's people, who he referred to as his bride many times in scripture, fell into idolatry.

In verse 2 of today's reading, we see Hosea's prophecy of Christ rising from the dead and freeing his people from the chains of death.

Even though I sin constantly and need to repent daily, Jesus healed me through his willingness to do God's will and take on the sins of the world by suffering and dying on that cruel cross.

We are blessed because we have Jesus the Christ, whose once for all sacrifice set everyone who believes in him free from death, the result of sin. The new covenant in Jesus: Hebrews 10:17: *And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.* THANKS BE TO GOD!

Prayer: Dear God the Father, thank you for sacrificing your only son for us. Your love for us surpasses all understanding. Thank you, Jesus, for submitting to the Father's will. Amen.

Your brother in Christ,
Art Schroeder

February 20, 2026

THE ORIGINAL “WOUNDED HEALER”

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. Isaiah 53:3a, 4-5 (ESV). *Read vs. 1-5

700 years before Jesus, Isaiah described God’s Messiah as “the suffering servant.” From the line of King David, he would serve, not be served. He would appear unremarkable, would come from poverty and obscurity, and be born into a non-traditional family (“A virgin shall be with child and bear a son.”). Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. He appeared “average,” and like most people, knew grief and sorrow. The world rejected him and saw him as being punished for his sins, but, remarkably, his “punishment” was for OUR sins, not HIS.

The “arm of the Lord,” strong to create and sustain life, provided a Messiah not strong, distant, but present, with his creation in its weakness. Foreshadowed by the perfect lamb carrying off the sins of the people, the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world.

As I age, my father approaches 98, and I look at my “exceptional” daughter, I become increasingly aware that life is fragile. Some live in poverty, but even more secure people suffer time, death and decay. We’re all fragile, and have been since sin brought death into the world.

But God promised redemption, and his prophets spoke of it. Just as God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall, Jesus (Emmanuel, God with us) walks with us in this chaotic world, gives us his perfection in exchange for our imperfections, and, balancing the scales of God’s justice, walks us back to his Father. I can relate to this “wounded healer”.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that your answer to our brokenness and separation from you is Jesus, who carries the weight of the sins we can’t and walks us back to you. Amen.

Chris Hubacek

February 21, 2026

WHO CAUSED YOU TO SIN?

God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since, by his blood, he did all of this for us as sinners, how much more will he do for us now that he has declared us not guilty? Now he will save us all from God's wrath to come. And since, when we were his enemies, we were brought back to God by the death of his Son, what blessing he must have for us now that we are his friends, and he is living within us. Romans 5:8-10 (TLB) *Read vs. 11-18

As Christians, we are very aware of sin taking place all around the world, as we listen to stories on radio, television, smart phones, and people talking. But are we truly sinful also? The Bible tells us that yes, we are! Even though we love Jesus and thank Him that His righteousness makes us right with God (verse 18), we still do sin. But can we now go ahead and sin and not worry about it? Of course not!

Just as we used to be slaves to sin, we are now slaves to our new Master, Righteousness. "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord." (chapter 6:23) So now, we can obey God's laws if we follow after the Holy Spirit and no longer obey the old evil nature within us! (chapter 8:4)

***Prayer:** Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for daily forgiving my sins through the death of Your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And, thank You, God, for the promise of eternal life with You in heaven! Help me to be a good reflection of Your love to people around me, that they may also learn of Your love and forgiveness. In the Name of Your precious Son Jesus, I pray. Amen.*

Pamella Christensen

February 22, 2026

I THIRST

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” John 19:28 (ESV) *Read Psalm 69

The One who changed water into wine and calmed the raging waters with His voice, said, “I thirst.” On the cross, Jesus demonstrates His humanity. He thirsts as we thirst. He suffers as we suffer. His darkest hour, He goes to Scripture – a lesson for us! Psalm 69 verse 21 prophesies that they would give Him sour wine to drink. Scripture was fulfilled. Earlier, Jesus had been offered wine mixed with gall. He refused because the gall would have lessened His pain. He took all our sins upon Himself, suffering it all.

But now He accepts the sour wine. The sponge – attached to a hyssop branch - full of sour wine is held to Jesus’ mouth. During the Passover in the Old Testament, the blood of the lamb was smeared on the doorposts using a hyssop branch. This lamb’s blood saved the Children of Israel as the angel of death passed over their homes. The blood of the Lamb of God – Jesus – saves us from eternal death.

When His lips were moistened by the sour wine, Jesus says, “It is finished.” The work of our salvation is complete – there is nothing we need do. He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. No one took His life from Him; He gave it up. He was beaten, crucified, thirsted just for us. He didn’t have to do this – He could have come down from the cross at any time. Yet He stayed. Suffered. Thirsted. Died. The nails didn’t hold Him there, love did. The grave couldn’t hold Him. Three days later, He rose conquering sin, death and the devil.

We live as forgiven children of God. We live knowing Jesus lived, suffered, thirsted and rose again so that our sins are forgiven. One day we will see Him face to face in Heaven!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for living, thirsting, suffering, dying and living so that our sins are forgiven. Help me to live a grateful life ready to share Your Good News with those who desperately need to hear it. In Your name I pray. Amen.

Sherrie Smith

February 23, 2026

EVERYONE IS WELCOME

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.” Isaiah 55:1-3 (NIV)

These verses refer to a spiritual banquet which everyone is invited to. I think back to my wedding in 1959, and the banquet we had after it. Many were invited, but I am sure some had excuses why they couldn't come. You have probably had times when you invited people to a party or activity and they had excuses of why they didn't come, too.

In Luke 14:16-22, Jesus talks about the great banquet in a parable, in which many are invited, but people have all kinds of excuses not to come, so almost anyone was welcome.

At a banquet, water is usually provided. Jesus talks about water in John 4:13-14, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

What does this mean for us? It means that we who believe in Jesus, and have accepted his invitation, will be with him in heaven! That should make us thankful for God's love.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for your love, even though we don't deserve it. Amen.

Don Wachholz

February 24, 2026

WE'VE GOT IT FIGURED OUT NOW!

This is what the Lord says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!' "They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. Isaiah 49:8-10 (NIV)

Life can be tough but, if I'm honest, I really thought I'd have it figured out by this point. It turns out I most certainly do not have it figured out and oftentimes it feels like the things I once relied on as guideposts have shifted or completely vanished like a mirage in the desert.

The stress only gets worse when trying to understand how to raise children or even just exist in a world that seems so vastly different from the one in which I grew up - back when I assumed I'd have it all figured out one day. Despite an abundance of blessings and creature comforts, I can find myself feeling very lost and misdirected in a world that seems to change faster than my teenager outgrows his clothes.

Feeling lost or forgotten is a common theme in the Bible, just as it's common in this life on earth. Isaiah reminds us of God's unfailing love. God's ultimate demonstration of that love came in the form of a savior, Jesus. When life feels overwhelming, and we lose our way yet again, we can rest in the fact that whatever trials we are facing simply fall away in the healing we have received through Jesus. Nothing else matters more in this world, and when we focus on that truth, we can find the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your steadfast love that surrounds us, comforts us, and guides us in every uncertainty in this life. Help us to remember to focus on the healing we received through Jesus, so that we can point others to your truth as well. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Julie Rauch

February 25, 2026

GOD-SHAPED HOLE IN THE SOUL

As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Psalm 42:1-2 (ESV) *Read Psalm 42

In this Psalm, the writer is experiencing distress in multiple ways. He laments being in exile and receiving persistent taunts from his enemies. He reaches a point at which he asks God, “Why have you forgotten me?” In short, despair overwhelms him. And yet, even in the depths, the psalmist acknowledges God’s “steadfast love, referring to the Almighty as “my rock.” With remarkable circumspection, he scolds himself for his inner turmoil, concluding that the only genuine hope is “Hope in God.”

In one of my favorite snippets of scriptural imagery, the writer begins this passage comparing the inner, soul-longing for God to a deer “panting” for thirst-quenching water. In His providential wisdom, God has wired us to desire Him. He has created our souls with what has been called a “God-shaped hole” that only He can fill.

