A DEVOTIONAL FOR ADVENT, CHRISTMAS, AND EPIPHANY

Room for Our Neighbors

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Forty Days of Hope, Welcome, and Justice

November 29, 2026–January 7, 2027

For individuals, households, and congregations

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me…"

Matthew 25:35

Waiting for Christ. Welcoming our neighbors. Working for a more just world.

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INTRODUCTION

Room for Our Neighbors

Our journey begins on November 29, the First Sunday of Advent, and continues through Christmas and Epiphany until January 7. Over these 40 days, we'll wait for Christ together, celebrate God's nearness, and carry that love with us into our daily lives.

We're invited to see our immigrant and refugee neighbors for who they are: people whose dignity and gifts God has already woven into them. Some of you know the story of migration deep in your bones, while others are just beginning to learn what it means to be a good neighbor. And God welcomes all of us.

We begin with grace. We don't have to earn God's love through hard work or perfect policies. Because God loves us first, we are free to love others, admit when we fall short, and try again tomorrow.

This devotional brings together two important ideas: opening our doors to strangers and working toward fair, generous laws. Everyday kindness makes a real difference, and so do the public choices that help families feel safe, find good work, and feel they belong.

Each day includes a Bible reading, a short reflection, and a prayer. When you can, read the whole passage. The readings follow our forty-day theme and also mark some of the church year's important days. The ELCA's social message, Immigration (1998; editorially updated 2018), is a helpful companion. This devotional is for Christians of every tradition. You're welcome to read the reflections without using the prayers or sharing the theology. Bring your questions and convictions as we reflect together on dignity, welcome, and justice.

May our waiting turn into welcome, our celebration into generosity, and our prayers into real, grounded love.

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DAY 1

November 29, 2026 — First Sunday of Advent

Loved Before We Begin

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8–10

"For by grace you have been saved through faith…"

Before we make room for anyone else, God makes room for us.

That is good news, because this journey starts with a gift, not a test. God's love finds us long before we have a plan, understand the issues, or know what to say. Grace is the ground from which we learn to love our neighbors and do the good works God has prepared for us.

Thinking about immigration can bring up many feelings: compassion, confusion, anger, fear, or even guilt. You can bring them all to God. And you don't need to be a policy expert to take one faithful step.

None of us has to save the world; that work belongs to God. We're simply called to love the neighbors right in front of us and to care about the world that shapes their lives.

Today, receive God's grace as a gift. Then notice one neighbor God has placed in your path and offer them the same patient welcome you have received.

Prayer: Gracious God, let your love be our starting place. Quiet our need to prove ourselves and open our eyes to the neighbors you place in our path today. Amen.

DAY 2

November 30, 2026

More Than a Label

Scripture: Genesis 1:26–31

"So God created humans in his image…"

Long before anyone is called a citizen, immigrant, refugee, or asylum-seeker, they carry the image of God.

Labels can help us organize information, but they shouldn't erase the differences in people's stories. Whatever their story, each person's worth comes first.

In January 2026, I visited the Holy Land. I witnessed Palestinians being treated in dehumanizing ways and heard Palestinian friends describe the obstacles they face each day. I also saw faith rooted in the promise of resurrection, a faith that resists every attempt to deny their God-given dignity.

Palestinian experiences and those of immigrants in the United States have distinct histories and realities, and it's important not to treat them as interchangeable. What brings them together here is the shared belief that no person's humanity is diminished by nationality, borders, or government policy.

Every person has skills, hopes, fears, determination, and a desire to live life abundantly. Every life holds far more than a stranger can see at a glance or from afar.

Whenever immigration comes up in conversation, try asking a simple question: Does the way I am talking honor the people I am talking about?

Today, take a moment to notice the words you hear and use. When a label reduces someone to just one thing, make space for the fuller, richer story of who they are.

Prayer: Creator God, teach us to see your image in every neighbor. Keep our words and actions from shrinking the lives you have created so beautifully. Amen.

DAY 3

December 1, 2026

A Stranger at the Door

Scripture: Matthew 25:31–40

"I was a stranger, and you welcomed me…"

The people in Jesus' story are caught completely off guard. They had no idea that ordinary moments of kindness were actual encounters with him.

Our biblical text also tells us that they visited people in prison and jail (v. 36), real people they could befriend. Christ's promise invites us to share in their lives in an authentic, personal way.

It is easy to expect Jesus to show up in a quiet sanctuary or during a moving hymn. Yet Jesus keeps pointing us toward people whose needs interrupt our schedules and go beyond the sanctuary.

Since August 2025, I've been taking part in prayer vigils hosted by the Indiana United Methodist Conference (INUMC) at the Miami Correctional Facility in Bunker Hill, Indiana, which houses immigrant detainees. Seeing the concrete walls, barbed wire, and fencing, and hearing the explosives used in training exercises, makes our encounters with Christ beyond the sanctuary feel especially meaningful and brings a fresh perspective to conversations about immigration.

Who in your neighborhood or congregation has stayed a stranger simply because nobody has paused long enough for a real conversation?

Today, ask God for the courage to move from noticing someone to actually knowing them.

Prayer: Jesus, you show up in unexpected places. Change our hearts to meet you there, beyond the sanctuary walls. Help us see the stranger so our welcome grows into a real relationship. Amen.

DAY 4

December 2, 2026

Love Without a Smaller Circle

Scripture: Leviticus 19:33–34

"…you shall love the alien as yourself…"

God's command here is clear: love is never meant to stay inside a small circle of people who share our birthplace, our history, or our last name.

Loving a neighbor as ourselves means taking their everyday life just as seriously as our own. We know what it feels like to want our kids to be safe, to be treated fairly at work, to come home to a quiet place to rest, and to have some say in our future.

Our neighbors may pray in another language or carry memories we can barely imagine, yet those basic hopes are identical.

This kind of love asks for more than a polite wave across the street. If we would feel angry about being cheated on wages, talked down to, or denied a fair hearing, love nudges us to speak up when that happens to someone else.

Today, think of one everyday protection you take for granted, and pray that your neighbors can count on it, too.

