

OPENING HYMN

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," (ELW 504 or 505)

OPENING PRAYER

Eternal God, your Son cried out in anguish from the cross, and you delivered him. Do not hide your face from those who cry out to you. By his death and resurrection bring life where there is death: feed the hungry, strengthen the weak, and break the chains of oppression, that all people may rejoice in your saving deeds through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW Psalm 22 Prayer, sundaysandseasons.com)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Scrap paper and pens or pencils

Faithfulness

Session two

Faith in the depths: Psalm 22

BY DENISE RECTOR

INTRODUCTION

Being laid off is an extremely stressful experience, often leading to symptoms of anxiety or depression. It's no wonder. We work to earn money for life's necessities and provide for our family's needs. A loss of income can cause a major hardship. And culturally, many of us connect our work to our identity. (We do this even though our true identity is who we are in Christ.)

Once, I was laid off. Another time, I thought I was going to be laid off, but was spared. The first time, I remember feeling helpless, unstable and doubtful. Half-heartedly, I searched for a new job while waiting to hear if I would be one of the employees to be cut. It was hard to prepare to leave that job, even though I knew being laid-off was likely. When the final decisions were made and I was let go, I felt ashamed. Wasn't I good enough to keep? If not, what did that say about me and my earning power? Constantly questioning and judging myself was exhausting. It diverted my focus and energy from finding a new job. The emotional impact of being laid off definitely impacted the drive I needed to find new employment.

The time I came close to being laid off, there had been a months-long discussion about restructuring the office where I worked. I expected to be among those not chosen to remain. To my surprise, however, I was not laid off. A lot of my friends were,

1 Carlos Cabrera-Lomelí, "Layoffs: How to Prioritize Your Mental Health After Losing Your Job, From Telling Family to Self-Care," <https://www.kqed.org/news/11949674/layoffs-mental-health-lost-job-self-care>.

though—two whole departments, in fact—which was heartbreaking. I did not need to worry about income at that point, a privilege I don't want to downplay. But I felt guilty. People who had worked there longer than I had were let go. People with higher ranking in the company hierarchy were laid off. It felt unfair to me that I still had a job when they didn't.

Both layoff experiences made me feel helpless, doubt my self-worth and struggle spiritually. What was happening, and why? Where was God? When I kept my job, I had so much empathy for my friends. I had to navigate that difficult personal and financial road previously. How could I be happy now, seeing them get laid off?

Share aloud or reflect:

1. How do you feel when someone has sympathy for you? What about empathy?

Like the writers of the psalms, we can find consolation in scripture when times are difficult. There is comfort in God's promises and power. Psalm 22, for example, is one place we can look when comfort is hard to find. This may sound circular or a little abstract, but stick with me.

One of the reasons for turning to the biblical book of Psalms, especially Psalm 22, is the author's intense emotion. Reading this psalm can bring up feelings of sadness or memories of disappointment. It can help us to recognize others who are feeling pain and tap into our sympathy and empathy as ways to support them. Psalm 22 testifies to God's great power—a power in which we can take comfort amid sadness and fear.

THE GOOD FRIDAY PSALM

You might have noticed that images from Psalm 22 are woven into the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Because of this, we read the entire psalm every year

on Good Friday.

After Jesus is tortured and nailed to the cross, he cries out the first line of this psalm in agony (in the gospels of Matthew and Mark). In the Gospel of John, the soldiers decide to not tear Jesus' robe but instead to gamble (cast lots) to see which of them will get to keep it for bragging rights—just as Psalm 22:18 describes. When we read about the scorn, mocking and gloating experienced by the psalmist, we think of Jesus being taunted and humiliated on the cross.

On Good Friday, the one and only person we recognize as connected to this psalm is Jesus. His pleas for God from the cross are part of the mysterious gift of God's salvation. Good Friday is about sitting in the pain, uncertainty and loss as Jesus is crucified—there is no jumping ahead to the joy of Easter morning without this agony—the agony of the cross.

When we encounter Psalm 22 at other times during the year, its emotions and movement draw us in, helping us to think about faith in God during the worst times.