In the fourth century, Saint Augustine wrote his enduring, autobiographical *Confessions*. He recalls his journey from a hollow life of indulging every sinful desire to repentance and the discovery of true peace and fulfillment. He wrote, “You stir man to take pleasure in . . . you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Augustine expressed regret that he had resisted God for so long, “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new.” Augustine gratefully credits God’s unrelenting pursuit of him for his reordered desires:

You were with me, and I was not with you . . . You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

Prayer: *Gracious Lord, thank you for creating me with an innate longing for you. May I pant for you every day, in every endeavor. Forgive me when I attempt to fill the God-shaped hole in my soul with anything but you. Amen.*

Kirk Farney

February 26, 2026

MEETING JESUS AT THE WELL

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”
John 4:7-14 (NIV)

Imagine someone walking
To the place that you must go
You don't expect a greeting
From a person you don't know
But when this man starts talking
About the life you lead
You realize that this meeting
Could be something you should heed

Imagine while you're listening
Strange feelings start to flow
And suddenly you're yearning
For the things he seems to know
You find it very interesting
He speaks in such a way
You feel that you are learning
From what he has to say

Imagine Jesus sitting
Waiting for you at a well
Curious when greeted
Just what He had to tell
You find it rather fitting
When He asks you if you thirst
Because of where He's seated
You think of water first

Imagine you are wondering
All that He has to say
He tells about the way you live
But there is a better way
And all the while you're pondering
About this Living Water
The gift that only He can give
To all His sons and daughters

Prayer: Dear God, Like the woman at the well we are all searching for things only You can give. Thank you for sending Your Son to bring us this Living Water. We lift our cups to you so that we too can have eternal life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Margaret Turner

February 27, 2026

LET THE WATER FLOW

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” John 7:37-38 (ESV)

Water - a necessity of life. About 55-60% of our bodies are made up of water; you cannot live long without it. So, what is Jesus trying to tell us here? Jesus is the one who gives us the water of life through His death and resurrection, but it does not end there. We are told that if we live a life with Jesus in our heart, we are to share that water. We are to share God's Word, not just keep it to ourself. As the Great Commission in Matthew 28 tells us, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ...” It is our job as Christians to spread the Word. We don't have to be Bible scholars to do this, we only need to share our story and live the life God has called us to live.

As I have grown, I look back on a number of times I was asked to step forward and serve and share my faith. At first, I hesitated, but the Holy Spirit kept telling me that I was not on my own. When we try and go it alone, the water that flows is not from God; but when we walk with the Holy Spirit, it is His words that come from our heart. So, don't hesitate, be in the Word daily and let the Holy Spirit guide you to opportunities to let His Living Water flow out of your heart to others.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, it is so easy to turn from opportunities to share our faith. Please help us to call on the Holy Spirit to guide us and take away that fear to share. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Gary Mayor

February 28, 2026

WHAT IS YOUR VISION?

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Revelation 21:2-4 (NIV) *Read vs. 5-7

If you are like me, you have probably wondered what it will be like when Jesus returns. Will we see Him coming from the east on rolling clouds, sitting on his throne, surrounded by legions of angels? What sounds will we hear? Crashes of thunder? Will there be trumpets blaring, angels with harps, J.S. Bach at the heavenly pipe organ console playing one of his most joyous pieces (just a personal wish of mine), and all the saints who have gone before us united in one unimaginable harmonious chorus?

St. John gives us his vision in our reading of the new Jerusalem coming down to us. This is an incredible thought, that God is bringing heaven, His dwelling place, down to us so that He can dwell with us! God the Father did the same thing when He gave us His son Jesus. He sent Him from heaven to be with us on earth, to live as a human like us, but without sin. Jesus would suffer and die for us (By his wounds we are healed) so that we can spend eternity with Him. What kind of love is this? It is difficult to understand this side of heaven, but by His grace and in faith we can look forward to that day with great anticipation, hope and love.

Prayer: Dear Lord, allow us to envision your coming with great hope. Remind us every day of Your love for us in Christ Jesus. Help us to share that hope with love in service to others. Amen.

Rick Lange

BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

March 1, 2026

ONLY GOD'S WAY

We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all ...After He has suffered, He will see the Light of Life and be satisfied. The righteous Servant will justify many and He will bear their iniquities Isaiah 53:6 & 11 (NIV) *Read vs. 6-11

We have an antiquated GPS in our car. Most of the time it gets us where we want to go when we follow the navigational prompts. But on occasion we want to override the given directions and take another way. That does not go well-- better to follow the prompts instead.

In Isaiah 53, the prophet could well be describing us without a GPS or just plain without a clue or a plan. He compares us to sheep, not the brightest animals. We have gone astray with each of us heading off on our own, having no idea how to get back to the sheepfold or how to combat the animals who want to prey on us. But we carry on. That's the nature of us sinners; we choose to turn our backs on God. We live our lives without purpose or direction and don't know how to find them. Anything that we do that is not God's way is a sinful, destructive and damning way. It is a serious matter as Isaiah has spent the first half of his book writing. Indeed, we need a Savior, a remedy for our sinfulness. God did not simply have a remedy; he had the only remedy. Isaiah then explains how God forgives and restores His people through the work of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant. This passage sounds so like the first four books of the New Testament that it is often called the Fifth Gospel.

Isaiah 53:6 hits us with the reality of our sinning selves. With what punishments God laid on Jesus, we can see how far we are from Him and truly acknowledge our need of saving, because none of this can we manage on our own. Jesus had no sin in him, the only one who could satisfy God's need of a substitute for what we truly deserved. As He was bearing our punishment, he did it without a word of complaint or objection. If he had declared His innocence, he would not have been able to atone for our disobedience and it would all be lost. We can only react in horror at what was done to Jesus in our stead and thank and praise him for his atonement; All of his wounds were for us, ...and by them we are healed.

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you for the perfect plan that you had for our salvation, offering your dear Son to suffer and die for our sins. He took all of our sins on his own sinless body to have us appear as sinless before our God. For all of this we thank and praise Him! Amen.

Barbara Paulsen

March 2, 2026

WONDERFUL NEWS

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations. Proclaim it in the distant coastlands. He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over His flock like a shepherd. For the Lord will ransom Jacob and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they. ...I will satisfy the priests with abundance and my people will be filled with my bounty, declares the Lord. Jeremiah 31:10-11, 14 (NIV) *Read vs. 12-13

Jeremiah was neither a popular nor positive prophet. He was known as the weeping prophet for all of the tears he shed while telling the nation of Israel about the punishment about to come upon them for their disobedience and disbelief. His messages were gloomy as he grieved over his people and the impending destruction of both them and Jerusalem. He also carried around his own personal sorrow. He endured persecution, ridicule and emotional pain as he delivered his message. He felt God's heartbreak over Israel's unfaithfulness and the unavoidable judgment coming. If this was not enough, God had forbidden Jeremiah to marry or have children because of the judgment to come, so that he would not have to see a family torn away when the Babylonians invaded. Without family and being opposed by the Jews, he was often lonely. His most faithful friend was his scribe Baruch who wrote down all of his prophesies.

And all that Jeremiah had prophesied came to pass. Babylon was a mighty force, and they destroyed Jerusalem and gathered those they had captured for an exile in Babylon. The Babylonian nation was riding high in the eyes of the world and they were feared. No one could stop their destruction. They would remain as rulers over the Jewish remnant for seventy years. It was a bleak time for those turned out of their own country and forced to live in a foreign and godless land.

BUT . . .God did not forget or abandon His people during this time, just as He did not abandon Jeremiah during his difficult lifetime. Even in judgment, there will be mercy. God had plans for them after this punishment. Babylon was to be punished, in turn, for their sins against Israel as they were overtaken by enemy armies. And the verses above finally tell of a happy prophecy from Jeremiah, that God wanted to gather Israel together and celebrate this reunion. His invitation was not limited to Israel, but it was proclaimed widely.