Prayer: God of generous love, stretch our hearts past what feels familiar. Help us want for our neighbors the same safety, fairness, and dignity we want for ourselves. Amen.

DAY 5

December 3, 2026

Remembering Vulnerability

Scripture: Exodus 23:9

"…you know the heart of an alien…"

God asks the people to remember what it feels like to be vulnerable.

Memory softens our edges. Maybe you remember walking into a room where everyone already knew each other, asking for help when you felt embarrassed, or staring at a form in an unfamiliar place with no idea what to write.

Those moments are not the same as fleeing violence or navigating a complex border system, and we should never pretend they are. Even so, they give us a small window into how tender it feels to be at someone else's mercy.

Some of us carry the experience of migration in our own bodies and family histories. Others of us mostly need to listen and learn.

God doesn't ask us to claim someone else's story as our own. God asks us to let our own memories loosen our certainty and deepen our patience.

Today, recall a time you relied on a stranger's kindness. Thank God for it and let that gratitude shape how you treat the next person you meet.

Prayer: Remembering God, keep us honest about how much we depend on others. Let our memories open a door to compassion rather than making us think we already know it all. Amen.

DAY 6

December 4, 2026

God Is Already There

Scripture: Psalm 146:5–10

"The Lord watches over the strangers…"

Sometimes we may speak as though we're bringing God into broken situations on our own. But the psalm offers a different and comforting picture: God is already there, caring for vulnerable people, feeding the hungry, and lifting up those pushed to the margins.

At an August 2026 prayer vigil at the Miami Correctional Facility in Bunker Hill, Indiana, we heard from an advocate who had once been detained. The advocate introduced someone released that very day, a story we rarely get to hear. Some of us had just asked whether anyone had been released, so the news felt like an answer to prayer. God is at work, and our prayers matter, even in one person's release.

We do not bring God to our immigrant and refugee neighbors. Instead, we ask for eyes to see what God is already doing among them: in their courage, hospitality, parenting, prayers, and quiet grit.

This realization changes the way we show up. We come ready not only to give, but also to receive. We ask what people are already building and how we can support them along the way. And often, the very people we came to encourage end up encouraging us in return.

Today, pray for humility before offering help. Look for strength as carefully as you look for need.

Prayer: Living God, thank you for always taking the first step. You know what's needed long before we do. Help us look with humility and recognize your grace already at work in our neighbors' lives, and guide us to respond with faithfulness. Amen.

DAY 7

December 5, 2026

A Willing Heart

Scripture: Luke 1:26–38

"…let it be with me according to your word."

Mary's "yes" does not mean the road ahead will be easy. She asks an honest question, holds onto a promise, and puts her life in God's hands.

I think many of us wish faithfulness came with a simple step-by-step guide—or an email from God saying, "Do this!" Instead, God often gives us just enough light to help us take the next few steps.

I'm grateful for Pastor Emily Trubey-Weller's leadership on immigration. She has helped plan our Synod's participation in the prayer vigils, shared helpful information with congregations, and encouraged others to take part. Her example helps make the next faithful step in this devotional feel concrete and within reach.

You don't have to promise more than you can follow through on. A small, honest commitment means far more than a grand promise that fades by February.

God loves to work through willing people who are still figuring things out as they go.

Today, name one commitment you can make faithfully, as Mary entrusts herself to God's word while still asking how the promise will unfold.

Prayer: God of surprising invitations, meet our questions with your promise. As we respond to your love, fill our hearts with openness and give us the courage to take the next faithful step. Amen.

DAY 8

December 6, 2026 — Second Sunday of Advent

Preparing a Way

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1–5

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord…"

Isaiah opens with a comforting message from God to a weary people: God is coming to meet them. The road through the wilderness is being prepared for the Lord.

Advent preparation begins with that promise, not with our efforts to make everything ready. In Jesus Christ, God comes to meet us with mercy. We prepare the way in response to that grace.

Some barriers to welcome are right inside our buildings and habits: a bulletin that isn't translated, an evening meeting without childcare, a church door that feels heavy or guarded, or our habit of talking before listening.

Other barriers are built into public systems: confusing paperwork, unequal access, and rules that leave people with no real chance to be heard.

God's welcome comes first. Trusting that welcome, we can help make room for our neighbors. We cannot clear every boulder out of the road today, yet we can stop pretending those boulders just belong there.

One way to respond is to ask people what makes walking through the door hard. Their answers might gently challenge assumptions we didn't even realize we were carrying.

Today, look at one familiar space through a newcomer's eyes. What says you belong here, and what quietly makes coming in harder?

Prayer: God, you promise to come to us before we have made anything ready. Root us in that promise. Show us the roadblocks we have stopped noticing, and give us the patience to listen and the courage to help clear a path for our neighbors. Amen.

DAY 9

December 7, 2026

Light Enough for Today

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2–7

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light…”

Advent hope never asks us to pretend the dark isn't real.

We can face grief, cruelty, uncertainty, and deep exhaustion honestly, knowing God’s light shines among people making their way through difficult times. For neighbors whose futures feel uncertain, simply being there and saying, “You don’t have to walk through this alone,” offers a more lasting hope than promises about how things will turn out.

“Everything will work out” is a promise none of us can make. We can offer something much truer: “You don't have to walk through this alone.”

Hope often looks ordinary: a ride to an appointment, soup left on the porch, a reliable phone number, or showing up next week as promised. These small acts don’t fix everything, but they make sure our neighbors don’t have to face it alone.

Today, resist the urge to talk someone out of their fear. Ask what steady, faithful company might look like instead.

Prayer: God of light, meet us in the world as it truly is. Help us become people of steady hope who never turn away from pain or leave our neighbors to face it alone. Amen.

DAY 10

December 8, 2026

Making Room for Lament

Scripture: Psalm 13

“How long, O Lord?”

Scripture gives us full permission to pray without cleaning up our pain first.

“How long?” is a deeply faithful prayer. How long will families live miles apart with no date for reunion? How long will people wait for basic safety? How long will neighbors be talked about as if their lives weigh less than ours?

Lament refuses to shrug at suffering, and it refuses to hush the person who is hurting.

