

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The old story goes that Jonah does not want Israel's ancient enemies forgiven for he does not think they deserve it. Then, in Matthew's parable, the first workers, expecting that they themselves should get more, do not think the latecomers deserve full pay.

Do we draw lines about who is deserving and who not? Do we allow others to divide us, our communities, our nation, and our world? Do we "like" and forward barrier-supporting memes and rift-causing disinformation? The gospel is always teaching us that if we draw lines to divide people or exclude others, Jesus Christ is always on the other side of the line: in the cross he is with the unsalaried, the suffering poor, the sinners, the enemies, even the threatened animals. And he is risen to give away mercy to all, to give enough to live this day.

The justice and "fairness" of God is mercy. And none of us is deserving. We, too, are latecomers — beggars for life — and God's gift is for us all, without distinction. Such mercy gives us an utterly new way to see the world.

### **Let Us Be Gathered**

#### **Confession and Forgiveness**

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,  
who creates, redeems, and sustains us and all of creation.  
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God.  
*Silence is kept for reflection.*

Faithful God,  
have mercy on us.  
We confess that we are captive to sin  
and cannot free ourselves.  
We turn from your loving embrace  
and go our own ways.  
We pass judgment on one another  
before examining ourselves.  
We place our own needs before those of our neighbors.  
We keep your gift of salvation to ourselves.  
Make us humble, cast away our transgressions,  
and turn us again to life in you  
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.  
Amen.

God hears the cries of all who call out in need,  
and through his death and resurrection,  
Christ has made us his own.  
Hear the truth that God proclaims:  
Your sins are forgiven in the name of † Jesus Christ.  
Led by the Holy Spirit, live in freedom and newness  
to do God's work in the world.  
Amen.

## **Gathering Song**

With reference to God's great mercies, our gathering song is lead today by members of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Wausau, Wisconsin. "Golden Breaks the Dawn" (ELW #852) was first published in 1936. It uses a traditional Chinese melody and sketches the wonders of God's mercies through a beautiful picture of the morning. From this beginning, petitions for living faithfully flow throughout the day.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/6-u3qbez5tl>. (Words and music are included in the video.)

## **Prayer of the Day**

Let us pray.

Almighty and eternal God,  
you show perpetual lovingkindness to us your servants.  
Because we cannot rely on our own abilities,  
grant us your merciful judgment,  
and train us to embody the generosity of your Son,  
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.  
Amen.

## **Let Us Hear God's Word**

*A reading from Jonah:*

<sup>1</sup>The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup>Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. <sup>3</sup>So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" <sup>5</sup>And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

<sup>6</sup>When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup>Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. <sup>8</sup>Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

<sup>10</sup>When God saw what [the people of Nineveh] did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

<sup>4:1</sup>But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. <sup>3</sup>And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." <sup>4</sup>And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" <sup>5</sup>Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

<sup>6</sup>The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

<sup>9</sup>But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." <sup>10</sup>Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup>And should I not be

concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 3-4)

*The Word of the Lord.*

*Thanks be to God.*

*A reading from the Psalms:*

- <sup>1</sup>I will exalt you, my God and king,  
and bless your name forever and ever.
- <sup>2</sup>Every day will I bless you  
and praise your name forever and ever.
- <sup>3</sup>Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised!  
There is no end to your greatness.
- <sup>4</sup>One generation shall praise your works to another  
and shall declare your power.
- <sup>5</sup>I will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty  
and all your marvelous works.
- <sup>6</sup>They shall tell of the might of your wondrous acts,  
and I will recount your greatness.
- <sup>7</sup>They shall publish the remembrance of your great goodness;  
they shall sing joyfully of your righteousness.
- <sup>8</sup>The Lord is gracious and full of compassion,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Psalm 145)

*A reading from Philippians:*

<sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. <sup>25</sup>Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, <sup>26</sup>so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

<sup>27</sup>Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup>and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. <sup>29</sup>For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—  
<sup>30</sup>since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1)

*Word of God. Word of life.*

*Thanks be to God.*

*The holy gospel according to Matthew.*

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>1</sup>"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup>They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you

have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’<sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20)

*The Gospel of the Lord.*

*Praise to you, O Christ.*

### **Reflection on the Readings**

Today, Paul writes his letter to the Philippians and us from prison as he faces capital charges. Issues of life and death are no joke in this setting, yet he instructs us to rejoice in the midst of our circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be. Paul, to put it briefly, is challenging us to find joy and hope in the difficult moments of life instead of letting bad events become like prisons that snuff out our life.

