

Staying Awake to God
Advent Devotions on Ephesians
2020



Pastor Tom Maehl
First Lutheran Church, Waltham, MA

Introduction

Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. (Mark 13:35) Each year, four Sundays before Christmas, Advent returns with its call to awaken, and to stay awake. This is a call to attend to the inner life of the spirit. Yes, Christ is coming at Christmas, and Christ will one day come in glory at the end of time; but Christ is also coming now. Christ comes to us! Mostly, however, he comes in ways that we will miss unless we are spiritually awake, unless we are paying attention.

These Advent devotions are offered as an aid to paying attention. They are based upon the letter to the Ephesians; a letter most likely written by a disciple of Paul and intended to be shared among many churches. At its center, Ephesians is calling the Church to open their eyes and see that God's purpose and power are now taking on human flesh in them. That is to say; just as once God was hidden in the vulnerable infant Jesus at his birth, now the risen Christ is hidden in vulnerable us.

Weekdays: Each weekday there is a brief passage from Ephesians followed by a reflection, questions to ponder, and a prayer. These can be engaged first thing in the morning, at the end of the day, or whenever works best. Use the 'Notes:' section to record insights that arise, or faces that appear in your mind's eye, or further questions that are stirred.

Sunday and Saturdays: Devotions are included for weekdays only. Sundays are left for attending to scripture in worship. Saturday is left as a little Sabbath for putting this aside, or catching up if you've fallen behind, or looking back so as to think more deeply about some question or insight that grabbed you during the week.

Framing Question: Each day's reflection begins with these words, "*Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be.*" Spiritually, we are often asleep. We are like a person who gazes into a mirror and sees their reflection; but upon walking away and forgets what they truly look like. When we engage Ephesians, the beautiful truth of who we are in our connection to Christ is repeatedly reflected back to us. It is when we have been reawakened to our core identity in Christ, that we find ourselves with renewed ability to stay awake to God's continued and persistent callings upon our precious and blessed lives.

Acknowledgments: My deep appreciation and sincere thanks to Joan Clemens for her keen eye and wise editorial insights. Ephesians passages are from *The New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved. The quotation of Psalm 143 is from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, by Eugene Peterson, NavPress, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2002.

I pray that as you keep engaging scripture with your heart, mind, and imagination you will continue to find yourself awake, in the ordinariness and the extraordinariness of your daily life; awake to Christ who is coming to make all things new.

Blessed Advent, Pastor Maehl

November 30: Monday, Week 1: Awake to Grace

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are God's saints; claimed by God in the waters of baptism; declared to be God's beloved children through the death and resurrection of Christ. We are God's beloved saints despite our past mistakes, short-comings, appearance, orientation, failures, or insecurities. As God's beloved saints we have been set-apart for a new way of living, one that is centered on the grace and peace that are continually offered to us by God, and are intended to be communicated through us to others.

To Ponder: Many of us have been enculturated to believe that our worth is tied to what we accomplish or produce. To receive grace, however, is to be received, appreciated, cared for, and loved apart from having fulfilled some role or responsibility. Where have you received grace in the last day or week? Where are you in need of grace now? How might you stay awake to your calling to be an agent of grace in the day that is ahead?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for your unconditional love of me, and for having generously carried me thus far in life up to this very moment. In my encounter with others this day, help me to stay awake to our shared humanity and empower me to be an agent of grace. Amen.

Notes:

December 1: Tuesday, Week 1: Awake to Love

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:3-8a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. This brief passage identifies us as blessed, chosen, destined, and forgiven; *blessed* with spiritual gifts, *chosen* before the foundation of the world (in other words before we could have possibly done anything to earn it), *destined* to be united with the resurrected Christ who walks with us (whether or not we view our own life as a success), and *forgiven* of our short-comings and failings in order that today, once again, nothing might separate us from God's love.

This is who we are (blessed, chosen, destined, forgiven), and there in the middle of the passage is this little line indicating whom we are called to be, *blameless before God in love*. What does that mean? That we are to be sinless, without fault, never letting our anxiety or anger or selfishness get the better of us? Heavens no, that is impossible! Which is why we continue to need forgiveness. And forgiveness is ours! Any demand for perfection has been crucified with Christ. Thus, we may receive these words as an invitation to love with the assurance that in our attempts at loving ourselves and others there is no blame for doing so imperfectly.