In July 2026, at a prayer vigil at First Unitarian Church in Hammond, Indiana, we gathered to remember those who died at the hands of ICE agents, including Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston, Texas, and Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero in Biddeford, Maine, as well as those who died while in detention, including Lorth Sim and Tuan Van Bui, both at the Miami Correctional Facility. We spoke their names aloud. They were children of God. We heard stories from people who feared for their own lives as they grieved the loss of loved ones.

When someone is grieving, we don't need to rush them toward silver linings or forced gratitude. We can simply sit beside them, name what has been lost, and carry before God the things we cannot fix.

People walking through heartbreak do not owe anyone a brave face or an inspiring story.

Pray the words “How long?” for someone still waiting. Let your lament name what hurts without rushing toward an answer.

Prayer: God who hears, hold close what we cannot understand and the grief that bears us down. Keep us close to everyone who is still waiting. Amen.

DAY 11

December 9, 2026

Listening Is Love

Scripture: James 1:19–20

"…let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger…"

Real listening takes more work than giving advice. It asks us to set down our prepared speeches and let someone else steer the conversation.

A neighbor might want to talk about work, music, their kids, tomatoes, or the weather, not immigration. No one owes us a painful story in return for our friendliness. When someone does choose to share their story, listening is a powerful way to honor it.

Last May, I attended a vigil hosted by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky. Two migrants shared moving stories about nearly twenty years spent navigating the immigration system. Their experiences remind us of the humanity that reaches beyond immigration law and reform. Listening to real people share their stories can help us move past the abstractions that often shape ongoing conversations.

If someone chooses to share something difficult with you, take the time to listen with care and without comparing or judging. Focus on what they're sharing instead of planning what to say next, and respect anything they'd rather keep private.

Make space for a conversation in which you listen more than you speak. Let the other person set the direction, and honor what they choose to share.

Prayer: Patient God, help us quiet the urge to prepare a response. Teach us to listen with our full attention, genuine humility, and deep respect. Amen.

DAY 12

December 10, 2026

When Fear Gets Loud

Scripture: 1 John 4:16–21

"…perfect love casts out fear…"

When John writes that "perfect love casts out fear," he is speaking first about fear of judgment and punishment. The love God has shown us in Christ, crucified and risen, gives us confidence before God. We stand on God's mercy, not on our ability to make ourselves worthy.

John connects that assurance with loving the people around us: we love because God first loved us. Fear can shrink our world, drawing thick lines between "us" and "them" and making every stranger seem like a threat. Secure in God's love, we can begin to meet our neighbors as people to love rather than threats to avoid.

God's love doesn't scold us for feeling afraid; instead, it gives us steady ground to stand on, so fear doesn't have to take the wheel. The perfect love revealed in Christ, crucified and risen, assures us that fear doesn't have the last word or have to dictate how we respond.

From that steadier place, we can pause and ask: What do I actually know for sure? Whose voice is missing from this conversation? Am I blaming one person for an entire group?

We can look for trustworthy facts and build real friendships, trusting that God's love gives us confidence even when questions remain.

Today, notice one fear that may be shaping how you see the world or people. Bring it honestly to God before sharing it with anyone else.

Prayer: Loving God, meet us in the noisiness of fear. Anchor us in your care, and keep our uncertainty from turning into suspicion or harm toward our neighbors. Amen.

DAY 13

December 11, 2026

Becoming a Neighbor

Scripture: Luke 10:25–37

"Go and do likewise."

The conversation in Luke begins with someone trying to draw a boundary: Who counts as my neighbor?

Jesus responds with a story about a Samaritan who crosses a deep social divide to care for a wounded stranger. He turns the question around: Instead of asking who deserves our help, Jesus asks what kind of neighbor we are becoming.

This story has been on my mind as I work with leaders planning a nonviolent public witness at the Miami Correctional Facility in Bunker Hill, Indiana. Tomorrow, on December 12, 2026, people will offer themselves for arrest to call for the release of people who have been detained. Such an exchange is highly unlikely and would require court involvement. We are not promising it will happen; we are showing our willingness to stand with people whose freedom is at stake.

The Samaritan sees someone in pain, crosses the road, uses what he has, and arranges for continued care. None of us can meet every need, but we can notice the person in front of us and ask what loving support looks like. Sometimes we can pitch in; other times, we can connect someone with people better equipped to help.

The goal isn't to be the hero who fixes everything. It's to refuse to pass by someone who needs help.

Today, notice someone who needs care. Offer one practical form of help, or connect them with someone who can.

Prayer: Jesus, turn our excuses into mercy. Shape us into true neighbors through open eyes, practical care, and the courage to cross whatever lines keep us apart. Amen.

DAY 14

December 12, 2026

God Lifts Up the Lowly

Scripture: Luke 1:46–55

"He has… lifted up the lowly."

Today, December 12, we honor Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. According to Catholic tradition, Mary appeared to Juan Diego, an Indigenous man in Mexico, in 1531. For generations, this story has reminded people that God draws near to those whose voices are too often ignored.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary sings of a God who lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Her song invites us to see our neighbors not as problems to solve, but as people whose dignity and gifts matter to God and to us.

Today, a nonviolent action at Miami Correctional Facility in Bunker Hill, Indiana, offers an opportunity to put that faith into practice. Peaceful witness can insist that people behind walls are neither forgotten nor beyond our care. We need not know someone's whole story to affirm their humanity.

Welcome means more than offering help. It means listening, making room for friendship, and standing alongside neighbors whose freedom and dignity are threatened.

Today, pray for those held at the facility, their families, those who work there, and those gathering peacefully. What might faithful solidarity look like for you?

Prayer: God of mercy, you draw near to the overlooked. Teach us to listen, build friendships, and bear peaceful witness to every person's dignity. Give us courage rooted in love. Amen.

DAY 15

December 13, 2026 — Third Sunday of Advent

Mary's Song

Scripture: Luke 1:46–55

"He has filled the hungry with good things."

Mary sings of a world finally being set right.

Mary's song is tender, but it is not timid. God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly, and fills the hungry. God's mercy overturns the world's rankings.

This is more than a promise that we will feel better. Mary praises God for setting things right. Hungry people need food, and those pushed aside need more than kind words.