We are called to live with hope. Viktor Frankl, a famous psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, suggested this thesis out of his experience within a fascist regime: people start dying when they lose hope. When hundreds acquiesce and give in to dozens, when truth is dismantled and hidden, the loss of hope robs people of their will to live and to face life’s difficulties. Frankl goes on to speak of the freedom we possess to that helps us determine our attitudes and spiritual well-being. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in today’s message. It is not God’s will that we experience death. It is God’s will that we experience life.

We are called to choose life. Paul speaks of the struggle between wanting to embrace death, which would allow him to be in the presence of Christ, and to stay in life (with all its hardships and struggles), which would allow him to continue in witness to the power of the resurrected one. He chooses life.

Sometimes our eyes seem so focused on the heavens, waiting for the resurrection and “true life,” that we can miss in our present life the opportunities for the abundant life to which Christ calls us. Jonah appears to have been stuck in such a mode. Perhaps the disciples were heading that way when Jesus gave them today’s parable.

Sure, we know and trust that tomorrow holds promises for hope and joy. Our God, though, is also in our present – in the world’s present. And within this “now,” God challenges us to look at life and its circumstances through the lens of hope that will bring joy into our life. God has already spoken a word of life on our behalf. This spoken word will help us find hope in the midst of the most difficult situations that life throws at us.

An expectation that God offers insurance against hard times or promises that things won’t change — that we can go back to the way it used to be — is a false hope. Christ does not provide us with a vaccine against the difficulties of life. Gospel living is not about finding an easy way out. It is about learning to see hope and possibilities even in the darkest and toughest moments of our lives.

Prisons are scary places. Amid the rats and isolation and temperature extremes, they can be places of lost hope and death. Prison was not the best place for Paul. Nevertheless, the Bible speaks of how prisons became places of worship and proclamation. Under the most difficult of situations, Christian prisoners chose to look to God and not their circumstances. Sometimes, we build our own prisons when we focus too much on circumstances instead of looking to God.

If Daniel in the den of lions had looked only to the lions, it would have been the end of him. By looking to God, he was able to rise above the circumstances and find hope even when surrounded by lions. That is the message that we are called to model and proclaim for others — so that they, too, may have hope.

How do we find hope and meaning in life? It all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves. Paul in his prison cell looked beyond dank, dark walls to encourage and teach. Today, we are called to look beyond our own circumstances and help others find meaning, recognize truth, and act with mercy.

Do we dare believe God's promises that we will experience life — and life in abundance — if we lean to live a life that trusts God even in the hardest times? Nobody is exempt from those moments of feeling locked up, those moments of feeling that the walls are about to cave in around us. When those "prison moments" come, God's love and mercy enables us to model for others what it means to face them with hope.

We are given two options: to give up and experience defeat and death, or to proclaim that even in our deepest despair our Savior lives and we shall experience God's goodness in the midst of it all. Like Paul, let us choose life. Let us choose to look beyond our circumstances and believe that God will show us a way that will lead us out of our prisons, out of the valleys of shadow and death in which we sometimes find ourselves. God will lead us out. There is no need to abandon hope; rather, we may embrace it and live.

God chooses life for the people and animals of Nineveh. God chooses life for Jonah as well. God chooses life for the psalmist and Paul. Jesus' message to the disciple is the same: don't get caught up in who is first or last — the kingdom of God is not a zero-sum economy, it's not a place where there have to be losers in order to have winners — you are freed from all that; you are freed to choose life!

This is God's same merciful invitation for us today. In the midst of all that we are experiencing this year, keep choosing life.

### **Hymn of the Day**

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (ELW #587) is led for us today by the virtual chancel choir of St. Luke United Methodist Church in Houston.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/4dyRKgm6l-s>.

The words below are from the version in our ELW hymnal. The choir at St. Luke sings a slightly different version with some alternate stanzas.

- 1     *There's a wideness in God's mercy,  
like the wideness of the sea;  
there's a kindness in God's justice  
which is more than liberty.  
There is no place where earth's sorrows  
are more felt than up in heav'n.  
There is no place where earth's failings  
have such kindly judgment giv'n.*
  
- 2     *There is welcome for the sinner,  
and a promised grace made good;  
there is mercy with the Savior;  
there is healing in his blood.  
There is grace enough for thousands  
of new worlds as great as this;  
there is room for fresh creations  
in that upper home of bliss.*
  
- 3     *For the love of God is broader  
than the measures of our mind;  
and the heart of the Eternal*

*is most wonderfully kind.  
But we make this love too narrow  
by false limits of our own;  
and we magnify its strictness  
with a zeal God will not own.*

4     *'Tis not all we owe to Jesus;  
it is something more than all:  
greater good because of evil,  
larger mercy through the fall.  
Make our love, O God, more faithful;  
let us take you at your word,  
and our lives will be thanksgiving  
for the goodness of the Lord.*

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need, responding to each petition with the words “graciously hear our prayer.”

O God, you make the last first, and the first last. Give resources and courage to the churches around the globe that have few resources. When ministry in this time is so difficult, inspire bishops, pastors, deacons, and congregational leaders in their service.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

Continue your care for your whole creation: sun and wind, bushes and worms, cities and farms, and all your many animals. Make us into extensions of your care. Preserve the food sources of the world's endangered wildlife.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

To places of conflict and violence, bring peace, especially to the cities of our nation. Bless the work of negotiators, peacekeepers, and development workers. Preserve protesters, and guide police. Enlighten our nation, the nations we call friends, and the nations that are deemed our enemies. Keep our election season from dishonesty and guide our court justices to act with mercy and grace.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

Give your blessing to the Jewish people at this time of their new year. Bring an end to anti-Semitism around the globe and strengthen peace efforts in the Middle East.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

To all who are suffering, show your mercy. We pray for firefighters, for communities devastated by fire, for all who suffer racial injustice, for migrants who seek safety, for all who are imprisoned, for victims of crime, for the unemployed, for students and faculty during the pandemic, for medical workers, for all who are hungry, for those in quarantine and isolation: O God, the list of the needy is so long.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

Give health and wholeness to all who are sick, to all who are suffering from the coronavirus, and to those we name before you here: Marge, Sue, Mary and her parents, Carolyn, Marsha, Martha, Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, and Marlene.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

You show mercy beyond our expectations, far beyond our deserving. Hear now our personal prayers.

*A longer period of silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

We praise you for all the saints, especially this week for the apostle Matthew and the gift of his gospel that speaks to us of your goodness and for Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her commitment to life, justice, and human and women's rights. Give us grace to live for Christ, until we join with all the faithful in your eternal life.

*A brief silence.*

O God, you are full of compassion: graciously hear our prayer.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

### **Offering Prayer**

Let us pray.

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things.  
You have set before us gifts of your good creation.  
Prepare us for your heavenly banquet,  
nourish us with rich food and drink,  
and send us forth to set tables in the midst of a suffering world,  
through the bread of life, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.  
Amen.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial,  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and forever.  
Amen.



## Let Us Be Sent in Service

### **Sending Song**

St. Paul Lutheran Church in Glenside, Pennsylvania, leads us this week in sing “How Small Our Span of Life” (ELW #636). Sun to the well-known tune of *Kingsfold*, the hymn stands in awe before the radical gap between humanity’s fleeting speck in time and God’s eternity, recast by the hope of God’s dwelling with us in Christ.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/u8yRCxXitYE>.

- 1     *How small our span of life, O God,  
our years from birth till death:  
a single beat within the heart,  
the catching of a breath,  
a drop within the ocean's deep,  
a grain upon the shore,  
a flash of light before we sleep  
to see the sun no more.*
  
- 2     *And yet our speck of life is spanned  
by your infinity;  
our tick of time on earth is caught  
in your eternity.  
While suns and stars spin endlessly  
through depths of cosmic space,  
while aeons roll and ages pass,  
you hold us in your grace.*
  
- 3     *O Christ, you left eternity  
to plunge in time's swift stream,  
to share the shortness of our span,  
our mortal lives redeem.  
You filled your cross-closed years with love;  
you loved us to the end  
and touch us with your risen life  
that ours may time transcend.*
  
- 4     *We thank you, God, for kindling faith  
that lights our transient years,  
illuminating our pilgrimage  
through mists of doubt and fears;  
for hope that sees a life beyond  
the swiftly passing days;  
for love, both human and divine,  
that lifts our hearts to praise.*

### **Benediction**

Mothering God,  
Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit,  
bless you and lead you into the way of truth and life.  
Amen.