To Ponder: In a way, to love someone is to withhold *blame* for their failing to live up to some idealized image we may have of who we believe they ought to be; that is, we let them off the hook for not being perfect.* In what one concrete way have you demonstrated love of your own imperfect self in the past day or week? In what one concrete way have you demonstrated love for an imperfect someone else? How might you stay awake to blameless love in the day ahead?

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for forgiving my failure to live up to all you would have me be. Keep coming for me when I turn in on myself and help me to stay awake to opportunities for engaging others with acceptance, openness, curiosity, and care. Amen.

* Note: this does not mean that we are to passively accept abuse or the mean-spirited actions of others. Love can include confrontation. So too, God has the power to work love through many people and in some cases, particularly when there has been emotional or physical abuse, a particular other person may be left to be loved by God through someone else.

Notes:

December 2: Wednesday, Week 1: Awake to Relationship

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:8b-10

With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. Who are we? As hearers of the Word of God, we are those to whom God has entrusted a mysterious truth, one that much of the rest of the world rejects. This truth is that ultimately God is intending to gather up everyone and everything in love. At the center of this plan is the life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence of the Jesus Christ. Note that this plan is not just for those who believe in Jesus or call him Lord in this lifetime. This plan is for everyone.

We live in a world of divisions where implicitly or explicitly it is believed that some people matter more to God than others. All the various “isms” serve to reinforce these divisions: racism, sexism, ageism, able-ism, nationalism, Christian-triumphalism, etc. —presuming that whites matter more, men matter more, the young and able bodied matter more, Americans matter more, Christians matter more. It is into this world of divisions that we are sent to be tenders of relationship, with the charge to embody the mystery of God’s intention—that every person, each one created in the image of God, shall be gathered up in love.

To Ponder: With whom are you, in some small or large way, estranged? With whom might God be nudging you to seek re-connection? How might you nudge yourself to act on this?

Prayer: God our shepherd, thank you for continually regathering us and for your promise that nothing will ever separate us from your love. Help me this day to stay awake to the mysterious truth of your love for all people, especially the ones I find threatening, uninteresting, or difficult to love; and bless my attempts to reestablish and maintain relationships with others. Amen.

Notes:

December 3: Thursday, Week 1: Awake to Delight

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:11-14

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are ones who have heard the gospel of our salvation and have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. That is, we are people who have received the extraordinary gospel news that the Spirit of the resurrected Christ is already at work in us, and that our future salvation is already assured. God has promised this, and God is faithful to God's promises!

As inheritors of this extraordinary promise, we are called to be those who *"live for the praise of his glory."* This is an invitation to delight. This is a summons to delight amidst all the uncertainty and struggles of daily life, with the full acknowledgement that times of suffering come. With Christ beside us and our ultimate future secured, we are called to be people who take delight in the gift of life and then turn to God in praise.

To Ponder: Dorothy Day once spoke of the duty of delight saying, *"To act lovingly is to begin to feel loving, and certainly to act joyfully brings joy to others which in turn makes one feel joyful. I believe we are called to the duty of delight."* What gives you a sense of delight? When have you experienced a moment of delight in the last day or week? How might you stay awake to God's invitation to delight?

Prayer: God our creator, thank you for delighting in me, imperfect as I am, and for your gift of life. Amid my varied responsibilities, challenges, and concerns, help me to stay awake to the gifts of your good creation and open my eyes and heart to opportunities for delight. Amen.

Notes:

December 4: Friday, Week 1 Awake to Trust

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:15-19

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are people of faith! However, bound by our flawed humanity and shaped by our varied life experiences, we are people of limited faith. Each one of us with a measure of wisdom, but not all the wisdom. Each one of us with a measure of the truth, but not all the truth. Each one of us with a measure of trust in God, but not complete trust. As people of limited faith, we are called to stay awake to God's call to ever deepening trust in "*the greatness of his power*".