Her song also calls us to repentance. We may welcome its promises for others while resisting what they ask of us. Where have we protected our comfort, trusted our status, or ignored someone else's hunger?

God's mercy meets us here, too, not to leave us unchanged, but to turn us toward a different life. We can confess without defending ourselves, trusting God's forgiveness to free us to share what we have.

Read Mary's song slowly. Confess one way you have protected your comfort or overlooked someone's need, then consider how you might share what you have.

Prayer: God of Mary's song, feed the hungry and lift up the lowly. Forgive our pride and indifference. Turn us toward our neighbors, ready to share what we have received from you. Amen.

DAY 16

December 14, 2026

Gifts Already Present

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:4–7

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

A truly welcoming community does more than pull up extra chairs; it stays open to being shaped by the people who sit in them.

New neighbors bring a wealth of experience in teaching, building, caregiving, leadership, business, music, and prayer. These gifts have been part of who they are all along, not just since an established church recognized them.

Of course, everyone deserves a warm welcome just as they are, never feeling like they have to prove their usefulness. Our worth as people is never measured by what we produce.

Still, real love pays attention to what people are eager to offer. It looks around the room and asks who gets invited to lead, whose voice carries weight, and whose ideas actually shape our decisions.

Today, think about a church, workplace, or neighborhood group you belong to. Are newcomers treated only as polite guests, or do they get a real say in where things go next?

Prayer: Generous Spirit, help us notice the gifts we may have overlooked. Guide us as we share leadership and welcome the new life that grows from truly belonging. Amen.

DAY 17

December 15, 2026

We Belong to One Another

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12–26

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.”

Paul compares the church to a living body, not a crowd of strangers who just happen to share a room on Sunday morning.

In a body, what happens to one part matters to every other part. Pain isn't brushed aside just because it’s felt somewhere else, and honor is shared generously rather than kept to oneself.

For Christians, that makes “us and them” thinking impossible. Immigrant and refugee neighbors aren't just people “out there” in the news, many are already sitting in our pews, leading ministries, teaching our kids, and working beside us.

When fear keeps one household up at night, the whole community is called to care. When one neighbor's gifts shine, the whole community gets to celebrate.

Look at the community you belong to. Whose struggles are treated as private, and whose gifts are celebrated? Consider one way the community could carry both sorrow and joy together.

Prayer: God who weaves us together, soften our indifference. Teach us to carry sorrow together without looking away, and to share joy without keeping score. Amen.

DAY 18

December 16, 2026

Kindness and Justice

Scripture: Micah 6:6–8

"…to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

Micah's words can sound like three more things we need to get right. But the passage starts with a different question: What could we possibly bring God that would be enough? Walking with God isn't a transaction. We get to walk with the One whose mercy has already met us.

That companionship reminds us we don't have to carry everything alone, freeing us to care for one another. Kindness asks how we can support someone who's hurting today, while justice asks why that hurt keeps happening. A bag of groceries can feed a family tonight, and fair wages can help them put food on the table next month.

Last July, I joined a public witness in downtown Lexington, Kentucky, alongside a rabbi, a Muslim neighbor, and a Roman Catholic priest. Together, we affirmed that caring for people in immediate need and engaging in public life go hand in hand. We weren't trying to change anyone's mind; we simply wanted others who shared our concerns to know they weren't alone.

Walking humbly means staying open to learning, accepting help, and beginning again. And we can take comfort in knowing that God is always with us, guiding us along the way.

Today, remember a kindness you have received. Let that gratitude shape one humble act of kindness or one effort to make things fairer for a neighbor.

Prayer: God of mercy and justice, thank you for walking alongside us. May the kindness we've received help our compassion grow and deepen our care for what is fair. Keep us humble, hopeful, and open to learning. Amen.

DAY 19

December 17, 2026

Laws That Serve Our Neighbors

Scripture: Deuteronomy 16:18–20

"Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue…"

God's instructions about justice are given to a people who knew slavery and deliverance. Their laws are meant to protect the freedom God gave them.

Laws continue to shape whether families can stay together, workers are protected from abuse, and everyone has a fair chance to share their story. These impacts matter, and they deserve our attention.

Drawing on our church's ministry with newcomers, we can work with fellow citizens for laws that serve the common good. Immigration raises complex questions, yet we can pursue generous welcome, fair visa rules, and strong refugee protections. (Adapted from the ELCA's social message on Immigration [1998; editorially updated 2018].)

Respecting the law doesn't mean every rule is fair, and working toward reform doesn't mean we have to give up on systems that are helping. We can listen to people directly affected by a law and thoughtfully consider whether it honors their dignity and makes room for compassion.

Our hope reaches beyond the success of any policy. Human injustice is real, but it doesn't have the final say over God's world.

Today, pray for lawmakers and families affected by their decisions.

Prayer: Delivering God, hold in your care everyone burdened by unjust decisions. Guide those entrusted with power, and renew our hope as we wait for change. Amen.

DAY 20

December 18, 2026

A Fair Hearing

Scripture: Deuteronomy 1:16–17

"…judge rightly between one person and another, whether kin or resident alien."

A person doesn't need to speak confidently, know the right people, or find the perfect words to deserve being heard. Even before a hearing begins, God already knows that person's life.

Moses reminds judges to listen to everyone fairly and without bias. Neither personal familiarity nor social standing should determine whose account is heard. Judgment belongs to God, not to whoever speaks the loudest.

Fairness becomes real when someone walks into a courtroom or government office. Can they understand the questions being asked? Do they have a genuine opportunity to share what happened? And are decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions about where they come from?

Immigration questions can be complex. A fair process gives each person a genuine opportunity to be heard, with decisions grounded in evidence rather than assumptions. Trustworthy legal aid and experienced immigration lawyers can help people understand the process and navigate it.

We can't promise a particular outcome, but we can remember that no case number captures the fullness of a life, and no human decision can diminish God's care for that person.

Today, bring someone who is waiting to be heard before God. You don't need to know all the details to hold them in prayer.

Prayer: Righteous God, you know the people and stories behind every case file. Help us avoid hasty judgments, guide everyone making decisions, and give strength to all who are waiting for a fair hearing. Amen.