Still today God does not abandon His people. He urges us to return to Him when we stray and to experience His mercy and blessings. Jesus was sent for us to receive hope when we are despairing, to remind us of the price He paid for us, to restore us to Himself. No matter the brokenness of our lives. we can be restored and healed. Christians can take heart in the assurance that God is working all things for good. For that we thank and praise Him!

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you for your faithfulness to us when we are anything but faithful to you. Remind us of your gift of forgiveness when we repent. Use us to share this Good News with others in our world. Amen.

Barbara Paulsen

March 3, 2026

THE VICTORY

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. **Revelation 12:10-11a (NIV)**

When I was going to high school, there was a group of kids and adults asking everybody, “Are you saved?” This bothered me because it seemed like they were saying we had to do something to be saved. My confirmation taught me differently.

These verses tell the real reason we are saved. It tells about the defeat of the accuser, who is the devil. A loud voice up in heaven proclaims our Lord’s victory over our defeated enemy. It talks about the Saints that overcame Satan. Then comes the great news that we are saved by the blood of the Lamb, who is Jesus. He overcame the accuser by dying for our sins.

We listen to scripture and the Holy Spirit brought us to faith. We didn’t have to do anything. Jesus did it all for us. This is great news because you and I commit sins daily even if we try not to. Jesus’ blood protects us from the Accuser. We should continue to resist temptations and do good things in thankfulness to God. The following hymn reminds us of Jesus’ love for us:

Prayer: *Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me, Died that I might live on high, Lives that I might never die. As the branch is to the vine, I am his, and he is mine. Amen.*

Don Wachholz

March 4, 2026

LET ME IN

I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. John 10:9 (ESV) *Read vs. 7-15

Shortly before Christmas I ran outside to take out the garbage. Although it was very cold, I was wearing a sweater and figured I'd be back in the house in a minute, so I didn't put on a coat. You guessed it. The door locked behind me and there I was at 7:00 am with no one to let me in. After slipping on the ice on my way to checking other doors, I found the deck door had been left unlocked. I had never been so happy to be inside my warm home.

This was what I thought of as I read John's accounting of Jesus telling the Pharisees that He is the door to salvation. There are 5 entrances to my house, but my deck door was the only way I could safely get in. Much in the same way, Jesus is the only door that allows us to enter eternal life with God the Father. He doesn't say "I am a door", He says "I am THE door." A sheepfold has one proper access and Jesus is telling us that He is that access. He's not only our Shepherd who leads and cares for us, but He's also the only door to salvation. There's no other way. Just as a shepherd wants his sheep to come into the sheepfold and be safe, Jesus cares for us, wants us to have a relationship with Him, and, ultimately, wants us to spend eternity with Him in heaven. I pray that we hear Jesus' words and enter the Door.

Prayer: Dear Loving Shepherd, we love you and praise you for the sacrifice you made for us. We pray that you keep us safe in your loving arms. In your name we pray. Amen.

Sue Kunz

March 5, 2026

HE RESTORES MY SOUL

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me... Psalm 23 (KJV) *Read all verses

Oh! What comfort the 23rd Psalm gives to us Christians. It is likely one of the first Bible verses you memorized as a young child, and it is a Psalm that sticks with us for life. It is a profession of joyful trust in the Lord as our Good Shepherd and King.

I was recently at the funeral service of a friend's parents. The speaker at the service spoke about losing his dad as a young child. He recalled the 23rd Psalm being sung during his father's funeral, and that many people were brought to tears. As a 6-year-old, he didn't understand why someone would sing a song that would make people cry at a time when they were already so sad.

As he grew up and heard the Psalm many more times, he realized the beauty of it, and why it was the perfect choice for that funeral and for so many others. In some of our darkest times, when we have wounds that need to be healed, the words of the 23rd Psalm bring peace and comfort. We need not want, our souls are stilled, we are guided in paths of righteousness. We need not fear evil, for God is with us, and we will dwell with Him forever. This world gives us plenty of things to fear. Let us take comfort in our Good Shepherd.

***Prayer:** Lord, thank you for being my Good Shepherd. Let the words of this Psalm comfort me and remind me that you are always near. Amen.*

Teri Lyn Fukar

March 6, 2026

OH, LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET ME GO

(Jesus said) All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from Heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. John 6:37-39 (ESV)

Jesus said we were his gifts from God, and because God gave us to him, he would care for us, hold us close and bring us to Heaven.

This makes me look at myself and others differently. We're God's gifts to Jesus! What gifts would you give your beloved? Precious, valuable gifts? Are we precious and valuable? To Jesus, we are.

At times, I haven't felt that way. We see ourselves by the world's standards. Are we beautiful or handsome? Accomplished? Respected? We're all lacking in some areas, and feel insecure. But to God, to Jesus, we are of infinite worth; so much so that God sent Jesus to earth, and he agreed to pay an immeasurable price to reunite us with his Father after the relationship we'd been created to have with him was severed by sin.

When Jesus says he will hold onto us and never cast us out, he's put his money where his mouth is. To do his father's will and "raise us up on the last day" has cost him. And when I contemplate the price he paid to do that for me, it leaves me speechless!

Every day since my daughter was born, we've said this prayer, ending in, "Let her always remember she's a Jesus girl, and you hold her in the palm of your hand and will never let her go, because you love her very much." God gave us all to Jesus, and he'll never let us go, because he loves us very much.

Prayer: Thank you, Jesus, for never letting us go, and for loving us very much. Amen.

Chris Hubacek

March 7, 2026

NO MORE TEARS

They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night ...never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst ... for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Revelation 7:15ff (NIV) *Read vs. 13-17

When my three daughters were little, hair washing could be a trauma, but a product, still available by Johnson and Johnson, solved the problem. It was No More Tears shampoo, keeping those little eyes from pain and stinging!

I wish that such a simple fix could've soothed them later in life. As Jesus said, in this world there will be trouble, pain and loss, due to sin. With all the happy times, came the loss of David and Evie, and tears still flow from this grief. God's promises provided comfort!

This text has always been a favorite! John's revelation gives us a glimpse of heaven, of all those white robed saints from every place and language offering their praise to God. And St. John adds that there will be no hunger or thirst and no tears, for The Lamb will be their Shepherd and their Joy.

This May, I was privileged to visit the small island of Patmos, where John, in exile, received the apocalyptic vision recorded in Revelation. I toured the very cave where John experienced this imagery. I will never forget the time spent in this cave and monastery!

When our friend Jerry Kuker's dad, Pastor Lester Kuker, passed away, he commissioned Dr. Carl Schalk to write an anthem based on this beautiful text. "They Are Before the Throne of God" is available to listen to on YouTube.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when we as Christians weep at the loss of a loved one, we don't weep as those with no hope. Because of your sacrifice, we have been promised an eternity with you. We look forward to this time of eternal praise, where you have wiped away all tears from the eyes of your saints. In your precious name, Amen.

Marnie Smith

March 8, 2026

THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD

Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there? Why have they aroused my anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols? The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.” Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? Jeremiah 8:19-22 (NIV)

Jeremiah, the prophet, was called by God to warn the kingdom of Judah to repent of their idolatrous behavior. Jeremiah warns them that if they don't repent, God will judge them and a foreign army (Babylon) will destroy them.

In today's verses, Jeremiah is grief-stricken over the impending fate of his fellow countrymen. He loves these sinful people and cries as he realizes that no balm or physician can heal them. The balm he references is found in Gilead from the gum of a tree there. This gum was prized for its healing qualities.

The balm cannot heal them, only their repentance can. As we reflect on our need for repentance and forgiveness this Lenten season, we can rejoice that we know that, “There is a Balm in Gilead” LSB 749.

Prayer: Lord, we thank you that You are the balm in Gilead. Only You can make the wounded whole and heal our sin sick soul. Please forgive us of our sins and bring healing to our sin sick soul. Amen.