FEELING THE FEELINGS

Like many others, this psalm carries the heading "A Psalm of David." Many Bible scholars consider this heading to be an editorial insertion, giving the text weight, but 2 Chronicles 29:30 mentions "sing[ing] praises ... with the words of David," so for the purposes of this study, we'll go with that. We might think that King David, once called "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22), wouldn't have to face such difficult times. But even strong faith and a close relationship with God don't guarantee that. In Psalm 22, things aren't going so great for the psalmist, and that's an understatement. David, distressed and suffering, is very honest about his vulnerability and needs. He feels forsaken. He needs help because trouble is near.

Over and over, throughout these 31 verses,

David clearly expresses his pain to God. To me, the first half of the psalm reads like one long confession of pain. We can identify with his tears (v. 2), sleepless nights (v. 2) and needing help (v. 1). But we may find it difficult to be as candid as David. Our culture does not always react positively to sadness or vulnerability. More on that in a moment.

📖 **Read:** Psalm 22:1-18

The words of this psalm, like the lyrics of a favorite song or hymn, let us see ourselves in another's experience. As we struggle to hold on to faith in difficult times, these words model how to confess both pain and praise.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Do you notice the “back-and-forth” in these verses? Where do you see it? What feelings do you notice in these verses? Where do you see images of need? Of hope?

TALKING ABOUT SELF-TALK

David says some intense things about himself, and his state of being, laying bare the physical, mental and spiritual impact of his struggles. Imagine if one of your friends, feeling down, said to you, “I’m a worm and not human” (v. 6)? Or that everyone “stares and gloats” (v. 17) at them. It would be hard to hear. David’s expressions of humiliation and disgrace are especially intense—even distressing. I hope I’d be sensitive enough to tend closely to my friend’s soul and mental health if they shared words like this.

On top of all that, in verses 5-8, David is dealing with how other people react to his vulnerability. He notes that his ancestors were *not* put to shame. We see how his self-worth is affected when he says: “*They* weren’t put to shame... but I am a worm. ...Am

I being put to shame?” Others mock him, saying: “Doesn’t God delight in you? Then why isn’t God delivering you?” Even if we disregard the mocking tone, we don’t know—and may never know on this side of heaven—the answer to this question.

Seeing David’s weakness leads us to see our own weakness. This is not a comfortable place to be. This is the Good Friday psalm for a reason. The Gospel writers connect these distressing images of taunting, gloating and humiliation to what Jesus experienced on the cross. Just as in the psalm, people at the foot of cross mock and taunt Jesus, saying he should save himself if he is so powerful. As difficult as this psalm is to hear, it reminds us that others—even Jesus, even David, assuming he was indeed the author of Psalm 22—have experienced this deep level of pain. Even in our worst struggles, we are not alone.

Psalm 22 also frees us to show and feel emotions. Maybe you were raised to believe that boys and men should not cry, or any leader or authority figure who cries is showing weakness. Here we see that feeling sad, needing help, even crying are not weak, not gendered, but simply human needs and emotions.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. How is your self-talk? When you are upset or going through tough times, do you speak to yourself as gently as you would a friend?

NOT JUST POSITIVE THINKING

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that you or anyone going through a difficult time just needs to “think positive,” “put on a brave face” or “turn that frown upside down.” That is not helpful advice. It is not what we see in Scripture. This sort of “sweeping away the agony” is not what God wants for us.

Glossing over our pain, especially with empty

clichés like “just think positively,” is harmful to our spirits, our relationships with others, and our relationship with God. Whenever I’ve been told such things, even though the speakers meant well, this hollow advice made me feel more alone. Unfortunately, I’ve also said such words to others—sometimes in an attempt to help, sometimes when I didn’t know what else to say, and sometimes when the level of vulnerability and pain made me uncomfortable.

As beloved poet, activist, and all-around wise woman Maya Angelou advised Oprah about a past incident: “You did then what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better” (*Oprah Winfrey Speaks*. John Wiley & Sons, NY 1998, p. 132). Over time, this quote has been shortened to: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better. We, too, can look for better ways to be of service when we see a friend in pain.