DAY 21

December 19, 2026

The Ties That Hold Us

Scripture: Ruth 1:15–18

"Where you go, I will go."

Ruth's promise comes amid deep grief. Before Naomi can see what the future holds, she learns she won't have to face the road ahead alone.

Those words can't undo their losses or answer every question, but they offer companionship before a solution. In the wider story, God's care unfolds through this kind of ordinary, steadfast faithfulness.

Ruth's relationship with Naomi shouldn't be treated as a one-size-fits-all explanation for every migration journey. Even so, it can help us see how moving across borders may be intertwined with love, loyalty, grief, and family responsibilities.

Our decisions are shaped by the people we love: our parents, children, spouses, and siblings. Crossing a border can stretch those connections across thousands of miles and years of waiting. Statistics alone can't capture what that separation feels like.

We can't promise every family will be reunited quickly, but we can trust that distance never places loved ones beyond God's care. This reassurance gives us space to grieve alongside them and explore choices that honor their relationships.

Today, please hold a household living apart in your prayers. And if the separation is yours, remember that your own sorrow belongs in that prayer, too.

Prayer: Faithful God, stay close to those who are missing one another. Give them strength as they wait, surround them with caring companions, and guide us toward choices that help protect family bonds. Amen.

DAY 22

December 20, 2026 — Fourth Sunday of Advent

Making Room for an Unfamiliar Future

Scripture: Matthew 1:18–25

"…do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife…"

Before Joseph takes his next step, God gently speaks into his uncertainty. The child Mary carries will be called Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins." Matthew also reminds us of the promise at the heart of this story: Emmanuel, God with us.

God's promise is already at work in the future Joseph cannot yet understand. As we encounter changes that unsettle the life we imagined, Emmanuel, God with us, accompanies us along the road ahead.

That matters when love gently shifts the life we imagined. A friendship might change our routines, help us recognize needs we hadn't noticed before, or invite us to reconsider an opinion we've held close. Change can feel unsettling, even as it opens the door to something good.

We can welcome the changes love brings, trusting God to guide us along the road ahead. Change may not always be easy, but we can trust that we won't face the unknown alone.

Today, name one uncertain part of your future. As Joseph did, listen for God's promise of "God with us" before deciding how you will respond.

Prayer: Emmanuel, meet us in the futures we did not plan. Gently quiet our need to control every outcome, and let your presence give us the courage to love. Amen.

DAY 23

December 21, 2026

The Dignity of Work

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24:14–15

"You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns."

The work that holds our lives together often goes unseen: picking produce, cleaning hotel rooms, caring for aging parents, preparing restaurant kitchens, and repairing roofs.

But God sees the workers and cares about their needs. This passage takes those needs seriously, calling for wages to be paid promptly and reminding us that their cries reach God. What others may overlook is never beyond God's attention.

That's a truth rooted in dignity, before it becomes anyone else's responsibility. If your work feels exhausting, is poorly paid, or goes unrecognized, please remember that your worth isn't measured by how others value your labor. You matter for who you are, not just for what you produce.

That same assurance can also shape how we view the people whose work helps make our lives more comfortable. Immigration status is never a reason to withhold wages, make threats, or provide unsafe working conditions. We can turn our gratitude into fair hiring practices, thoughtful spending, and support for trustworthy worker organizations.

Everyone deserves to be treated as fully human without having to work twice as hard.

Today, take a moment to notice the work behind something you rely on, and thank the person who makes it possible, not just the service they provide.

Prayer: God who hears the cries of workers, please sustain those whose labor often goes unseen. Protect them from exploitation, and help our gratitude grow into fair, respectful treatment. Amen.

DAY 24

December 22, 2026

Words That Tell the Truth

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25–32

"So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another."

Paul's call to speak truthfully is part of a larger promise: we belong to one another, and God has forgiven us in Christ. We can let go of the need to defend every word we've ever spoken, knowing our place in this community is secure.

It's good news when we discover we were wrong because it gives us a chance to learn and grow.

A careless joke, an unverified rumor, or a sweeping accusation can make cruelty feel all too ordinary. Repeating a claim doesn't make it true, but admitting a mistake doesn't have to become an exercise in shame. Forgiveness can create space for honesty, and for choosing a kinder next sentence.

Before we speak or share a story, we can take a moment to ask where it came from, whether it treats different people as interchangeable, and whether it honors the humanity of our neighbors.

When hurtful words come from someone else, we can address them with compassion rather than humiliation. And when we're the ones who misspeak, we can make things right without making excuses. Both our neighbors and those who misspeak are always within reach of mercy.

Today, take a moment to pause before sharing a claim about immigrants or refugees. If you've shared something inaccurate, a simple correction can help set the record straight.

Prayer: God of truth and forgiveness, help us let go of needing to be right at someone else's expense. Give us honest words, open and teachable hearts, and the courage to make things right when we cause harm. Amen.

DAY 25

December 23, 2026

Under the Weight of a Decree

Scripture: Luke 2:1–5

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."

Luke places Jesus' birth in a world shaped by political power and its effects on ordinary people. Mary and Joseph's journey was different from modern immigration, but their story reminds us that government decisions affect family life. Public debates about court or presidential decisions can overlook the people living with the consequences.

In June 2026, a Supreme Court ruling (*Mullin v. Doe*, No. 25-1083 (U.S. June 25, 2026)) allowed the federal government to end Temporary Protected Status for hundreds of thousands of Haitian and Syrian immigrants while lawsuits continued. Many had lived here for more than a decade, working, studying, and building lives in our communities while their home countries remained unsafe.

In response, ELCA Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry called us to lament for those affected (ELCA, "Bishop Curry Statement on SCOTUS Immigration Decisions" [July 8, 2026]). Lament brings people's fears before God without rushing to explain them away. We can grieve, admit what we don't understand, and listen. Instead of speaking for others, we can make room for their voices.

When weighing a policy, picture a kitchen: Who must pack up and leave? Who waits? Who faces uncertainty, and who can cushion the blow? These questions help us see neighbors, not just policies.

Today, pray for families making decisions far from home.