To Ponder: Call to mind one or more challenges you are facing in each of the following three areas; perhaps write a word that summarizes this challenge:

- Internal life challenge:
- Work or family life challenge:
- Life as a global citizen challenge:

Now three times reflect upon this question, "*Can God be trusted?*" In engaging your own internal challenge, "*Can God be trusted?*" In engaging the work or family challenge, "*Can God be trusted?*" In engaging the challenge of a polarized society, climate change, economic injustice, for whatever came to mind for you, "*Can God be trusted?*" Where in particular do you sense God inviting you to engage life with greater trust?

Prayer: Faithful God, I thank you for those saints whose witness of faith has helped to shape my own, and I thank you for the measure of faith that has been planted within me. Help me to stay awake to your invitation to keep trusting. In my internal challenges, in my work and family challenges, in our national and global challenges—please keep guiding me, strengthening me, and providing for us all, and help me to grow in trust that you will do just that. Amen.

Notes:

December 7: Monday, Week 2 Awake to Abundance

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 1:20-23

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. Together, we are those who have been incorporated into the body of Christ; he dwells in us as community (church), and we dwell in him. At the same time, Christ dwells in the place of ultimate power, metaphorically described as the “right hand of God.” Therefore, the greatest power in heaven and earth, the power of God almighty, is actively at work in this blessed and broken world through what appears rather small; as small as the community of the church, as tiny as you and me.

We see signs of the world’s brokenness all around us—hatred, misuse of the planet, economic unfairness. Much of this is driven by a fearful sense of scarcity. When we humans are seduced by the message that there simply is not enough for everyone, fear of scarcity creeps in. This fear tells us that we must take and hold onto whatever we can for ourselves, our family, our demographic, our nation; and enough is never quite enough. But then we regather as church and the Gospel news of abundance washes over us—Christ is with us, Christ will provide for us, Christ is intending to provide for others through us! We are called to be people who, in spite of any empirical evidence to the contrary, live out of a worldview of abundance.

To Ponder: Where are you experiencing a measure of scarcity in your life—a scarcity of money, or of relationships, or of health, or of comfort, or of time, or of understanding, or of delight, or of faith, or of hope, or of love, etc.? Where are you experiencing a measure of abundance in your life—an abundance of money, relationships, health, comfort, time, understanding, delight, faith, hope, love, etc.? In the midst of your blessed and complicated life, how might you stay awake to God’s invitation to live out of a worldview of abundance?

Prayer: Gracious God, help me to daily receive the gift of my life as a sign of your abundant love. Continue to hold me and guide me through those aspects of my life that feel barren (*especially ...*). Then work in me an enduring trust in your promise to provide, in order that with diminished fear and renewed hope I may engage the world with both a generosity of Spirit and a spirit of generosity. Amen.

Notes:

December 8: Tuesday, Week 2 Awake to Desire

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:1-7

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are recipients of God's grace, those who have been made alive together with Christ through the forgiveness of our sins; and we are those who still struggle with sin. In this passage the author ties sin to pursuing the passions of our flesh and senses. We need to take these words with care. It's not that our human flesh and senses are bad. No! They are part of God's good creation. In the incarnation, God demonstrated that our very flesh may bear the divine with the "enfleshment" of God through the conceptions and birth of Jesus. It's not that our flesh and senses are bad, but it is here where our struggle with sin tends to be centered.

Think of the things that engage our senses: flowers and trees, tasty food, fine wine, sexual contact, music and other arts, etc. All of these are part of God's good creation to be enjoyed; yet all of these are places that can stir unhealthy desire. Thus, the enjoyment of food and drink can turn to gluttony or alcoholism. The enjoyment of nature, literature, and music can turn to a persistent hunger to possess more and more land, beauty, or libraries. Similarly, sexuality and the arts can delight and connect us; they can also numb and isolate us. God calls us to be those who stay awake to our desires.

To Ponder: In the past day or week, where has your desire and your engagement with your senses brought a measure of delight to both you and God, reconnecting you to wholeness? Where has your desire and engagement with your senses disconnected you from wholeness? How might you stay awake to the varieties of desire within you?