Cheryl Haugen

March 9, 2026

COMFORT UNDESERVED—TIME AND AGAIN

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
Isaiah 40:1-2 (ESV) *Read vs. 3-8

Though the Israelites had proven themselves to be a rebellious, ungodly people--totally out of keeping with their covenantal relationship with God--their Eternal Father directs words of comfort to them. While justice would have demanded harsher treatment, Isaiah is to “speak tenderly” to His wayward people and assure them that their iniquities are forgiven in double measure.

God’s people were in a complex, unpleasant period of exile—all of their own making, due to individual and societal sins. Most of them would have been able to “connect the dots” as to why their world had turned upside down. And that realization could lead to despair. Does any of this sound familiar? As we survey the confusing, conflict-laden world of 2026, do we fail to recognize the profusion of sin at the root of it all? Are you ever inclined to throw up your hands in resigned frustration?

If so, you are not alone. But realize that just as God comforted His people in the past, He desires to comfort His people in the present. He does this through His “one, holy catholic and apostolic Church.” As members of the Church, we are the direct beneficiaries of divine comfort through Word and Sacrament. Let us also recognize that we are called to provide such comfort to others. God invites us to be recipients and conveyors of His grace.

In 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression, Walter Maier opened the radio season of *The Lutheran Hour* with a sermon, “Comfort for a Critical Day,” based on Isaiah 40. Dr. Maier stated that just as Isaiah had spoken “in the depths of Israel’s despair,” comfort “must be proclaimed in clarion tones throughout our country in its present crisis; for there is a bewilderment, a delusion, a disappointment, abroad in the land more critical than this generation or any previous generation in our country has ever experienced.”

Through time our sin-fueled predicaments persist. Fortunately, so does God’s abundant grace.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, we crave your comfort, notwithstanding our unworthiness. Bless us and help us to pass on your comfort through your Church. Amen.

Kirk Farney

March 10, 2026

AMAZING GRACE

Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Psalm 107:15 & 21 (NIV) *Read vs. 13-21

In the nine short verses in Psalm 107, twice, in verses 13 & 19 the people cried out to the Lord for help and he saved them - this is pure grace. In verses 15 and 21 they were told, "Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men".

What filled my mind was the grace of God shown in Psalm 107 and also in the New Testament with the people's responses to give thanks. In the Old Testament there were wounds and shedding of animals' blood as sin offerings and in the New Testament it was the wounds and shedding of Jesus' blood as the final sacrifice that washes away our sins, wipes our slates clean and gives us the promise of eternity with Him. Through His Wounds We Are Healed!

What is constantly going through my head are the two great hymns that echo both the Old and New Testament which show us God's grace and our response to give thanks.

Amazing Grace

Amazing grace how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see!

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;

His grace has brought me safe thus far, His grace will lead me home. (LSB 744:1&3)

Now Thank We All Our God

Now thank we all our God With hearts and hands and voices,

Who wondrous things has done, In whom His world rejoices;

Who from our mothers' arms Has blest us on our way

With countless gifts of love And still is ours today.

Oh may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us,

With ever joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us.

And keep us in His Grace And guide us when perplexed

And free us from all ills In this world and the next (LSB 895:1&2)

Prayer: All this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Sharon Broz

March 11, 2026

THE CROSS AND THE CROWN

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Isaiah 61:1-3a (NIV)

As Christians, we are deeply loved by God, and He calls us to share that love with those around us. Many of us live in places where we can freely share the Good News without fear, while many believers around the world cannot. Isaiah 61 reminds us that God's heart is especially near to the brokenhearted, the captive, and those who mourn.

As Easter approaches, we reflect on Jesus' death on the cross—a moment of deep sorrow as we consider what He endured on our behalf. Yet this season also invites us to celebrate the transforming love of God. Through Christ, mourning is met with comfort, and despair is exchanged for praise.

Prayer: Lord, thank You for Your great love and for the hope we have through Jesus. As we remember His sacrifice, help us to hold space for both mourning and joy. Replace our ashes with beauty, our sorrow with gladness, and our despair with praise. Empower us to share Your love with those who are hurting, both near and far. Amen.

Erin Doyle

March 12, 2026

GO AND DO LIKEWISE

Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. Luke 10:30 (NIV) *Read vs. 31–37

A lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” In response, Jesus told this account.

The parable of the Good Samaritan tells of a man who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. A Jewish priest and a Levite saw the man but passed by without helping. Then a Samaritan—an enemy of the Jews—stopped, showed compassion, tended the man’s wounds, and paid for his care at an inn. Through this story, Jesus teaches that a “neighbor” is anyone in need, not just those from our own people or background. He challenges His listeners to show radical love and mercy beyond social boundaries.

Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Lawyer replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

Reflections from the Good Samaritan:

- Empathy over prejudice
- Action over inaction
- Generosity over selfishness
- Service over avoidance
- Mercy over duty
- Sacrifice over procrastination

Today:

1. We are cautious when responding to pleas for help because the risk of scams, robbery, or assault and not show apathy.
2. Good Samaritan laws now exist to protect those who voluntarily help in emergencies, encouraging people to act without fear of legal consequences.
3. Jesus calls us to notice needs in our neighborhoods, workplaces, communities, and throughout the world—and to respond with selfless love.
4. Being a good neighbor requires looking up from our smart phones, being aware of those around us, and reaching out with simple acts of kindness—or expressing gratitude when kindness is shown to us.
5. Too often, we forget to say “thank you” to our neighbor’s acts of kindness.
6. Who is my neighbor? The person whose needs I can see and who I am able to help.
7. So, we show: “Go and do likewise.”

Prayer: Lord, help us to serve with open eyes and open hearts. Teach us to be good neighbors to those in need and to share acts of kindness wherever you place us. Amen.

Jim Paulsen

March 13, 2026

JESUS' HEALING POWER

And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick—those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics—and he healed them. Matthew 4:23–24 (ESV)

As we reflect on this passage, we're reminded that the challenges faced in Jesus' time are not unlike those we encounter today. Conversations with friends and family often revolve around the pain, uncertainty, and suffering that come with physical illness, emotional strain, or spiritual struggle. In these moments, we long for healing—whether for our bodies, our hearts, or our spirits.

Scripture shows us that Jesus' healing work extended far beyond physical ailments. He brought restoration to the whole person—body, mind, and soul. His ministry continues to give us hope, reminding us of God's deep compassion and care for every aspect of our lives. And as recipients of that care, we're called to extend it to others.

Each of us has been given gifts we can use to serve. We can offer encouragement through conversation and prayer. We can provide practical help to those who are ill or struggling. And perhaps most importantly, we can show compassion by simply listening, offering comfort, and being present.

When we place our faith in Jesus' healing power—especially in seasons of conflict, turmoil, or uncertainty—our perspective shifts. We begin to see our circumstances not through fear, but through the lens of His restoring grace.

***Prayer:** Heavenly Father, we thank You for the privilege of bringing our needs to You in prayer. We are grateful for Your power to heal—physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Strengthen our faith and help us to extend Your compassion to others. Amen.*

Rebecca Schiltz

March 14, 2026

COVENANT RENEWAL: PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S HEALING

But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Malachi 4:2 (NIV) Read vs. 3-6a

Take a moment to remember a sunrise you have experienced and how you felt. Perhaps the sky slowly shifted from darkness to light, colors stretching across the horizon. Nothing rushed, not all at once. Just patient anticipation and the soft warmth of a new day.

In the final words of the Old Testament, we hear God's promise: "*But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.*" (v.2) These words invite both remembering and looking forward, holding together God's faithfulness in the past and God's promised future.

We see the sun's work all around us. The sun thaws frozen ground and brings new growth. Fields rest before they flourish. Seeds wait patiently beneath the soil. This renewal is gradual, unfolding in God's timing.

The imagery points us beyond the sun we see to the Son who comes. Jesus fulfills this promise "*By his wounds we are healed.*" (1 Peter 2:24). During this season of Lent, we stand in this gentle dawn, turning our hearts toward Jesus, trusting God's promised new life.

Healing is not passively received.