Prayer: God who hears your people's cries, receive the grief of those unsettled by decisions beyond their control. Give wisdom and compassion to those entrusted with power and keep us from looking away. Amen.

DAY 26

December 24, 2026 — Christmas Eve

Is There Room?

Scripture: Luke 2:1–7

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger…"

Tonight, candles will flicker in darkened sanctuaries as familiar carols celebrate Jesus' birth. At the heart of it all is a newborn baby sleeping where animals eat.

We don't need to imagine a cartoon villain of an innkeeper to hear tonight's question: What kind of room are we making for people who are vulnerable?

Christmas places before us a newborn who needs warmth, shelter, and tender care.

For some of our neighbors, tonight is full of family noise and celebration. For others, it brings sharp loneliness, worry about the future, or the ache of an empty chair at the table. We never have to steamroll someone's grief with forced holiday cheer.

We can offer an invitation without pressure, quiet company without strings attached, and practical help that respects each person's dignity.

Today, think of someone who might appreciate a seat at your table, a short visit on the porch, or a simple text: "I'm thinking of you tonight."

Prayer: Jesus, born among us on this holy night, receive our praise. Open our doors and our celebrations to everyone who is lonely, unsettled, or far from home. Amen.

DAY 27

December 25, 2026 — Christmas Day

God Makes a Home Among Us

Scripture: John 1:1–14

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us…”

Christmas is the startling promise that God refuses to love this world from a safe distance.

The Word takes on real flesh and bone, a human life that can be cradled, fed, threatened, welcomed, and loved.

God’s coming is a gift, not a reward for finally getting our act together. Christ doesn’t wait for every room to be spotless or every heart to be wide open.

That is deeply good news for us, and for every neighbor who has been told—in big ways or small—that they don't quite belong.

God taking on human flesh doesn’t erase our differences. It shows that ordinary human life is sacred to God: our hunger and rest, friendships and fears, need for shelter, and need for someone to walk beside us.

Today, rest in the joy of being loved before you have earned anything, and let that joy make room for someone else. We don’t welcome our neighbors to persuade God to come close. In Christ, God has already moved into the neighborhood.

Prayer: God with us, thank you for making your home right here among us. Let the love we celebrate today grow into open-handed welcome in all the days ahead. Amen.

DAY 28

December 26, 2026

Good News for Ordinary People

Scripture: Luke 2:8–20

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people…"

The very first Christmas announcement goes out to shepherds working the night shift out in the fields.

The angel announces that a Savior has been born for them. Before they can do anything, God's good news meets them right where they are. Their place in the story begins with God's grace, not with their standing in the community.

But the shepherds do more than simply receive an invitation. After finding the child, they warmly share what they've heard with others. Their listeners are amazed, while Mary treasures these words and reflects on them. The shepherds become witnesses, sharing a story others need to hear.

Earlier in Advent, we reflected on the barriers that can make it difficult to join in. Christmas invites us to take the next step: once someone can enter, are we ready to listen? Making room means more than helping newcomers feel at home in what we already do. It also means listening to how they encounter Christ and welcoming the ways their witness can deepen our faith and shape our life together.

Today, invite someone to share where they have encountered hope or God's presence. Listen as the shepherds' hearers did, ready to be surprised by their witness.

Prayer: God of great joy, thank you for sharing with us good news we could never earn. Open our ears to those we may overlook. May their witness deepen our faith and inspire us to live together with greater care. Amen.

DAY 29

December 27, 2026

The Child Who Needed Refuge

Scripture: Matthew 2:13–15

"Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt..."

Matthew refuses to leave the holy family tucked safely inside a peaceful Christmas card.

A violent ruler comes after the child, and Joseph wakes Mary in the middle of the night to flee across the border into Egypt.

We should never flatten every displaced family's journey into a single story. Still, we cannot tell Jesus' story honestly without remembering that his parents had to run from danger and ask for safety in a foreign land. The Savior we worship was never shielded from the raw vulnerability of human life.

Remembering the child who needed refuge calls us to stand beside neighbors seeking safety today. Through AMMPARO, the ELCA invites us to walk with migrants and families forced from their homes, protect their rights, and address the dangers that drive them to leave. Its name echoes the Spanish word "amparo", meaning refuge, and the promise of Psalm 46:1 that God is our refuge and strength. Together, our congregations, synods, and ministry partners can help make that care tangible. (Source: *ELCA, AMMPARO*)

When we pray for refugees and asylum-seekers, we honor the heart of Christmas, remembering that Jesus' own family sought safety in a foreign land.

Today, hold in prayer families forced to pack up in a hurry, people waiting years for safety, and the communities called to open their doors.

Prayer: Jesus, whose own family fled from danger, remain close to anyone searching for safety today. Keep them safe along the road, and prepare us to offer generous shelter. Amen.

DAY 30

December 28, 2026 — Remembering the Holy Innocents

The Children Matter

Scripture: Matthew 2:16–18

"Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

The Christmas story holds deep grief that most of us would rather crop out.

Today, Christians remember the young children King Herod killed and the parents left grieving in Bethlehem. We must not explain away their suffering or treat their deaths as background to someone else's story. Their lives mattered, and so does their families' grief.

Remembering them turns our attention to children whose safety is at risk today, including children uprooted by violence or caught in crises they did not create. Children are not bargaining chips or symbols in adults' arguments. They need safety, steady care, and room to grow.

Our care can include supporting local families, backing trusted youth programs, and paying attention to how public policies affect children, as well as to the violence and instability that force families to flee.

Today, pray for vulnerable children by name when you know them, while always protecting their privacy. Let their real, individual lives shape your concern.

Prayer: God who hears the weeping, hold grieving parents close. Protect children from violence and harm, and make us faithful in defending their safety and dignity. Amen.

DAY 31

December 29, 2026

Speaking Alongside

Scripture: Proverbs 31:8–9

"Speak out; judge righteously; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Some of our neighbors are shut out of the rooms where decisions get made, while others face real danger if they speak up in public.

Proverbs calls us to use whatever influence we have to seek justice. But that doesn't mean acting as if our neighbors have no voice.

Often, the very first step is simply listening and helping make space for people who are already speaking. Sometimes we are asked to stand quietly beside them; other times, we can carry a concern into a room they cannot safely enter.

Furthermore, faithful advocacy sometimes means protecting confidentiality rather than drawing public attention to a ministry. Some ministries do such vital and sensitive work that, for the safety of the people they serve, it's best not to share details.

One rule is essential: never share someone's story, name, photo, or personal details without their clear permission. Good advocacy isn't about putting ourselves in the spotlight. It's about making sure our work respects people's dignity and choices.

Today, think about the spaces where your voice carries weight. How might you use that influence with humility and care?

Prayer: God who hears the overlooked, teach us when to speak, when to listen, and when to step back and make room. Keep our advocacy honest and accountable to the people most affected. Amen.

DAY 32

December 30, 2026

Protection Is Not a Favor

Scripture: Acts 22:22–29

"Is it legal for you to flog a Roman person who is uncondemned?"

When authorities are about to beat him without a trial, Paul asserts his legal rights.

Earlier, we explored fair hearings. Paul's story presses this further: what happens when someone lacks the status that makes authorities listen? His Roman citizenship prevents the threatened violence. What about those without that protection?

Paul's experience is not a guide to today's immigration law, but it exposes unequal treatment. Our worth before God does not depend on a passport. In Christ, we receive unearned mercy; that grace frees us to seek our neighbors' protection regardless of their influence.

Loving our neighbors includes holding those in power accountable. Is mistreatment investigated? Can people report harm without intimidation? Can they use protections that exist on paper? These questions concern how power is exercised, not how particular cases should be decided.

Trustworthy legal help remains essential. We can connect neighbors with qualified immigration attorneys and support organizations that document mistreatment and seek independent oversight. We follow the lead of those affected, protecting their privacy and safety.

Today, ask a trusted legal aid or immigrant-serving organization what prevents people from using existing protections. Listen for one practical way to help.

Prayer: God of justice, grant our leaders the wisdom to prevent the misuse of power. Please protect everyone facing a court hearing, and strengthen all those working to ensure fair hearings and access to trustworthy legal help. Amen.

DAY 33

December 31, 2026 — New Year's Eve

Holding the Year Before God

Scripture: Psalm 90:1–17

"So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."

As the new year approaches, you might feel gratitude, regret, relief, or worry. Many of us feel all four at once.

Thankfully, we don't need to make the past year look perfect before giving it to God.

We can thank God for those who welcomed us, the neighbors who showed quiet courage, and the moments when our compassion moved us to act. We can also gently acknowledge the hard conversations we avoided, the assumptions we left unchallenged, and the promises we forgot. God's mercy helps us be honest while giving us hope to move forward.

For many families, the new year arrives while an immigration case remains unresolved, loved ones are apart, or bills keep piling up. The clock turning at midnight doesn't make those challenges disappear, but each new day offers a chance to keep moving forward.

Today, thank God for one good thing from this year, admit one place where you fell short, and name one person you will keep praying for. Then, give the whole unfinished year to God.

Prayer: God of all our days, receive both our gratitude and our regrets. Forgive what needs forgiving, carry what remains unfinished, and lead us into tomorrow with wisdom and hope. Amen.

DAY 34

January 1, 2027 — New Year's Day

Called by Name

Scripture: Luke 2:21

"…and he was called Jesus."

Eight days after his birth, Jesus is circumcised and given his name, as the angel had said. Mary and Joseph raise him within the Jewish people and God's covenant with Israel. This small scene bears witness to God's faithfulness to that covenant.

On the first morning of a new year, Scripture invites us to pause and notice something both ordinary and sacred: a personal name.

Every neighbor has a real name before they ever get a case number or a public label. Names hold family stories, memories, hopes, and a sense of belonging. Learning to say someone's name correctly is a simple way to show, "You matter enough for me to get this right."

At the same time, human worth never depends on whether we know someone personally. The neighbor whose name we never learn is just as precious to God.

We begin this new year trusting the Savior whose name means God saves. That grace frees us to tend one relationship with simple, unhurried attention.

Today, choose one relationship you want to tend more faithfully this year. Start with simple, unhurried attention rather than a giant resolution.

Prayer: Jesus, whose name we bless, hold our neighbors and us in your mercy. Let this new year begin in grace and grow through patient, personal acts of love. Amen.

DAY 35

January 2, 2027

Help That Can Be Trusted

Scripture: Isaiah 1:16–17

"…learn to do good; seek justice…"

"Learn" is such an important word here.

Caring for our neighbors takes more than good intentions. It means knowing our limits, working with reliable partners, and not making promises we can't keep.

A local church may offer rides, hot meals, English conversation, or grocery gift cards. Legal questions belong with trained immigration attorneys, and private family details require careful handling.

Before helping, ask what kind of support is most useful, and be clear about what we can and can't do. Healthy boundaries don't mean we care less. They make our compassion more trustworthy and focused.

Our Indiana-Kentucky Synod has formed an immigration team to support pastors, leaders, and congregations. The team may host discussions, share events and resources across the Synod, or connect congregations with help when a need is beyond their capacity. Through this work, we seek to be faithful to our immigrant neighbors and advocate for them locally.

God doesn't ask us to do everything for everyone. We are invited to take our small place with others, each bringing their own gifts.

Today, identify one local group with experience serving your neighbors. Learn what they recommend before deciding how you or your congregation can help.

Prayer: Wise God, make us eager to learn about our neighbors. Lead us toward trustworthy partners, honest conversations, and care that honors both our neighbors and our limits. Amen.

DAY 36

January 3, 2027

Enough to Share

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:12–15

"…it is a question of equality between your present abundance and their need…"

Paul never asks one small group to carry the weight of the whole world. Instead, he pictures resources flowing back and forth so that everyone has enough.

Sharing can mean giving money, time, a place to stay, practical skills, or friendship. It also means letting others enjoy giving back to us.

The goal isn't to divide the world into "generous helpers" and "grateful receivers." Instead, we want a community where gifts flow in all directions and everyone's dignity is honored.

Thoughtful generosity asks practical questions: What is needed right now? Who is already helping so we don't repeat their work? How can our help give families real choices instead of taking away their independence? Often, a small, steady commitment is better than a quick burst of charity that fades away.