Prayer: Almighty God, who put aside the greatest of your power in taking on the weakness of human flesh in Jesus, you know how hard our internal struggles can be. Thank you for the gift of life and the wonder of our senses. Help us to be awake to our varied desires; then empower us to resist those that might harm, and to embrace those desires that connect us to wholeness. Amen.

Notes:

December 9: Wednesday, Week 2 Awake to Good Works

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are those who have been saved through faith. There is some uncertainty about how to interpret the original Greek in these verses. It could be interpreted that “We are saved through our faith;” it could also be interpreted that “We are saved through the faith of Jesus Christ.” Either way, the faith that saves us is not anything we can claim to have chosen or orchestrated, it is God’s free gift given to us. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we shall be saved! God has promised! Reawakened to this astounding gift, we are called to be people who live a new kind of life.

Success, wealth, attractiveness, status, comfort—these are what motivate many adults in our competitive culture. Behind each of these is a desire to be saved from something; perhaps to be saved from being deemed a failure, saved from the struggle or shame of being poor, saved from being rejected by the ‘beautiful people,’ saved from discomfort, saved from being ‘ordinary.’ Consider what might change if we more deeply trusted that in our connection to the love of God in Christ, we already have access to a rich, beautiful, engaged, extraordinary life? And doesn’t any rich, beautiful, engaged, extraordinary life end up blessing others? How? There are too many possible ways to name, so let’s just group them all together under the title, “Good Works.” Good works are demonstrations of love in action.

To Ponder: What in the long run, over the course of a long life, makes a person beautiful or unattractive, ordinary or extraordinary? What measuring stick are you using to gauge whether or not your life ends up being deemed a success? Where might God be calling you to rouse from sleep?

Prayer: O God, I believe, help thou my unbelief. I believe that it is your love that saves me, but still I find myself anxious over money, appearance, and standing—buying into the world’s values and definitions of success. Give me eyes to see that it is love that makes us beautiful, then make me beautiful to you, to myself, and to others. Amen.

Notes:

December 10: Thursday, Week 2 Awake to Divisions

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:11-16

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. Human sin alienates, separates, and divides. Reconciliation heals, repairs, and reconnects. We have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Having been reconnected to God through the forgiveness of sins, we are called to be agents of reconciliation in a world filled with hurt and resentment, divisions and estrangement.

To Ponder: Where are you aware of estrangement or divisions in your extended family, workplace, church community, or society? Where might God be calling you to act as an 'agent of reconciliation'? If this feels like a risk, is there a small, safe action you might take to test the waters? What might you need from God to follow through?

Prayer: Patient God, thank you for staying connected to me, and for your promise to keep doing so with forgiveness and love. Help me to know when it is my turn to seek to mend fences, and my turn to seek to tear fences down. Give me courage and wisdom to know what to say when opportunities for potentially healing conversations arise; and in the midst of my challenges this day give me a measure of peace. Amen.

Notes:

December 11: Friday, Week 2 Awake to Service

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:17-22

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. Incorporated into the body of Christ, we are ‘members of the household of God.’ In any healthy household, every member has duties and responsibilities. Someone pays the bills, someone takes out the trash, someone plans the holiday gatherings, somebody does the minor repairs, somebody checks in on the neighbors, somebody checks in on extended family members who are sick and lonely, etc.

The community of the church is a household of sorts, too. Somebody takes care of the bills (the finance team), someone takes out the trash (the sexton), someone plans the holiday gatherings (the worship team), somebody does the minor repairs (the property committee), somebody checks in on the neighbors (the justice and service team), and somebody checks in on the sick and lonely (all of us in ways), etc. As those who have been welcomed into the household of the community of the Church, we are called to share in the duties and responsibilities.

To Ponder: What responsibilities at home give you a measure of satisfaction? What ones do you dislike? What areas of service in the church have you tried and found to be satisfying? What ones have you disliked? Where might God be calling you to continue serving or to engage in a new area of service; and where might God be giving you permission to pass along a responsibility to others?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the gift of my family and the gift of those church communities that have shaped me. Thank you for all those faithful servants through whose diligent service and loving care I have been blessed. Continue to lead me to opportunities for service as you see fit. Help me to discern when to take on duties and responsibilities and when to say, “no”. Then empower me to follow through. Amen.