A beautiful part of this renewed covenant is that God invites us to participate. In response, Malachi encourages us to:

- **Revere God's name** – honor and trust Him in all we do (v.2)
- **Remember God's faithfulness** – reflect on His promises and teachings (v.4)
- **Go out in joy** – respond actively with hope and celebration (v.2)
- **Turn our hearts to God and each other** – realign relationships and open ourselves to love and restoration (v.6a)
- **Be watchful and expectant** – live in readiness for God's promises (v.5)

This season invites us to remember His faithfulness and await His promises. The rising Son brings the covenant love that restores, reconciles, and transforms.

Prayer: *God, you invite us into healing. Help us remember Your faithfulness, opening our hearts to Your Son's rising and the new life You bring in us. Amen.*

Ashley Mayor

March 15, 2026

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD SURROUNDS US

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him. Isaiah 11:1 (RSV) *Read vs. 2-10

Isaiah not only identifies the genealogy of the promised Messiah, but in verses 2-3 he names the marvelous attributes he will receive from the Spirit of the Lord, God, the Holy Spirit. Throughout the New Testament we learn a great deal about this special human being, the promised Savior, and how the Spirit was present in his earthly life. From His conception, baptism, death, and resurrection, the Holy Spirit rested upon him. Before Jesus ascended to Heaven, He promised his followers that He would send this Holy Spirit to them, to comfort and energize them. We as followers receive that promise, too.

I am so happy to know that God's Spirit surrounds me (and all believers) every day because without His power and blessing, I couldn't possibly believe the incredible narrative of Good Friday and Easter. I would have no faith in its absolute truth without the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. Dr. Martin Luther explains, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." That is one big job! Because of the power of the Spirit's work, I am then able to share the conviction of my belief with others, inspired by the Lord's Spirit to do so.

I often pray the following hymn for God to increase my faith in Him:

Come down O love Divine, Seek out this soul of mine
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing.
O Comforter, draw near, Within my heart appear
And kindle it, your holy flame bestowing. LW 162

Prayer: Keep me in the faith, Spirit of the Lord. Amen.

Mim Roth

March 16, 2026

LOOKING DOWN AT THE GOOD EARTH

Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: Instruction will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail. Isaiah 51:4-6 (NIV)

Do you remember what happened in December 1968? Apollo 8 was launched; these three men were the first to orbit the moon. Do you remember the famous photo known as “earthrise”? It was the very first time when humans looked back at the Earth, as they were orbiting the moon. We also remember these astronauts taking turns reading from the book of Genesis: and closing with a wish for everyone “on the good Earth”.

That is what I was thinking when I read verse 6 of our text: **Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath.**

Now imagine God the Father looking down from the heavens “at the earth beneath” and thinking: *It used to be a beautiful planet that I spoke into existence. However, it's not anymore! These humans need to be saved; they don't deserve it, but my love for them is so profound. My Son, Jesus, will have to go down to “the good earth”, and by his wounds, these humans are going to be healed spiritually. When I look at them, I will only see the righteousness of Jesus.*

Yes, it kind of takes your breath away, don't you think? We have messed up this planet so terribly, and God still loves us.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, yes, we have messed up the good earth, but as long as we believe in You, we are saved! Amen.

Pastor Mark Stapleton

March 17, 2026

WAKE UP!

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you and His glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. Isaiah 60:1-5 (ESV)

Years ago, our family took a ranger-led night hike in the Rockies. When it was pitch dark and we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces, the ranger lit a match to illustrate the difference a tiny amount of light would make in the darkness. Suddenly, we could see each other's faces and the ground on which we were standing. It was astonishing how much was visible as a result of the shining of that one little spark of light.

In this passage, Isaiah is talking to, not only the people of Jerusalem, but also to us. The first two words are our call to action: Arise and Shine! When we 'ARISE', as Isaiah calls for us to do, we are being told to stand apart from the world and be committed to God's mission. It's so easy to conform to current standards, but as God's children we need to follow His commands and be set apart. When we 'SHINE' we are to show God's grace and love through our actions. Can people see that we are Christians by how we live our lives? Are we the hands and feet of Jesus? In other words, we are to be the lit match on the dark night hike. People with whom we come in contact should be able to see Jesus through us because the glory of the Lord has risen upon us.

***Prayer:** Dear Loving Father, we praise you for sending your Son as our Savior. Help us to arise and shine every day so that we can be a reflection of your love for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Sue Kunz

March 18, 2026

WHEN DID YOU MEMORZE THIS?

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. John 3:16-21 (NIV)

I am sure you learned John 3:16 when you were young. I probably memorized this in first grade at Peace Lutheran School in Chicago. As I write this, it is a few days before Christmas. We are anticipating the Savior's birth. The Bible shows us that Christmas has a much greater and more serious significance. Christ's coming into the world spells the beginning of the end for Satan's power on earth. The devil wants to do all he can to distract our attention from it, because he knows that Jesus has come to break the power of sin and death.

In John's passage above, he uses the word light in two ways. When it is capitalized, the word refers to **Jesus**. When it is in lower case, it means illumination. God wants us to stay in the illumination of the **Light of Jesus** that we may bring others into the **Light of Jesus** for their salvation. This is our mission as a church. May we all be faithful during this Lenten season in furthering the mission.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for sending Jesus to save us as You promised so long ago. Help us to see that His crucifixion has brought salvation for us and all who believe. Amen.

Lynn Kahl

BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

March 19, 2026

YOU'RE FOOLIN' YOURSELF (AND YOU DON'T BELIEVE IT)

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 1:8-2:2 (RSV)

If you ever attended a Lutheran church service, you have no doubt heard the words in verses 8-9 above. Many people have a hard time accepting themselves as sinful. However, without that recognition, the need for a Savior is unnecessary. The way adults around the world view themselves range from complete self-loathing, which lends itself to difficulty believing they can be saved, or sometimes that they are even worth saving. At the other end of the spectrum, there are people who view themselves superior to all others, including God, who they sometimes do not even acknowledge exists. The first and third verses of today's text speak directly to the second group of people - those who don't think they need a Savior. The second verse, Verse 9 offers comfort to those who feel they cannot be forgiven.

Regardless of how humans feel about themselves, the fact is, we are awful. If we don't recognize that, we don't see a need to be saved. Your sins are not more or less than mine. God's expectation is perfection, and no one has been; the size of the deviation is irrelevant. And boy, do we hate that. We don't think it's fair. And truth be told, we have more Pharisee in us then we ever will admit. Because our sins couldn't POSSIBLY be as many or as bad as (insert your favorite group or person to which you like to feel superior). What Jesus did for us by his gift of death is to make us all perfect in God's eyes.

While God's grace and mercy are abundant, we need to be sure we are not "cheapening" God's forgiveness. We can't do whatever we want, just because we have forgiveness - during our lives on earth we must live with the consequences of our actions, and premeditating sin just because 'God will forgive me later' can be a dangerous game to play not only for your life on earth, but with your soul. Verses 1-2 of chapter 2 tell us that avoiding sin is the goal, but when we fail, we find our forgiveness in Christ.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for your willingness to die so we might be forgiven. Strengthen us to use our time and abilities to further your kingdom that others might know of this amazing gift! Amen.

Jennifer Behnke

March 20, 2026

SINGING A NEW SONG

And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” Revelation 5:9-10 (NIV)

This year in my teaching career, I have noticed my voice gets very tired and my singing and speaking seems less free and more taxed. Fortunately, with rest and ways to amplify my voice in the classroom, I am feeling my healthy singing voice come back.

This verse from Revelation touches me, because it mentions a new song being sung to King Jesus. I imagine that with the twenty-four elders, the four creatures and all of the harps playing, I will be singing this song one day and my true voice will be unveiled. All of our true voices will be unbound from sin and stress, and we will be praising Him with the voices that He created in us in perfect form! We will be singing with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world in every language. And we will praise Him for His precious blood that cleanses us from our dirty sin and makes us new again. This is what Lent is all about! We are reminded of our sin and are grateful to be made clean by our Savior. Until that time, let's continue to sing new songs to our God and praise Him for redeeming us!