Our impulse to help and empathize when others are in pain is part of how God connects us to each other. We can foster those connections in ways that don’t cause more harm. We can connect with others in ways that lead us toward God, rather than solely relying on ourselves. This is the opposite of shallow platitudes that say we should be able to “pull ourselves up, emotionally and spiritually, by our own bootstraps.”

As Lutherans, we believe some important things about our relationship with God. Namely: God first loved us. In love, God comes to us. God continually moves toward us. God freely gives us salvation, because we cannot save ourselves. God does this when we are doing well and when we are in distress. God is God, in times of joy and despair.

When we ignore our own pain and put on a brave face to match the expectations of others, we may miss out on the opportunity to rely on God’s constant, loving presence. As we read Psalm, 22, we see David remembering God’s presence.

📖 Read: Psalm 22:19-24

Amid his pain and vulnerability, David recognizes that God is in relationship with him (vv. 19-21). By pouring out his sadness *to God*, David stays *connected* to God. At no point does David stop talking to God. In the first two verses, the psalmist calls God by name three times. Shortly thereafter, we hear “Yet you are holy...” (v. 3), a testimony that God is indeed God.

Living in the moment of this psalm—the moment of agony and fear—is deeply uncomfortable. Yet because of its association with Jesus’ crucifixion, this psalm is familiar to many churchgoers, who almost anticipate the “happy ending” of praise. Still, this psalm begins in pain, with David taking time to honestly express and move through his tender emotions.

Even when we are dealing with disagreements, despair, disappointment and deep loss, we have been given an amazing gift: the enduring, holy presence of God. God’s presence is not something to smooth over our pain. God’s presence reminds us of something much bigger: who God is.

Within ourselves, within our communities, who God is makes a difference even while we are experiencing those hard moments. Yes, it is difficult, because at those times we do not have the answers we long for. Yet God is still God.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Has someone else’s pain made you uncomfortable? How did you handle it? If you could do it again, would you do anything differently?
5. Where do you see God present, when you don’t “feel” God? How does this affect your faith?

FROM YOU COMES MY PRAISE

 **Read:** Psalm 22:25-31

This is a turnaround from the earlier verses. After the deeply despairing talk of his shame, the psalmist turns to God's holiness. David moves from dishonor and pain to wall-to-wall praise. He declares that he is ready to "pay vows" (v. 25) and "live for [God]" (v. 29).

Can David really be worshipful in the midst of such anguish? Can we? This gift of a psalm shows that, for God's people, crying out and praising are often companions. Maybe that is why Jesus chose these words to cry out to his Father from the cross during the mystery of working out our salvation (See Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34).

If you are like me, you may be thinking: *That's just too hard for me. David can do that because he is special. The scriptures say he was "a man after God's own heart"* (1 Samuel 13:14). But remember: God's love for you and me is just as strong as it was for David. We have this psalm as a comfort. At times, life brings us to a place of loss. We may feel too low to worship amid our pain. That's when we can listen to this psalm and its ancient, lasting words of praise. Together, the ancient psalmist, Jesus, you and I can cry out to God in both despair and worship.

As Lutherans, we talk a lot about ideas being in tension, a sort of "both/and," as in "We are both saint and sinner," or that we are both freed in Christ, as well as bound to our neighbor in service. The idea that not only joy, but despair, has a place in worship is another "both/and" concept. God is big enough and loving enough to encompass both despair and worship.

As David's praise continues, the scope of it grows. His confessions of praise move from him to the community of believers: "the great congregation" (v. 25), "the families of the nations" (v. 27), and even to past and future generations—"all who sleep in the

earth" (v. 29) and "a people yet unborn" (vv. 30-31).

CONCLUSION

God does not hide when we call. God hears us when we cry. We know that we can cry out to God from the depths, just as the psalmist and Jesus did. Just as God was there for David, God is there for us. Just as Jesus called on God, we can also call on God. When we see David witnessing to God's holiness, even through his pain, we know God's love comes to us in our deepest troubles too. As Psalm 22 shows, we can bring our complete selves—even our pain and tears—into our prayers, finding God's love and mercy there as well.