Notes:

December 14: Monday, Week 3 Awake to Call

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:1-6

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are those who receive varied callings from God. St. Paul received a call from God in such an astonishing way that his whole life changed in an instant. You may recall that he was blinded by light and audibly heard Jesus speaking. Additionally, Paul’s sense of call was so clear that he refers to it as a commission.

Our callings are less dramatic and often less clear-cut; and we may have multiple callings in our varied spheres of life: family, work, church, society, world. Our work can be a calling (vocation comes from the Latin word ‘vocare’ meaning to call); likewise we may have callings that are lived out through volunteer efforts, and/or commitments to family, friends, and neighbors. When we are awake to our callings, we tend to live with more intentionality; when asleep to our callings, we tend to drift.

To Ponder: Bring to mind one of your varied callings from God. Then reflect on the following:

- *Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue; it means a calling that I hear. It is not a goal to achieve but a gift to be received.* – Parker Palmer
 - This calling that you have brought to mind, how is it a gift for you?
- *“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”* - Frederick Buechner
 - How does this calling in some way connect you to the needs of others, and bring you moments of deep gladness?
- *“[Because of my calling] I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus.”* – St. Paul
 - How does your calling constrain and limit your life?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the varied callings that you give to me. Help me to discern my callings and stay awake to them, so that I may live with purpose and experience moments of deep gladness. So too, instill in me patience and hope so that I may accept the constraints and limits upon my life with gratitude; and help me when the path forward seems unclear. Amen.

Notes:

December 15: Tuesday, Week 3 Awake to Wisdom

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:7-10

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are those who have encountered the wisdom of God, particularly through the church as it repeatedly redraws our attention to the example of Jesus. It is Jesus who wisely instructs us not to be anxious about tomorrow, but to live an engaged life today. It is Jesus who calls us to trust in God to provide what we need (daily bread), in order that we might practice [neighborly] love with less fear. Following this way of Jesus is not easy, but it is wise.

Every human being is unique. Synonyms for unique include eccentric, quirky, and unusual. When we engage in the life of the Church, we begin weaving our life together with other followers of Jesus who are eccentric, quirky, and unusual. These are the very people St. Paul refers to as saints, those in whom *'the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known'*.

To Ponder: Consider the people of your faith communities now and/or in years past. When you consider the characteristics of being eccentric, quirky, or unusual – who comes to mind? Pick one person to reflect upon. Setting aside this person's flaws, consider how in some measure *the wisdom of God in its rich variety* was being revealed through this uniquely created, gifted and limited saint.

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for the community of saints; for all those unusual, blessed people who have revealed a measure of wisdom in their own living out of faith, hope, and love. In my encounters with others today, help me to be less judgmental, more open and curious, and more awake to the mystery that is wisdom. Amen.

Notes:

December 16: Wednesday, Week 3 Awake to Suffering

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:11-13

This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. In our connection to our risen and ever-present Lord we are those who have direct access to God, and Jesus urges us to pray with confidence and boldness. Why then do we fail to pray as we ought, failing to pray with regularity and/or failing to pray with confidence and boldness? Maybe it partly has to do with misconceptions about suffering; with some part of us believing prayer to be primarily about removing or avoiding suffering. “If God perhaps might save us from this particular suffering,” a voice inside of us says, “then perhaps we should pray with timid respectfulness. But then if God isn’t going to save us from suffering, why bother to pray at all?”

In this passage, as in many others, Paul acknowledges his own suffering as an unavoidable fact of life. Paul suffers physically because Christ has called him to speak a Word of God’s inclusive welcome, and this Word is threatening to those in power. Paul will end up beaten and imprisoned for following God’s call. So too, Paul suffers emotionally because Christ keeps calling him to start new church communities in places like Philippi, Corinth, and Ephesus. In each new church he develops strong bonds of love with the people; and then Christ calls him to leave and move on and Paul’s heart will ache. Paul, however, continues to pray fervently and boldly, knowing that God will not give him a way around suffering, but a way through.