Prayer: *Thank you, Jesus, for purchasing us with your blood. Accept our songs of praise to you and may they be pleasing for you to hear! Amen.*

Rebecca Hemminger

March 21, 2026

OUR PROMISED DESTINATION

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... Revelation 22:1-2 (ESV) *Read vs. 3-21

Revelation 22 is the final chapter of the book of Revelation. It gives us a breathtaking glimpse into the final chapter of God's redemptive plan for humanity. It paints a picture--a picture of hope, restoration, and the ultimate victory of God over all that is evil.

The final chapter of Revelation is more meaningful to me since my sister and my best friend, Lisa, died unexpectedly on February 19, 2025. I think about her every day wondering what she is experiencing in her eternal home. I have assurance knowing she is with our Lord and Savior, I will see her again, and she is experiencing the fullness of what we as believers will share when we dwell intimately with God in the new heaven and the new earth.

The river of the water of life signifies the sustenance and eternal life that God provides. Water, often symbolic of the Holy Spirit, cleanses, refreshes, and sustains believers. At the center of this new reality is the throne of God and the Lamb. This shows God's direct rule and the close bond between Him and His people. Furthermore, the tree of life echoes back to the Garden of Eden, representing eternal life and direct fellowship with God. Amidst this glorious scenery is a tree bearing twelve kinds of fruit symbolizing the abundance of blessings and spiritual nourishment that believers will experience in the heavenly city.

The book of Revelation is all about Jesus. All the blessings of God find their fulfillment in Jesus--in who He is and what He has done. What began in Genesis with man's fall and the curse, is promised to end in the new heaven, which will be free from sin, evil, sickness, suffering and death. It will be earth as God originally intended it to be, prior to the emergence of sin. It will be Eden restored. What a promising destination for all of God's children that because of Christ's sacrificial death on earth, we will live with Him forever and be reunited once again with our loved ones in a new heaven.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to be ready for your second coming and the glorious new heaven you have prepared for me and all your believers, and we especially thank you that we will live with you forever. Amen.

Cheryl Farney

March 22, 2026

DEAR BROTHERS, MAY THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST BE WITH YOU ALL
Galatians 6:18

As for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest for the attractive things of the world was killed long ago, and the world's interest in me is also long dead. It doesn't make any difference now whether we have been circumcised or not; what counts is whether we really have been changed into new and different people. May God's mercy and peace be upon all of you who live by this principle and upon those everywhere who are really God's own. From now on please don't argue with me about these things, for I carry on my body the scars of the whipping and wounds from Jesus' enemies that make me as His slave. Galatians 6:14-17 (TLB)

Even as we grow as Christians, it is difficult to not brag about wonderful worldly things that we do accomplish. God has blessed us with loving family members; with happy homes; with wonderful jobs and income; and with talents such as music, sports, yard-work, creative writing, sewing, and much more. So why does Paul not want us to brag about these wonderful earthly accomplishments?

Our Heavenly Father has blessed us in so many ways, and we can be very thankful for this! But nothing is as meaningful as what His Son Jesus came to earth to accomplish for us -- to die on a cross and save us from all of our sins!

Throughout our lifetime, we can lose many of our worldly accomplishments, by breaking bones, losing sight or hearing, not getting along with some of the family members, not earning enough income, having loved ones die, and many more examples of loss.

But we never have to lose our true faith in our Triune God, because He will save us to be with Him for eternity! And the more that we study God's Holy Word, attend church, and share our faith with other people, the more blessed we will actually be while we still live on the earth. So, Paul prayed, "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!"

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You so much for teaching us about our eternal salvation through Your Holy Word. Help each of us to be a reflection of this to other people, to bring more people into strong Christian faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Pamella Christensen

March 23, 2026

GOD'S EMBASSY ON EARTH

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (ESV)

Two hundred and fifty years ago the brand-new country, the United States of America, sent its first ambassador, Benjamin Franklin, to France to enlist aid for the fledgling independent nation. Franklin was quite popular as a guest among the French people. Many believed he was poor because of his bifocals. The split lenses confused many who thought his glasses were broken and that he could not afford to buy a new pair. Ironically, he had invented the bifocals! Franklin was 70 years old when he served in France and this also amazed people, as they were living in a time when living past 50 was not extremely common.

Franklin was quite the diplomat. He used his knowledge and congeniality to win much assistance. Like the new nation, we are a new creation, and similar to Franklin, we are called to be ambassadors for Christ. We, however, are sharing the gift of redemption that Jesus gave to the whole world. Ben Franklin sought allies for the United States. We, as Christ's Ambassadors can seek, find and reconcile friends, people we encounter, and all the nations, to God through Christ our Redeemer.

Embassies of the United States are all around the world. Ambassadors and diplomatic staff work to maintain global relationships. The embassy can also be a place for U.S. Citizens to seek aid if needed, while in a foreign land.

Every week we can join to support each other as "Ambassadors of Christ" in our embassy of St. John's LaGrange. It is a place where Christians can seek the aid and support of other Christians, while we live as "foreigners" in the world. With that love and support, we can go into the world to tell of the blessings we share as new creations, being healed by the wounds Christ suffered for us.

Prayer: Lord, help us to bring others to you and affirm our faith together in worship as ambassadors together. Amen.

Mark Behnke

March 24, 2026

MY ROAD TO THE LORD

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Colossians 1:13-17 (NIV) *Read vs. 18-22

I grew up in a home mostly devoid of Christ. Occasionally, my siblings and I would attend the Presbyterian Church in Western Springs with our grandparents who were members. On December 25, 1976, my siblings and I were baptized together at that same church.

Though there was never any encouragement by my parents to have a relationship with God, they did not stop us from pursuing one.

Before my mom passed away in 2020, she expressed to me that she believed in the Lord. To this day, I do not know if my father does or does not believe.

God tells us, “Through Him all things are possible.” It is only possible if we believe in Him and follow Him.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please continue to enlighten us and guide us. We thank you for making all things possible. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Your Sister in Christ,
Kary Tosch

March 25, 2026

TRULY FREE

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is free from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. Romans 6:4-8 (RSV)

I chose this passage as I am about to witness my grandson's baptism. I am blessed by his parents for choosing this for their child. They are following His ways by "starting children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it." Proverbs 22:6.

Sin is so prevalent in our world that there is truly no escape except through Him. By performing baptism, we are declaring our faith and love for our Lord and Savior as only through him are we forgiven, given the gift of faith and given his gift of grace. I am thankful for my parents and grandparents as they also chose this for me and guided me in my upbringing. I know that one day I will see them again, as well as my son Christopher, who also was baptized and confirmed in this faith. Knowing this frees me. I, though a sinner, know that Jesus Christ will be there for me no matter what, as he has declared that my sinful body is dead and I am not enslaved to sin. I am truly free. I can look forward to my old age, knowing all this.

***Prayer:** Thank you, Jesus, for dying for us and guiding us to know you and live by your word to the best of our ability. We are truly free! Amen.*

Jessica Connor

March 26, 2026

YOM KIPPUR, DAY OF ATONEMENT

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. Hebrews 9:11-15 (NIV)

In Jesus' day, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies just once a year. This was to make an atonement for Israel's sins by sprinkling blood on the Ark of the Covenant. Today, Jews still celebrate this holiday (Yom Kippur).

This was a temporary covering of sin, an animal sacrifice; this ritual highlighted the separation between God and humans. But now, the writer of Hebrews says that Christ is the mediator of a new covenant; he is the ransom to set humanity free from the sins they committed.

Picture Jesus as he walks behind the curtain, into the Holy of Holies, and explains that no more sacrifices need to be made, "I was the sacrifice, by MY wounds, you are healed"!

Prayer: Thank you for being our sacrifice, all out of love for us! This act of mercy, we cannot repay. Amen.

Pastor Mark Stapleton

March 27, 2026

JESUS TEACHES UNITY

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Matthew 18:18-20 (NIV)

Resting on a grassy slope peaceful and serene
Disciples listen earnestly, absorbing every word
As Jesus gently teaches what they will need
To faithfully equip them to carry out His work

Listening intently as He spoke with much love
And speaking so truly when He granted the key
Where decisions on earth would be upheld above
When standing together and they always agree

This authority is offered to all who believe
Using prayer and forgiveness responsibly
To give this world the hope that it needs
Securing God’s will in complete harmony

United we pray, in God’s name faithfully
We ask for His blessings, we ask to forgive
Humbly with love lifting prayers truthfully
The way Jesus encouraged believers to live

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Thank You for Your promise to be with us whenever and wherever we gather in Your name. Please let Your presence fill our hearts with peace, love, and unity. Help us to do Your will on earth so that it aligns with Your will in heaven. Help all believers to live in unity, just as Your Son taught His disciples. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Margaret Turner

March 28, 2026

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF LIFE

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' ...Isaiah 58:8-9a (ESV)
***Read vs. 9b-12**

The Bible is often described as the manual to a successful life, and Isaiah 58:8-12 gives us directions. These passages remind us that receiving God's blessings cannot be attained by simply attending church services. Isaiah reminds us that we should live a life shaped by a heart of compassion. God's light will rise-up within us when we dedicate our lives to lifting the burdens of others. This includes caring for the vulnerable. Examples may be helping to feed the hungry, offering advice to those who are troubled, or contributing to your local community by helping neighbors with those tasks they can no longer complete on their own. In a world filled with anger and strife, it has never been more important to be a glimmer of God's light in a dark world.

Isaiah 58:8-12 reveals to us what our 'repayment' will be for offering God's healing towards others. God promises to provide us with all the strength and power in our own lives, even those times that we view as stressful, worrisome, and challenging. As we provide for others, God will provide us with the same support by bringing others into our world at the right time.

God asks us to live a life filled with God at the center of our heart. No matter what our vocations are, we are called to be rebuilders, restorers and repairers in the lives of others. This, combined by faith, will allow us to shine, heal and restore the lives of others. In return, we will be provided the same with God's seal of approval.

Prayer: *Dear Holy God: Teach me to have a heart of compassion towards others. Help me to loosen the burden of others and lift them up when they are weary. Allow me to share generously and to love sincerely. Guide me when I cannot see what the future holds and strengthen me when I feel weak. Use me to be a repairer, restorer, and builder of broken paths. Thank you for being a God who rebuilds, heals and never abandons His people. Amen.*

Julie Barnstable

BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

March 29, 2026

OUR LORD CAN *TOTALLY* CLEANSE US FROM OUR SINS!

Come, let's talk this over, says the Lord; no matter how deep is the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool! And afterwards I will give you good judges and wise counselors like those you used to have. Then your city will again be called The City of Justice and The Faithful Town. Those who return to the Lord, who are just and good, shall be redeemed. Isaiah 1:18, 26-27 (TLB)

As you read these verses from Isaiah chapter 1, I'm sure that you could interpret that our Heavenly Father truly wants to save us from our sins. He loves the people of His creation, and He wants us *all* to love Him and obey Him. But the sins of the world continue to grow worse and worse!

It was 700 years later that God was willing to sacrifice His precious Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins. Jesus grew up as a child with His virgin mother Mary and His carpenter father Joseph. When He was about 30 years old, Jesus was baptized and then began His public ministry. (Read Luke 3:21-23)

Then Jesus returned to Galilee, full of the Holy Spirit's power. When He came to the village of Nazareth, His boyhood home, He stood up to read the Scriptures. The book of Isaiah the prophet was handed to Jesus, and He read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me. He has appointed me to spread good news to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted"; and more things, including that, "God is ready to give blessings to all who come to Him." (Read Luke 4:18-21)

Jesus accomplished many wonderful things during His next three years on earth. He also had wonderful, helpful disciples. But many people hated Him for what He taught, and eventually planned for Jesus to be crucified. *Matthew 21:1-16 and Luke 19:28-38 both tell the story of Jesus' Palm Sunday donkey ride, which actually led up to His crucifixion, to pay for all of our sins.*

So, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, let us truly thank our Lord Jesus Christ for coming to earth as a human being and spreading the Good News for our salvation. Thank Him also for being willing to give up His life when being nailed to the cross, so that our sins could be forgiven and we can look forward to spending eternity with the Triune God.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Friend, thank You so much for coming to earth to spend Your time with us and for saving us from our sins. We do look forward greatly to spending eternity with You, Your Father, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.

Pamella Christensen

March 30, 2026

SLOW TO ANGER

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. Psalm 103:1-10 (NIV)

Do you have a sibling? If you have a sibling then you must know how it feels to be angry at someone. For example, your sister broke your toy, or your brother ripped your drawing. We know that God is a forever-loving God. Imagine having a God that is always angry at you, like the feeling you have towards a brother or sister when they broke something of yours. But God is not like that and is slow to anger. In fact, He forgives you even before you ask Him for forgiveness. You just have to believe it. Now that we have been forgiven, because He does not stay angry, we can forgive our brother or sister for hurting us.

Prayer: Dear God, please remind us that you are slow to anger and that you forgive us no matter the sin. Help us to forgive others and be slow to anger, too. Amen.

Sofie Hemminger

March 31, 2026

INDESCRIBABLE LOVE

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him...

Psalm 103:11-13 (NIV) *Read vs. 14-22

When I read these verses, I am reminded of a beautiful song with this as the text. It calms my soul just thinking of it. "It is perhaps the most perfect song of pure praise to be found in the Bible... Through centuries it has been sung by glad hearts, and today is as fresh and full of beauty as ever." (G. Campbell Morgan) As I search for the song on YouTube, I find *many* beautiful versions. What beautiful words from David, reminding us of the vastness of God's love for us:

- As high as the heavens are above the earth
- As a father has compassion on his children
- From everlasting to everlasting

This Psalm also reminds us that we are sinners, frail mortals. We fail to do God's will over and over and over again, yet his love is beyond our comprehension. We can get down on ourselves for our mistakes, feeling unworthy. We judge others for their shortcomings, yet God loves us all. I share these bullets as a quick reference to remind us of the enormity of the love our heavenly Father has for us, to comfort us when we need it.

It is believed that David might have written this Psalm later in his life, when he "had a higher sense of the preciousness of pardon," (Spurgeon, Charles). As we move through life and reflect back, we can choose to focus on our flaws, or we can choose to honor God for the indescribable love he bestows upon us unworthy creatures. I encourage you to find one of the many songs based on this text and let it fill your soul with gladness.

Prayer: Oh, heavenly Father, You are awesome! Thank you for your forgiveness and overwhelming love. Amen.

Teri Lyn Fukar

April 1, 2026

MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. Psalm 22:1-4 (ESV) *Read vs. 5-22

Close to death by crucifixion, Jesus cries out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Once again Jesus is quoting Scripture – this time Psalm 22. Jesus is not cursing God. Instead, He is claiming God the Father as His own. He says, “MY God.” Jesus repeats this call, begging His God to hear Him. Even hanging on the cross, Jesus is proclaiming that God the Father is God! Yet Jesus feels alone, even deserted. It seems that God has turned His back on Jesus. Imagine the sorrowful look on God’s face. How did God let this happen to His one and only Son? The answer is God HAD to let this happen. God is just and demands retribution for sin. Jesus took that sin on Himself on the cross. God was silent and seemingly absent only for a short time. On the third day, Jesus burst forth triumphantly from the grave. Jesus’ triumph over sin and death is also our triumph. Imagine the joyful look on God’s face at Jesus’ triumph. Imagine the joyful look He has for us as we triumph through Jesus’ triumph.