Today, pick one practical resource you can share on a regular basis, and keep your commitment realistic enough that you can actually stick with it.

Prayer: Generous God, loosen our grip on what we hold. Teach us to share wisely, receive graciously, and build communities where everyone has enough. Amen.

DAY 37

January 4, 2027

A Pace We Can Sustain

Scripture: Galatians 6:9–10

"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right…"

Long periods of waiting can be exhausting, and caring about problems without easy solutions can be too.

Paul's encouragement doesn't mean we should ignore our limits. We need sleep, good friends, worship, laughter, and rest.

In August 2026, we marked one year of prayer vigils begun by the Indiana United Methodist Conference (INUMC), starting in August 2025. The ELCA, the Episcopal Dioceses of Northern Indiana and Indianapolis, and others have joined us. Gathering each month for a year shows our commitment to the work ahead. When we support one another, we can do more together than we can alone.

To keep doing good, we need to share the load. We can take turns, ask for help, and celebrate small signs of growth while the work continues. God remains faithful when we rest.

Today, name one healthy boundary that will help you keep caring with patience rather than growing resentful.

Prayer: Faithful God, remind us of your faithfulness when we run on empty. Thank you for good companions, healthy limits, and permission to rest, trusting that your care for the world never depends on our constant motion. Amen.

DAY 38

January 5, 2027

Courage Without Contempt

Scripture: Romans 12:14–21

"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." —Romans 12:18

Anger can arise when something we care about feels threatened. Still, contempt can make it easy to lose sight of the humanity we're hoping to protect.

Loving our country can mean caring for our neighbors and helping it fulfill its promises. At the same time, our deepest loyalty is to Christ. That raises a thoughtful question: Does our faith shape how we love our country, or has national identity become a measure of faith?

Andrew Whitehead describes Christian nationalism as giving one expression of Christianity a dominant place in public life, often tied to social hierarchy, authoritarian control, and narrow ideas about who belongs (*American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church* [Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023], 28–29). Naming this framework doesn't mean labeling everyone who disagrees about immigration or politics. It helps us notice when national identity is treated as a measure of faith.

We can hold different views on laws while still affirming that every neighbor deserves dignity and humane treatment. Peace doesn't ask us to stay silent; it invites us to speak honestly and respectfully, without contempt.

Today, keep this thoughtful phrase handy for when a conversation turns hurtful: "I see this differently, because these are our neighbors."

Prayer: God of steadfast love, please give us courage that is kind and compassionate. Help us speak honestly, set thoughtful boundaries, and treat one another with respect, even when we disagree. Amen.

DAY 39

January 6, 2027 — Epiphany

Gifts From Beyond Our Circle

Scripture: Matthew 2:1–12

"Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

On Epiphany, we celebrate Christ's revelation to all nations. Travelers from the East find the child and kneel in worship. Their gifts honor the one God sent for the whole world.

The good news begins with God's gift to us. Before they open their treasure chests, God has already come among us in Jesus. The light guiding them to Christ shines beyond familiar borders, revealing a Savior whose mercy reaches us, too.

Earlier, we asked whether newcomers have a genuine voice. Epiphany takes us deeper: the community isn't ours to control. Christ gathers us as fellow recipients of grace, not owners deciding who belongs.

Receiving our immigrant and refugee neighbors' gifts means more than adding something to familiar routines. Their questions may challenge our assumptions; their faith may reshape cherished practices. Together, we discern in Christ's light, without expecting anyone to represent an entire people or earn belonging by being useful.

Give thanks for a gift of faith or perspective you have received from a neighbor. Let that gratitude open you to reconsidering a familiar assumption or practice.

Prayer: Jesus, light for all nations, gather us around you. Forgive our need to control who belongs. Help us receive one another's gifts and follow wherever your grace leads. Amen.

DAY 40

January 7, 2027

Carrying the Light Forward

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1–3

"Arise, shine, for your light has come…"

Our forty days end here, but the daily work of loving our neighbors goes on.

Together we have waited through Advent, celebrated Christ's birth, started a new year, and followed the travelers toward the light. Every day, God's welcome has been our starting point, not a prize we had to earn.

Now we return to our regular days, where love shows up in simple ways: listening patiently, keeping promises, sharing what we have, stopping rumors, or writing to an elected official to support a fair law.

On January 10, 2027, I will travel to Washington, D.C., with a delegation from the ELCA Conference of Bishops to advocate for fair, humane immigration reform. Few leaders or members of the public have this opportunity. It reminds us to act when we can.

No single action finishes the work. We will need forgiveness, real rest, trustworthy partners, and grace to start again when we make mistakes. Our immigrant and refugee neighbors are not just a holiday project; they are our neighbors all year.

Today, pick one practical habit you want to keep and one way you will keep learning or speaking up. Invite a friend to check in with you. The light we share with the world is first a light we have received.

Prayer: God of enduring light, continue opening our lives to your grace and our eyes to your work. Send us forth to welcome our neighbors, pursue justice, and walk together in hope long after these forty days have ended. Amen.

REFLECTION AND COMMITMENT

What Will We Carry Forward?

Come back to these questions on your own, around the kitchen table, or with a small group.

What have I received? Which Scripture passage, prayer, conversation, or new friendship has stayed with me?

What needs to change? Where have fear, old assumptions, or daily habits made my welcome smaller?

Whose wisdom do I need? Who should help shape our next steps?

What can I sustain? Choose one practical habit and one way to keep learning or speaking up.

- **I will:**
- **I will start by:**
- **I will check in on this commitment with:**
- **On this date:**

We never make these commitments to earn God's love. We make them because God has already loved us first—and because our neighbors' lives matter.

Room for Our Neighbors

Forty Days of Hope, Welcome, and Justice

Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

November 29, 2026–January 7, 2027

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me…" Matthew 25:35

God's welcome is our beginning.

Our neighbors are not problems to solve, projects to complete, or strangers to fear.

They are people to know.

May the hope we have prayed for become a welcome we can practice.

May the love we have received become justice we are willing to seek.

May Christ, who makes a home among us, keep making room in our hearts and in our common life.