To Ponder: Consider where you have experienced a degree of suffering recently, and don’t worry if what comes to mind feels minor (anxiety and worry count). When and how have you brought this to God in prayer? What might change if you were to spend more time praying and less time worrying? What might change if you prayed with more boldness? Try it now, with whatever words appear on your lips.

Prayer: Call to mind an aspect of your own suffering or the suffering of another, then recite Psalm 143 printed on next page. Note that your ‘enemy’ may be a disease, stress, complication, or hardship. Let the bold words of the Psalmist become yours in this moment.

Notes:

Psalm 143 (from The Message, by Eugene Peterson)

¹⁻² Listen to this prayer of mine, GOD;
pay attention to what I'm asking.
Answer me—you're famous for your answers!
Do what's right for me.
But don't, please don't, haul me into court;
not a person alive would be acquitted there.

³⁻⁶ The enemy hunted me down;
he kicked me and stomped me within an inch of my life.
He put me in a black hole,
buried me like a corpse in that dungeon.
I sat there in despair, my spirit draining away,
my heart heavy, like lead.
I remembered the old days,
went over all you've done, pondered the ways you've worked,
Stretched out my hands to you,
as thirsty for you as a desert thirsty for rain.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Hurry with your answer, GOD!
I'm nearly at the end of my rope.
Don't turn away; don't ignore me!
That would be certain death.
If you wake me each morning with the sound of your loving voice,
I'll go to sleep each night trusting in you.
Point out the road I must travel;
I'm all ears, all eyes before you.
Save me from my enemies, GOD—
you're my only hope!
Teach me how to live to please you,
because you're my God.
Lead me by your blessed Spirit
into cleared and level pastureland.

¹¹⁻¹² Keep up your reputation, God—give me life!
In your justice, get me out of this trouble!
In your great love, vanquish my enemies;
make a clean sweep of those who harass me.
And why? Because I'm your servant.

December 17: Thursday, Week 3 Awake to the Spirit

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14-19

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are part of the family of God, ones in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells; as such, we are those who are *being strengthened in our inner being with power through the Holy Spirit*. Rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, we are those called to be awake to this inner life of the Spirit.

When awake to our inner life we become aware of different forces at work within us. The Spirit of God is a force, so is our own ego. The ego is not necessarily bad, but without awareness it can disconnect and alienate us from others as it seeks its own way. The word we tend to use for our individual, isolated personhood is ‘self.’ I alone, driven by my ego, am a self. The word we tend to use for our self in connection to God is ‘soul.’ To be purely ‘self-ish’ is to be asleep to one’s inner life of the spirit. To be ‘soul-ish’ is to be awake.

To Ponder: Review your primary activities and encounters from yesterday. When were your motivations selfish? When soulish? When were your reactions selfish? When soulish? How might God be inviting you in the day ahead to stay awake to the Spirit’s strengthening power at work within you?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for continuing to walk with me with never failing love, for your forgiveness of my times of selfishness, and for the ways you are at work strengthening me in my inner being. Help me to navigate the demands, responsibilities, and complexities of my life with greater self-awareness; so that my motivations and reactions may be ever more soulish. Amen.

Notes:

December 18: Friday, Week 3 Awake to Potential

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:20-21

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are small, limited, sinful, and we are passing away. At the same time, we are the ones in whom the power of God is at work! Embodied in the life of Jesus, this power healed the sick, fed the hungry, and raised the dead. In the death and resurrection of Jesus this power even defeated death. With this power at work in us, surprising things are possible. Life, therefore, is never without hope for *God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.* We are those called to engage life awake to this potential.

On our own, there's not all that much most of us can do—get an education, find work, perhaps find a mate, make some friends, maybe raise a family, join in the doings of a church, engage a hobby, fend off boredom with entertainment, enjoy a few vacations, survive 40 years in the work force, then retire just when the body starts wearing out. Yet there can be, and there is, so much more! The power of the creator of the universe is at work within us, and we too can create. Likewise, the power of love is within us. In every service undertaken out of concern for someone else, and in every caring conversation with another there exists the possibility for God to heal or reveal, to deepen or transform, to bring to life something new. Such potential!