God is OUR God as well – even when He seems absent and silent. Jesus knows what it is like to feel abandoned by God. He holds us in the palm of His hands even when we don’t feel it. Jesus promises to be with us always. It may be difficult to wait for God’s timing. He certainly doesn’t make everything easy for us in this life on earth. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we know how our stories end. We will experience perfect unity with God in Heaven, never to feel forsaken again.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, we know that You felt everything we feel and understand us perfectly. Thank you for hanging on that cross for us and bursting from that grave for us. Help us live with the confidence that, even though we may at times feel forsaken by God, you are with us always and we will be united with You forever in Heaven. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Sherrie Smith

BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED

Maundy Thursday

April 2, 2026

A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD!

Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me! For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. Psalm 31:2-5 (ESV)

God's Word tells us again that He is our rock and fortress, a refuge in the midst of earthly trials. Dozens of references repeat that message in my study Bible, throughout both Old and New Testaments. Add to that the many wonderful hymns that reinforce these words: "Built on the Rock", "Rock of Ages", and of course Luther's "A Mighty Fortress". Every reference join in proclaiming God's promise to his people, to be our fortress and only hope. It is clearly an important message – how should it impact our thinking, our view of God's plans for us at St. John's? What is our response? Will we laser focus on this promise, or will our thoughts stray to daily worries and push it aside?

Clearly, these verses are both a promise and a challenge, exemplified by the work of the apostles as they faced overwhelming opposition, imprisonment, and death. In fear for their lives, they could have given up on Jesus' command to spread the message of His salvation everywhere, but they continued their missionary journeys, and Christ's church took root and grew exponentially. God, the great rock, supplied the ultimate victory, preserving His church according to His will.

Throughout scripture, we see that God's promise is always a constant, but by His design, we don't claim it until we live it. This puts our commitment at St. John's to ministry in our community, the growth of our church family, God's provision of a senior pastor, and smaller concerns, such as the poor condition of our parking lot, in proper perspective. Will we run toward God and the challenges He puts before us, or away from Him, allowing our doubts and fears to overcome our faith in His promises? Our commitment to God's plan for St. John's, whatever it may be, is a challenge we can face, because we know that the God we trust is our refuge and great fortress.

Prayer: Father God, we thank you for your promise throughout scripture to be our fortress and refuge. As we claim your promise, increase our faith and strengthen our commitment to you and to your plans for St. John's. Lead us by the power of your Holy Spirit, and give us patience as you reveal your will to us. In Christ's name, Amen.

Dalyne Shinneman

April 3, 2026

*Good Friday***ENSLAVEMENT VS FREEDOM**

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:34-36 (NIV)

Jesus exposes the truth we would rather avoid: sin is not just something we do—it is a power that enslaves us. Left to ourselves, we cannot loosen its grip.

Consider the difference between being a slave and being a son. The slave has no hope whatever, while the son has the freedom and all the privileges of being in the family, in addition to the potential of inheritance in the future. Polar opposites.

Good Friday is not about our bondage or enslavement to sin. It is about the One who enters that bondage for us. As Isaiah foretold: “By His wounds we are healed.” The Son does not free us by issuing commands from a distance. He frees us by stepping into our place—into our addiction, our suffering, our death. The wounds He bears are not accidental marks of cruelty; they are the very means by which our chains are broken.

On the cross, Jesus becomes the slave so that slaves may become sons. He takes the full weight of sin’s accusation so that we may stand uncondemned. He suffers the judgment we deserved so that we may receive the freedom He alone possesses. His cry, “It is finished,” is not resignation, but victory. The Son paid the price. The prison doors stand open. We are free.

Freedom is not self-made; it is blood-bought. It is Christ’s blood that secures it, this freedom that makes us part of the family is certain. In His wounds, we find healing. In His death, we find life. In His sacrifice, we find the freedom and a place in the family that only the Son can give—freedom indeed.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, never let us forget the sacrifice you made to give us freedom and a permanent place in your family. Amen.

Andy Kunz

April 4, 2026

BEFORE GOD MADE THE WORLD, HE KNEW WHO I WOULD BE HE CALLED ME BY MY NAME, AND HE HAD PLANS FOR ME

Long ago, even before He made the world, God chose us to be His very own, through what Christ would do for us; He decided then to make us holy in His eyes, without a single fault -- we who stand before Him covered with His love. Ephesians 1:4 (TLB) *Read vs. 3-10

One of the most wonderful things that the Bible teaches, in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, is that God created the entire world in only 6 days.

But it's in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 4, that we learn that God planned every single one of us even *before* He created the world! Verses 5-10 tell us that His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family.

But when sin entered the world (read Genesis chapter 3) and we *all* became sinful people, God still chose us to be His very own, through what His Son Jesus Christ would do for us. God's unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die for us.

To know that our Heavenly Father loves each of us so much that He was willing to sacrifice His own Son Jesus to save us from our sin, so that we can live with the Triune God for eternity as He originally planned, is overflowing in His kindness toward each of us. God's purpose was that when the time is ripe, He will gather us all together from wherever we are -- in heaven or on earth -- to be with Him in Christ, forever.

Ephesians 5:19-20 tells each of us what to do as saved Christians:

"Talk with each other much about the Lord, quoting psalms and hymns, and singing sacred songs, making music in our hearts to the Lord. Always give thanks for everything to our God and Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please send Your Holy Spirit to help save more people and bring them to salvation through Your Son, Jesus. How wonderful and exciting it is to know that we will live with You, our Triune God, for eternity! Thank You, Lord, for knowing who each of us truly is, and for wanting us to be with You since before You even created the world! Amen.

Pamella Christensen

April 5, 2026

Easter Sunday

HE HAS RISEN INDEED

After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. John 20:20 (NIV)

When thinking about the significance of this verse, it helps to consider the state of mind the apostles must have been in when this encounter happened. They had just lost their loving friend and spiritual leader to a horrible death and were fearful the same fate might be awaiting them as well. So why were they so quickly overjoyed?

By showing his hands and side (the places where he was wounded), Jesus is proving to them that he is truly the same person who was crucified, reassuring the disciples that they are not seeing a ghost or illusion. Earlier, Jesus told his disciples he would rise again. Actually seeing him alive helped to turn their fear and doubt into confidence that he keeps his word. Also, this encounter sets the stage for what was to follow: Jesus sending the disciples out into the world to spread his word. They needed the certainty that he was alive before they could confidently share his message.

So, over 2,000 years later, what does this mean to us? While none of us will have the experience the disciples had, physically being with the risen Christ as proof of his resurrection, God does send signs to us. We just need to have the faith to look for and recognize them. Since the loss of our son Tommy 30 years ago, we started seeing doves regularly when we were out or traveling. We initially chalked it off to coincidence but it happens so frequently and at the most unusual times and places that it defies coincidence. We believe it is a sign that Tommy is at peace and with the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for providing proof that you truly rose from the dead, that your sacrifice still matters, and that believing in the risen Christ helps transform fear into joy and faith. Amen.

Tom D'Amico

LENTEN WORSHIP SCHEDULE 2026

MIDWEEK VESPERS SERVICE SCHEDULE

Ash Wednesday, February 18th, 12:00PM & 7:00PM

Wednesdays, February 25—March 25

Light Suppers 6:00PM

Vespers 7:00PM

February 18 Ash Wednesday-*Father, forgive them*

February 25 Midweek II-*You will be with me in Paradise*

March 4 Midweek III-*Behold your son; Behold your mother*

March 11 Midweek IV-*My God, why have You forsaken me*

March 18 Midweek V-*I thirst*

March 25 Midweek VI-*It is finished*

Good Friday-*Father, into your hands I commend My Spirit*

HOLY WEEK SERVICES

Palm Sunday, March 29, 8:00AM & 10:45AM

Maundy Thursday, April 2, 7:00PM

Good Friday, April 3, 3:00PM & 7:00PM

Easter Sunday, April 5, 8:00AM & 10:45AM

Reflections

**The 2026 Lenten Devotional
*BY HIS WOUNDS WE ARE HEALED***

Worship

Sundays 8:00 a.m. & 10:45 a.m.

Equipping ♦ **E**ngaging ♦ **E**ncouraging

St. John's Lutheran Church and School

505 South Park Road

La Grange, Illinois 60525

708.354.1690

www.stjohnslagrange.org