CLOSING PRAYER

Sovereign God, we thank you for your everlasting love. We thank you for coming to us. Hear our cries. Help us be present for those who are hurting. Lead and guide us to serve your beloved people, especially when they are in pain. We pray these things through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN

"Just a Closer Walk with Thee," *ELW* 697 

WINTER/SPRING 2025:

“FAITHFULNESS”

by Denise Rector

(January) Session One: Ruth and Naomi

Ruth chooses to remain part of Naomi’s family, even after Naomi has lost everything – including her husband and sons. This inter-generational story of faithfulness during emptiness and sorrow helps us learn how to rely on God in bleak times.

(February) Session Two: Psalm 22
David testifies that God is God and worthy of praise, even as David is in despair. It’s no wonder that Jesus cried out to God during the crucifixion using these very words. In our worst times, this psalm gives us a way to contemplate God’s holiness.

(March) Session Three: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10-11)
We do not always see eye-to-eye with our neighbor. And yet, we are called to love our neighbor. Peter’s experience with someone different gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to teach Peter, the church and us to see others as God sees them.

(April) Session Four: Jairus and the woman who is bleeding (Mark 5:21-43)
When both Jairus and the woman who is bleeding reach out in their pain and disappointment, Jesus meets them with compassion. Jesus is present in our actions as well when our listening and grace make us stand out from the world around us.

SUMMER 2025:

“HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS”

by Brooke Petersen

(June) Session One:

Relationships that Form Us: All in the Family?

Some of our most beloved Bible stories involve siblings and the trials and tribulations of relationships within families. We’ll examine the stories of Jacob and Esau, as well as Mary and Martha, while considering what we learned in our own families about relationships. These biblical characters will help us to explore how our early family relationships shape how we think about the everyday relationships in our lives.

(July) Session Two:

Relationships that Sustain Us:

Where You Go I Will Go

One cannot get far in this life without encountering suffering. Loss, betrayal and tragedy show up in our own lives and in the lives of those we love. In this Bible study, we will explore the story of Naomi and Ruth, two women who held fast to their relationship in the face of great loss. With this in mind, we’ll consider what helps us to stay in relationship with others when we face seasons of grief and suffering in our own lives and the lives of others.

(August) Session Three:

Relationships that Push Us to Grow:

For Such a Time as This Relationships aren’t always comfortable. There are times when

we find ourselves navigating the painful work of growing and changing in our relationships. This session explores the story of Queen Esther and her uncle Mordecai. How can we draw on the stories of our faith when we face great challenges in our lives and relationships with others? We’ll explore how vulnerability, trust and the power of faithful friendships help us to grow.

FALL 2025:

“MONEY, STEWARDSHIP AND GENEROSITY,”

by the Rev. Dr. Christa von Zychlin

(September) Session One:

Money – What do we treasure?

(October) Session Two:

Stewardship – How do we protect & multiply our treasure?

(November) Session Three:

Generosity – To whom & where do we open our treasure?

DECEMBER 2025 DEVOTIONAL:

“PRACTICING ADVENT IMAGINATION: MATTHEW’S DREAMERS AND ISAIAH’S VISIONS”

by the Rev. Sara Olson-Smith

We cannot build a new future that we cannot imagine. The long nights of Advent gift us with time to dream. This study offers ways to imagine God’s future for us and all creation—through the dreams of Joseph, the Three Wise Men and Isaiah.

Faithfulness

Session two

Faith in the depths: Psalm 22

BY DENISE RECTOR

SESSION GOALS

- Think more deeply about how to be present for yourself and others during strife.
- Wrestle with praise in the midst of pain.
- Take comfort in God's steadfast holiness.
- Know that the lows and highs of Scripture, as well as God's love, are available to us.

OVERVIEW

In Psalm 22, we have a model for praising God in distress. Even when it feels next to impossible to sing God's praise, we can read this psalm and know that God will never stop loving us.

Sometimes our disappointment makes it hard for us to trust God. When we ask for something in prayer, God's response to us might seem to be "no," "not yet" or even silence in the face of our need. Psalm 22 reminds us that others, including our biblical ancestors, have felt the same. In turning to Scripture, we grow closer to God.

Psalm 22 is included in the church lectionary every Good Friday. A lectionary is a scheduled set of scriptural readings. Different churches may use different lectionaries. The ELCA and many Protestant churches use the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of scripture readings chosen to match the church seasons. It is a sign of unity in God's church that many churches around the world are united by shared weekly lectionary readings.

Psalm 22 begins with a stark back-and-forth of despair. It ends with songs of praise and thankfulness for the psalmist's deliverance, for the assembly, and even for future generations. As Lutheran scholar Rolf Jacobson points out, the psalmist's widening circle of praise is remarkable. According to Jacobson, it entails "...not just the living and the dead, but also the not-yet-living: 'posterity' and 'future generations' and 'a people yet unborn.' Thus, the eternal song of praise envelops not just everyone everywhere, but also everywhen." (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-psalm-2223-31-5>)

LEADING GROUP CONVERSATIONS

When discussing Question 1, participants may want to share their own difficult life situations, instead of their experiences with empathy and sympathy. Gently steer group members toward talking about empathy, sympathy and the power of community. We want all participants to feel safe being vulnerable within a trusted space. To do so, we strive to be present and care for each other in bad times as well as good times. Faith in community is a blessing to many.

Encourage participants to respect this time of sharing. The section entitled "Not Just Positive Thinking" encourages this kind of community support. Leaders can model sharing and vulnerability for the group. This is also a good time to remind people of the need for confidentiality, as far as the sharing of personal stories.

RESOURCES FOR TALKING ABOUT EMOTIONS

Job, Lamentations and Psalms. These biblical books provide comfort in knowing that your emotions are reflected in scripture.

Sundays and Seasons (sundaysandseasons.com, accessible via subscription). This online pastoral

resource includes a short prayer for each psalm. Your pastor or worship leader may have access to this resource. The prayer for Psalm 22 is the opening prayer for this Bible study session.

ELCA.org (search “Health and Wellness”) This website offers online resources related to health and wellness, including mental health.

SAMHSA.gov. This is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This public health effort works to advance the behavioral health of the nation.

Journaling/art activities. Many people use journaling and art to express their emotions. Read this article from Psychology Today on “Harnessing Emotions to Fuel Creativity,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/creativity-the-art-and-science/202001/harnessing-emotions-fuel-creativity>.

SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

The entire study can be completed in a 120-minute session (or a series of weekly half-hour studies). Larger groups can break up into pairs or groups of three for discussion, to keep the whole group engaged. Here are suggestions for shortening the study.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask participants to read the study and consider/complete the questions before they arrive.
2. Sing the Opening Hymn or pray the Opening Prayer.
3. Ask each person to share one memorable point and/or one question they have from the lesson.
4. Discuss the questions group members have raised, as time allows.
5. End with the Closing Prayer or the Closing Hymn.

A LITTLE LONGER STUDY (45 TO 60 MINUTES)

1. Sing the Opening Hymn and pray the Opening Prayer.
2. Read the study together. Group members may take turns reading scripture passages aloud where indicated.
3. Invite two or three responses to the questions in each section.
4. End with the Closing Prayer. Sing the Closing Hymn if time allows.

TWO-HOUR STUDY (works well with larger groups)

1. Sing the Opening Hymn. Pray the Opening Prayer.
2. Invite participants to briefly name their favorite psalm.
3. Read the study together. Group members may take turns reading scripture passages aloud where indicated.
4. Break into small groups of two or three to discuss questions. (People can remain in their groups for all the questions, or switch groups if they prefer.) Take 5 minutes to report out on the conversation before moving to the next section.
5. Invite participants to share a favorite hymn or contemporary song that reflects the theme of the lesson.
6. End with the Closing Prayer and the Closing Hymn. 🌸