To Ponder: Think back over the past few days or weeks. When have you experienced a moment of satisfaction or joy doing something on your own? When have you experienced a moment of satisfaction or joy engaging in conversation or working together with someone else? Where do you sense the power of God in those moments?

Prayer: Glory to you, Lord Jesus, for your power at work throughout this world; and praise to you for continuing to be at work in me. Increase in me the faith that this is so. Give me confidence, empathy, and an ample measure of hope so that I might live this day awake to possibility. Amen.

Notes:

December 21: Monday, Week 4 Awake to Oneness

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are those who have been washed and forgiven, welcomed and accepted, and through the power of the Holy Spirit incorporated into the body of Christ. We are *part* of Christ's body, and though we may have different gifts and callings, we are equal *partners* with one another. With God above us and Christ beside us, no one is higher nor lower in the unity of Christ's body. We, therefore, are those who are called to stay awake to this essential oneness. We do this with humility.

The word humility, like the word human, comes from the Latin word 'humus' meaning ground or earth. To have humility, therefore, is to be grounded; not too high, rising above others; not too low, falling beneath; but grounded in our shared humanity, equal partners in the one body. True humility can be a challenge, for we live in a competitive world filled with hierarchies and divisions. There are varied degrees of education and training, we have wealth and class distinctions, differing life experiences, and there exists the dynamic of birth order in families. Some may look down on us, others may show us deference believing us to possess a higher standing. We, however, are those called to keep relating to one another as equal partners in the one body.

To Ponder: Reflect on recent interactions or conversations. When did you consciously or unconsciously lose sight of your shared humanity? When did your ego lead you to rise above with an attitude of superiority, or fall below with a sense of inferiority? How might you stay awake to our essential oneness in the day ahead?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for breathing into me the breath of life, and for all those who have nurtured me over the years. Thank you, Lord Jesus for incorporating me into your body and for your ongoing, never failing, patient love of me. Help me to stay grounded in your love. When I rise too high, bring me down to earth; and when I sink low, raise me up. Amen.

Notes:

December 22: Tuesday, Week 4 Awake to Giftedness

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:7, 11-13

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are those with gifts intended for use in the community of the Church. We also have gifts that are intended for use elsewhere—in our families, workplaces, and neighborhoods, etc. However, we are those called to employ certain gifts given us by God for building up the body of Christ.

The list of gifts given above may sound rather formal and 'churchy'. Consider them in the following way. Like entrepreneurial leaders in other fields, *Apostles* help the Church to keep adapting and evolving as times change. *Prophets* are those with gifts of discernment; they tend to be prayerful and reflective, quietly noticing what others might fail to see, helping the Church to stay grounded in the wisdom of God. *Evangelists* are those with gifts of passion and enthusiasm; they often enjoy trying new things and will encourage others to join in. The term *Pastor* does not refer to clergy here, but to all those who are drawn to serving; these people care for others and are often generous with their time and resources. *Teachers* are those with gifts for communicating the faith in ways that are accessible and engaging; they honor the traditions and history of the Church and ensure that what is essential is passed on (even as the apostles are helping the church evolve). Note: we may have a mixture of some, or all, of these gifts in varying degrees, and that mixture may change over time.

To Ponder: In what way or ways have you shared your gifts within the church community. What have you found to be satisfying and life-giving? What have you found to be the opposite? What does that reveal to you about your own mixture of gifts? Where do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to engage your gifts now?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for the gifts you have planted in me; help me to be a good steward of them. Give me discernment so that I may know where and when I am being called to share in the responsibilities of the Church, and where and when a particular task or responsibility may be left for someone else. Then give me the wisdom and the courage to act. Amen.

Notes:

December 23: Wednesday, Week 3 Awake to Truth

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:14-16

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are members of the body of Christ, and he is the head of the body. The head is the seat of decision making, the place of primary control. As individuals we have heads, too, and every day we are confronted with choices and decisions. Our well-being and the well-being of others is powerfully dependent upon how we think and act. However, in the face of all life's uncertainties, we do not have ultimate control over our future. We are those called to trust in God for our future.

This passage references people's trickery, scheming, and lies. Why do we, at times, lie or shade the truth? Is it because we are afraid? We cannot control other people's reactions, we cannot control the outcome of difficult conversations, we cannot control our future; and that can be frightening. "Trust me," says our God. Risk speaking the truth in love, even if it means relinquishing control; for the one who is the head of the body, Christ Jesus, will be with you promoting growth.

To Ponder: Recall a recent interaction or conversation that was deep and/or difficult? Where was truth spoken in love? Where might truth have been shaded or side-stepped? What underlying fear was impacting the encounter? How might you stay awake to your fears, and Christ's invitation to risk speaking the truth in love?

Prayer: Thank you Lord, for placing truth tellers in my life who have helped me gain a measure of clarity about you, about life, about myself (especially). Help me to keep growing in trust that you will provide and that your Way is life, in order that I might more and more let go of the need for control. Then give me courage to speak the truth in love, and the wisdom to hear and internalize truth offered to me. Amen.

Notes:

December 24: Thursday, Week 4 Awake to the Way of Christ

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 6:10-17

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. We are the inheritors of the Christmas story. This is the old story about how once upon a time, in the birth of a vulnerable infant, God was taking on cosmic powers of evil. This is also the ongoing story of how God's power is hidden in weakness as the resurrected Jesus Christ comes and takes flesh in us.

There really are cosmic forces of evil whose intent is to separate us from God, separate us from one another, and separate us from wholeness within our own selves. Separated from God we would no longer be a soul, but a self; and total selfishness is a form of hell. Isolated from community we would live in perpetual fear of others; and fear is a form of hell. Cut off from inner wholeness there would never be any internal peace; and peace is heaven. Why do tyrants lead nations to war, and why do the wealthy oppress the poor? Because cosmic forces have led or seduced them into being selfish and fearful, and they lack inner peace.

But Jesus Christ is born this day! God is again coming to do battle with these cosmic forces, with power! As this is the Christmas story, however, God's power will once again be hidden in frail human flesh—this time yours and mine—as we follow Christ's way of truth and righteousness, seeking to proclaim Christ's Gospel of peace. Today the risen Christ is once again calling us to "*arm ourselves*" with this story, the Christmas story; the story of divine power hidden in frail human flesh, the story that continues with us.

To Ponder: Reflect over the past four weeks of Advent. Where have you glimpsed evidence of the power of Almighty God being at work through others and/or your own self?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for the gift of Christmas. Stir up your power and come. Bless all who celebrate this night; and bring your healing and your peace to this troubled world. Amen.

Notes:

December 25: Friday, Week 4 Awake to Christ

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 6:18-19, 23-24

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflection: Reawakened to who we are, may we stay awake to whom God is calling us to be. Consider the manger in the Christmas story. There is no indication that the manger was made of the finest wood, nor that it was clean or in perfect repair. But it was into the manger that the Christ child was lain. In a way, we are like that manger—rather ordinary, neither perfectly maintained nor pure. Now it is into us that *love and faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ* are lain. We are those in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells; called to be bearers of Christ to others.

From deep within us the Spirit of Christ is once again calling us to love. To love God with our heart, mind, soul and strength; and to love those whom Christ loves—others and ourselves. Everything else passes away, it is love alone that is undying. With an enduring (undying) love for our Lord Jesus Christ we celebrate Christmas today, and we prepare for the coming of a new year with hope. In Christ, love is born today. Through Christ, all things are possible tomorrow.

To Ponder: How has your prayer and/or other spiritual practices over the past four weeks of Advent affected you or changed you? What do you hope to carry forward with you into the new year? What do you need from God or from others so that you will neither forget nor fall asleep to this hope?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for being born in me—for your guiding Spirit at work in me. Teach me to pray, inspire and empower me to love, and give to me your gift of peace. Finally, help me, *“Day by day, to know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly.”* Amen. (attributed to Richard of Chichester, 1197-1253)

Notes: