

Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church at Rosemont

DAILY MEDITATIONS — JANUARY, 2026

January 1, 2026

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

At the start of the year, many individuals choose a ‘word for the year’ to guide their spiritual thoughts and journeys in the year ahead. The words are usually positive, affirming, and uplifting. The purpose of choosing a ‘word for the year’ is to have something – a concept, an idea, a promise, a hope – on which to focus during the ups and downs of the months to come. Such words can give us a focal point for our prayers and thoughts, an ongoing reminder that we are, indeed, in a relationship with our Creator. Some words that might be used for such guidance and focus include hope, gratitude, grace, presence, blessing, rescue, refuge, Savior, Comforter, Jesus. Perhaps a ‘word for the year’ would help you to center your prayers and thoughts in the year ahead. Whatever enriches and expands our connection with God is a blessing in itself, and we already have the Word that is God. May God bless this coming year for the world and everyone and everything in it. God bless us all!

January 2, 2026

(Jesus said) “For which of you ... does not first sit down and count the cost?” Luke 14:28

Last year, a word that is not particularly inspirational surfaced in many news stories and reports: “affordability”. Many people know the real-life pain and anxiety of not being able to afford some or all of life’s basics: food, shelter, heat, transportation. It is often said that, except for the stupendously wealthy, all of us are ‘one accident, one health crisis, one loss of income, one disaster’ away from being poor. That reality occurred to me one day when I was grocery shopping. I saw an older woman looking at packages of cookies and cupcakes. These were pre-packaged items, not desserts made in the store bakery. The woman would pick up a pack of cookies, look at it, think about it, and put it back. She did the same with packaged cupcakes. As I watched from a distance, I was sure she wasn’t deciding between chocolate and vanilla. She was probably debating about whether she could afford the item. I’m sure she wasn’t the only shopper who was calculating the costs of items. When I drove home, I passed a just-built apartment complex. The new sign was on display: studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units available, starting at \$1850. I assume the \$1850 was for a studio apartment. If this building is like others in our area, the one-bedroom would be \$2200-\$2400, and two-bedroom units would be \$2500 or more per month. I suddenly realized— if I didn’t have my home, if I had to rent an apartment, that cost would consume all of my Social Security income. All of it. My much smaller income from a retirement account would never cover utilities, car/gas/insurance, health insurance, medicines, taxes, cable/TV/phone ... and food. That was a scary thought. I’d never be able to pay for basics if I had to pay rent. No wonder so many are homeless, and so many others are on the edge. No wonder the concept of affordability strikes a chord for so many. No wonder the gray-haired woman put the cupcakes back. *“Provider God, please help those most in need.”*

January 3, 2026

O give thanks to the God of heaven, who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 136:24

It is an old saying that people come into our lives for ‘a reason, a season, or a lifetime’. God is a lifetime presence for each of us ... for this life and the next. God is at once the omnipotent Creator, the Lord of the universe and of all time and space, and a personal God who knows us by name, who created us and loves each of us as his own child; a Father/Mother God who abides with us each day, each season. This may be difficult for us to understand, but we don’t have to fully understand it in order to accept it. We are loved by God himself, the God of “great wonders”. Perhaps no wonder is greater than that this powerful Creator God loves us. Loves you. Loves me. *“Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever!”*

January 4, 2026

Give us life, and we will call on your name.

Psalm 80:18

When this Psalm was written, it expressed the anxiety and desperation of a people besieged by enemies; people who knew their sins and weaknesses and how far they had strayed from the God who gave them life and protection. Just like many of us today, the people cried out to God, asking God to give them life and promising that they would remember God and call on God. Human beings haven't changed much over thousands of years. Blessedly, God hasn't changed either. God hears us, sees us, loves us, and answers us. God knew what troubled the psalmist, and he knows what troubles us. Whatever your needs today, or in the coming year, turn to God. Ask for new life, and remember to call on God's name in the good days as well as the troubled times.

January 5, 2026

Let brotherly love continue.

Hebrews 13:1

Each year, as the holiday season ends, I think of the county nursing home in which my grandmother lived after she had amputation surgery on her toes. With that challenge added to her other ills, she required skilled care that couldn't be provided at home. We visited her every day, sometimes twice a day. I got to know many of the other residents, and I visited with them, too. On Gram's floor, residents were grouped into areas separated by walls that were half glass. On her first Christmas there, I had the idea of painting holiday scenes on her glass partitions. The staff loved the idea, and I wound up painting scenes on *all* the glass panels on the whole floor. A little army of residents, many in wheelchairs, began to follow me around as I painted, asking me to create specific scenes, making suggestions ("Put a cardinal in the evergreen tree!"), and watching the scenes emerge on the glass. I let residents dab at the pictures with paint brushes, thus letting them help to create the scenes. One day, I saw a signboard listing all the groups that would be coming to entertain in December. "Wow!" I said. "You'll soon have a lot of activity here!" My little army went quiet, even a little sullen, irritated. Their mood darkened. When I asked what was wrong, an older man in a red flannel shirt said, "It's nice that the groups and choirs come at Christmas, but then they go home and they forget about us for the rest of the year. We don't exist until next Christmas. For eleven months, it feels as if no one knows, no one cares." I never forgot his words. Without meaning to, we can lavish attention on people at specific times – birthdays, holidays – but then forget about them for the rest of the year. This year, whether it's family, friends, or folks in need in the community, let's 'remember to remember' ... before next December.

January 6, 2026

You must therefore be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn to the right or to the left.

Deuteronomy 5:32

At first, this verse seems stern and restricting, as if we're to march through life in a straight line and not even look around us. In reality, obedience to God's commandments, and to God's will, is one of the most liberating things we can experience. When choices that would be wrong or harmful for us are taken off the table, we rest more securely in God's will, we rejoice in possibilities, and look for opportunities and new blessings. When we see God's path clearly before us, we have less confusion. When we know that we are living within God's will and commandments, we have a security and reassurance that we can't find anywhere else. God's word, his world, and his will become, for us, an enormous, exciting place in which we can play, prosper, and discover the blessings God wants to give us. This is the opposite of restriction. It is freedom of the sweetest kind. If we aren't sure what God's will is for us, we can ask, and then listen for God's guidance and look for God's signs. It may take time, but finding our place within God's plan is worth whatever time it takes, to wait or to discover.

January 7, 2026

Whoever lives in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

John 3:36

This verse sounds like one of the hellfire verses from the Old Testament. But John doesn't mince words. He knows, and he tells us, that faith, and life in Christ will lead us to eternal life, to a peace and wholeness in God's presence. Deliberate disobedience, and hostility to God's love and teachings, lead us in the opposite direction. No, we don't know precisely what comes, in the next life, to those who choose evil over good. Despite the vastly different proclamations and depictions of 'God's wrath' – from prophets, priests, sages, writers, artists, and others – we cannot know with certainty. Perhaps 'enduring God's wrath' is a heartbreaking separation from God, from what is light-filled and love-filled, from what we finally know is right and good. Perhaps it is a need to atone. Perhaps it is something proportionate to the evils we choose to create or embrace. We simply don't know. What we can know is that, when we choose to remove ourselves from God and from his love and wisdom, a chaotic and cruel world can harm us in ways that we can't imagine, in this life as well as the next. That reality should cause us to think more soberly about our choices, for now and for 'forever'.

January 8, 2026

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority.
Jude 24-25

When we look squarely at who God is, at what God has done, is doing, and can do for us, and how much God loves us, our natural reaction is to be awed and to praise God. Only two weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Our scripture readings for the next weeks and months take us through the early days of Jesus's life and ministry. Already it is apparent that this man ... this God and Savior in human form ... is able to bless our lives in extraordinary and unimaginable ways. Jesus gives us wisdom and love; he enables us to forgive and be forgiven; he cleanses, frees, and saves us. He has and deserves "glory, majesty, power, and authority". And though Jesus has all of these, he welcomes us and wants our love. He wants to be part of our lives. Today and always, let us tell him that we love him. Tell him today. Tell him now. *"Lord, welcome to the world – again, as in each Christmas – and welcome to my life. Although I may not be able to understand the mystery of you ... God born as a human; a human who understands that God is within him ... I can understand your love, your reaching toward me, and your reaching toward your world. I lift my arms, my life, and my heart toward you. It is a response I also cannot fully understand, but which I offer to you, this day and always. Walk with me through this year, through this life. I want to walk with you."*

January 9, 2026

Then our mouth was filled with laughter.

Psalm 126:2

As I was reading the morning paper, my mind was compiling the day's to-do list. Stress was already rising in me, and it wasn't yet 10:00 a.m. When I turned to the comics, I saw a cartoon strip showing a veterinarian's waiting room. A dog was sitting on a chair, waiting to see the vet. Next to the dog, sitting on another chair, was a centipede. The centipede looked up at the dog and said, "You think you have problems? I have restless leg syndrome." I burst out laughing— one of those deep belly laughs you can't control. It felt wonderful! Laughter does for us what nothing else can do, and we get far too little of it, especially the belly-shaking, out loud kind of laughter. Jesus must have loved laughter, loved seeing people smile, be happy. The laughter and giggles of children must have sounded especially sweet to him. A few years ago, while flipping TV channels on a Saturday morning, I came across a cartoon show, one with all the old cartoons: Bugs Bunny, Tweety and Sylvester, Tom and Jerry, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig. A whole hour of smiles, silliness, and laughter. What joy! What a great way to start a Saturday ... or any day. Of all the things we underestimate, surely our need for laughter is near the top of the list. Laughter takes us out of ourselves. It shows us another side to life, even when life seems to have problems on all sides. This year – this day – let's make time for laughter, let's welcome humor into every day. Let's look for it, create it, share it. Making others laugh blesses us as much as the laughter we enjoy. Laughter can even lighten pain ... for us, and even for a centipede with restless leg syndrome.

January 10, 2026

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Psalm 150:6

We never know when something wonderful will surprise us. In 2024, I bought a small Christmas cactus. I was hesitant as I paid for it. I'd had Christmas cactuses before, and they all expired quickly. The lady at the flower shop gave me fertilizer as well as written care instructions. I was stunned by the order to "not water the plant between Sept. 15 and Nov. 15 and barely water it the rest of the year." But I obeyed the rules, placed the plant in the foyer, in indirect light, named it Phoebe, and talked to it occasionally. (With my history with Christmas cactuses, I didn't want to become too attached to it.) Amazingly, the leaves stayed on. It survived through the 2004 holidays and into 2025. By spring, I decided it must like its location and simply being left undisturbed. Last September, I stopped watering it, as instructed. One day, in late November, I glanced at the plant. It had a bevy of intense pink blossoms. How beautiful! They seem to have appeared overnight. It was time to begin the watering again, and I thanked Phoebe for her glorious display. I also marveled at what was, to me, a delightful surprise, a special blessing from God. There is a deep pleasure, a warm appreciation, when we're surprised by blessings. Maybe we simply have to be more open to them, more aware of the everyday beauty, blessings, and surprises around us. Surely, our Giving God is always open to providing such surprises and blessings to us.

January 11, 2026

Jesus took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd.

Mark 8:6

We know this story. Miraculously, the seven loaves and the few fish were enough to feed thousands. That sounds like a magician's trick. But a theology professor has suggested something else. In Jesus's time, people never left home, even for a brief journey, without taking food and water with them. There were no fast-food places in the desert; no places at which to grab a quick snack. People took everything they needed with them. What if what really happened on that day in the desert was this: that the people who had come to hear Jesus saw his disciples dividing the bread and fish they had and sharing that food ... then gesturing to those in the crowd that they should do likewise? What if one man reached into his sack and shared his bread with the person next to him? What if this gesture of sharing was seen and repeated dozens, scores, and even hundreds of times among those in the crowd in the desert? People sharing what they had. That could easily explain how the loaves and fishes appeared to feed so many. That possibility would explain it, but it doesn't make it less of a miracle. When people share what they have, that's a kind of miracle, greater than any magician's trick.

January 12, 2026

"At the same time," says the Lord, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people."

Jeremiah 31:1

When a whole year lies before us, there is so much that awaits us— things to do, to discover, to savor, to appreciate. For many, simply doing what needs to be done each day – work, chores, errands, bill paying – pretty much absorbs our time, energy, and resources. But there is something important that doesn't require an athlete's strength or a millionaire's resources. All it requires is the willingness to share who we are. Sadly, many people know little or nothing about their own families, family histories, or what life was like just a few decades ago. Often, they know even less about the nation's history. Surveys have revealed that many students today think that Kennedy was president before Lincoln, that the Revolutionary War came after the Civil War. Many people have no idea where their grandparents were born or lived. To some, the Depression sounds like a time when people were unhappy – as many surely were – rather than a severe economic time in America. Perhaps this can be the year when we make time to talk to each other, especially to younger family members and friends, about what life was like before today— before the phone was the center of life, before you could press a computer key and have AI write a book for you. Kids, especially, love stories about when daddy was little and where grammy was born. Such conversation, such sharing, does more than transmit facts and dates. It assigns worth and value to people, to families, and to their histories. It gives young people a sense of self, of continuity, of belonging. Often, such sharing gives everyone a reminder of how God has blessed us along our journey. In the year ahead, let's remember to share our stories with others. That will be a blessing that lasts forever.

January 13, 2026

Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.

Psalm 150:2

There are so many things for which we can praise God: the beauty of nature and all creation; the miracle of a baby's birth; the vastness of the universe; the brilliance of the human mind; the power of love. Today's verse tells us to praise God for his power and his surpassing greatness. The things for which we praise God may be less important than the act of praise itself. Praising God ... spontaneously, joyfully, wherever we are ... reminds us of God's greatness and blessings to us. Whatever makes your heart glad, whatever you enjoy, whatever you have seen of God's work in your life and other lives— praise God for whatever you wish, but praise God. Praise him, indeed! God will be glad to hear your praises, and you will lift your own mind, heart, and soul to that higher level, that elevated perspective from which goodness and love can be seen as over-shadowing all that is dark and fearful. It is a 'praise view' from which life can be seen – and lived – as it should be. Praise God.

January 14, 2026

Restore me and I will return, because you are the Lord my God.

Jeremiah 31:18

This sounds as though someone is bargaining with God: 'If you, God, do something for me, then I'll do something for you.' But in Jeremiah, God pours his love out on the Israelites who have journeyed through the wilderness. God tells them how much he loves them and how he will bless them. God speaks of those in travail, those who are weeping and mourning. God says that these people will turn to him, asking to be restored, and then they will praise him. God knows how people ... how we ... behave in certain situations. God knows what we will think and say before the words are in our minds or in our mouths. And God tells us, in this verse as in so many places in Scripture, that he will be waiting to receive us and bless us. *"Thank you, Lord, thank you."*

January 15, 2026

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.

James 1:17

It is easy for us to think that we're responsible for all that we have, especially our blessings and good fortune. We tell ourselves that we have our income and our assets because we work hard. We believe that we succeed in school and in our jobs because we're smart and diligent. But this verse reminds us that everything – our talents, skills, strengths, intelligence, opportunities, our very lives – are gifts from God. God's love and goodness make all blessings possible, even those things we thought we accomplished entirely on our own. *"Lord, forgive our self-centeredness and our foolishness, our assumption that we have generated our own blessings. Accept our thanks for all the gifts you have given us and help us to use them wisely."*

January 16, 2026

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

Psalm 25:11

The esteemed British actor Sir Anthony Hopkins has written a memoir of his often-difficult life. Born in Wales in near poverty, he was a child in World War II, in a place where masculinity often equated to alcoholism and brutality. Shy, with no apparent gifts for schooling, he felt a kind of loneliness and estrangement – isolation – that made life more painful. When he was 10, he saw the film "Hamlet", and something about Shakespeare's words captured his mind and heart. He began memorizing speeches from Shakespeare's plays and discovered he had a gift for memorizing whole plays, whole scripts – a skill that later allowed him, as an actor, to embody the characters he played and to focus on revealing their thoughts and emotions. Hopkins's acting skill has been recognized with two Academy Awards, four BAFTA Awards, and a knighthood. But eight decades after his troubled childhood, he still remembers what a grade-school teacher called him: "a useless carthorse". Perhaps that's the kind of cruel comment no one could ever forget. What we say to people matters. Sometimes, it matters so much ... the effect of our words is so powerful ... that what we say to someone can stay with them for a lifetime. Each day, we have the power to lift people up, encourage them, comfort them, assure them ... or to put a verbal knife into them, as that teacher did to a shy little boy. So often, we don't think before we speak, or we simply neglect to say kind and positive things when we have the chance. We're all guilty of those failings at some time. Perhaps Sir Anthony's childhood experience, and his clear remembrance of it after 80 years, will remind us of the need to be careful with our words. They matter more than we know.

January 17, 2026

**Do not ... be angry. For anger rests in the bosom of fools.
You shall not hate your brother in your heart**

Ecclesiastes 7:9
Leviticus 19:17

Another actor provides the focus for today's Meditation. Last month, TV and film actor Dick Van Dyke celebrated his 100th birthday. Familiar to millions from films such as "Mary Poppins" and "Bye Bye Birdie", and from his iconic "Dick Van Dyke Show" on TV, he is still dancing and singing at 100 and was still performing at 97. When asked what enabled him to reach that century milestone with such vigor, he cited the benefits of finding joy in life and being positive. Then he said that there are two toxic things that should be avoided by everyone: "hate and anger". While we each have flashes of those feelings from time to time, Van Dyke said that a conscious, deliberate commitment to keeping anger and hate at a distance – to not let those toxic feelings take root in us – may be the most important step toward living life at its best, however long our life lasts. Wise words, born of a century of abundant living, and echoing the words of scripture.

January 18, 2026

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.
1 Corinthians 3:7

Most of us have participated in activities in which the involvement of many people is needed for success. There are very few things that we can do entirely on our own. Certainly, few of us succeed entirely on our own in our work. Unless we eat only the food we grow on our own land, we need the provision of others to live from day to day. Even a hobby such as knitting requires someone to create a pattern, someone else to make the yarn, and still another to raise the animals whose wool provides the yarn. Life is a team sport. Just as we know that we depend on others ... and they depend on us ... in most of life's activities, we must also acknowledge that God is the great designer of what we are called and enabled to do. It is God's pattern and plan that unfold as we live and do our work in the world. "*God, you give the growth in my life. In my best moments, I know that. Forgive me for the moments when I forget.*"

January 19, 2026

Naaman said, "Your servant will no longer offer sacrifice to any god except the Lord." 2 Kings 5:17

Naaman was a great and powerful commander and warrior, but he had leprosy, a frightening and despised disease. When the Israelite servant of Naaman's wife told him about the God who could cure him, Naaman went to the prophet Elisha. Elisha told him to wash in the Jordan River seven times. At first, Naaman was offended. He expected some magical and majestic kind of healing, something fitting for his exalted status. He didn't want to humble himself by washing in that dirty river! But when he finally did obey and go into the Jordan, his leprosy was washed away and his skin was clear and healed. Having experienced so great a miracle, Naaman gratefully proclaimed his faith in God. We human beings often have trouble humbling ourselves, doing something we think is beneath us or not worthy of us, even if it's something that will lead us to a blessing. Examples: apologizing, so that a relationship can be restored; admitting we're wrong, so that we can move on; not insisting on getting our own way, so that someone else can have some gratification or recognition. Can we come around, as Naaman did? Can we obey the words of God that we hear in our hearts? If not, what will it take before we can say, as Naaman did, that we will have no other gods?

January 20, 2026

Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

1 Timothy 6:11

Look at the words in this Meditation: "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." They are words that belong in the Bible, in church, and in worship. But they don't seem to belong in a world that is often violent, cruel, and uncaring; a world in which people and relationships seem to be as disposable as used facial tissue; a world in which truth seems to have been beaten to death and replaced by rampant falsehoods, blatant lies, and 'alternative facts'. The words in today's verse seem suited to a Sunday School class, not a corporation;

an altar, not a kitchen table; a prayer meeting, not a Congressional hearing. They are words that guide the lives of people such as missionaries and pastors, but do they guide educators? Store clerks? Police officers? Elected officials? Musicians? Attorneys? Do they guide us? These words were not meant to exist only in the Bible. They were not meant just to be read, but to be lived ... in all lives, in our lives, and – yes – in the lives of judges, teachers, entertainers, company CEOs, line workers, laborers, Senators, journalists, doctors, fashion designers, and cooks. What might our often violent confusing, and uncaring world be like if we lived by these words? There's a song that says, "Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me." In this dawning of a new year, let us make a promise – to God and to ourselves – that we will, as in today's verse, "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." These words can change us ... and they can change the world.

January 21, 2026

At that moment, the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

Mark 14:72

How terrible Peter must have felt when he heard that rooster crow, when he remembered what Jesus had predicted just a few hours before! Jesus: the one Peter loved and in whom he believed, the man he had watched teach and heal so many. Jesus: the one who loved everyone, even the outcasts, even his enemies. Jesus: the one now in the hands of soldiers prodding him and piercing his flesh with their swords and spears. Jesus: the one Peter had just betrayed. Peter's shame and grief were beyond measure. No wonder he wept. And how did Jesus respond to this horrible betrayal that he knew would happen? He said, "You are Peter (meaning 'rock') and on this rock I will build my church." Jesus may have even smiled at the irony of referring to weak, all-too-human Peter as a 'rock'. But on him, and on his fellow disciples and the women who followed him, Jesus did, indeed, build his church. Whatever our sins or weaknesses ... whatever our shame, whatever the ways in which we have betrayed God or betrayed ourselves or others ... God not only loves and forgives us, but God wants us – yes, even us – to grace his world and show his love. If the cock has crowed twice in your life, do not despair. God still loves you and will use you, even you, just as he did Peter. And if you don't want to come to the point of hearing the cock crow, of feeling remorse and despair as Peter did, then perhaps this is the time ... the day, the year ... to begin to live differently, to follow the best that you know, to follow God's word and God's way.

January 22, 2026

I call to remembrance my song in the night; I meditate within my heart, and my spirit makes diligent search.

Psalm 77:6

Even for me, it seemed like an odd thing to do. On a sunny autumn day, I was once again at the creek which is my beloved place for thinking, praying, writing, and simply being near water. "I wish I could take this place home with me for the winter," I thought to myself. Then I spotted it— a small branch, maybe 20 inches or so in length, less than an inch in diameter. It had fallen onto the embankment from a nearby tree. I picked it up. It had an interesting shape, a few knobs and knots, and gray-green moss in some spots. It was the right size to take home as a talisman, as a souvenir – a reminder – of my special creek-side places. When I hold that branch now, indoors, in winter, I can picture the beautiful, sun-splashed waterfall at the creek, looking like liquid silver as it rushes over the high and wide expanse of terraced steps. Built as a dam, it is also a thing of wonder and beauty. I can picture the clear water, burbling over rocks, leaves swirling by on the ever-moving surface, trout darting in and out just below, ducks diving for morsels, geese gliding by as if pulled along by hidden strings, and long-legged, white egrets standing sentinel on the far banks. A physical item – a branch, a seashell, a dried flower, a photo, a letter, a ring – can transport us to another time or place, perhaps a place where our heart still dwells, where our soul wants to be; a place we want to remember, a place where the sun still shines on our hopes and dreams. God is with us in such heart-journeys; in our remembering, and in the keeping of symbols and mementoes. God blesses both our memories and our hopes. God even blesses sticks and seashells and other tokens of what is precious to us. God blesses all of life, in all its seasons and symbols.

January 23, 2026

For by grace you have been saved by faith.

Ephesians 2:8

For the next three days, we'll look at grace, a wonderful blessing we associate with a loving Creator. Grace is given to us by God: unearned, undeserved; something often not even sought by us. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he says that God's grace is sufficient for us. Martin Luther said that we are saved by grace, that we can do nothing to win or merit salvation. Grace is comprised of favor, forgiveness, acceptance, and blessing—all flowing from a divine love that embraces us in this life and the next. We think of grace as God-given, but we can give grace as well, to others and to ourselves. Perhaps, in our overstressed world, in our overly demanding lives, this grace given by us is more important than we know. Last fall, I read a short story, "Dear Husband", written by the renowned author Joyce Carol Oates. The story, in the form of a woman's letter to her husband, is not for the faint of heart. More riveting than the fictional story is the realization that many real-life people lead lives in which they are demeaned, bullied, and abused, often by the people closest to them. Some people even do negative, hurtful things to themselves. That dark reality may not seem to apply to most of us, but ... in lighter shades of dark ... perhaps it does. If we think we're never good enough, if we're hard on ourselves, self-critical, and unwilling to forgive ourselves for our large and small failures, we may need to learn how to give grace to ourselves. The start of a new year is a good time to take an honest look at how we treat ourselves, how much we do or do not love ourselves, and whether we do or do not honor and respect ourselves as God's creation, God's children. Tomorrow: The long reach of guilt, and the deep need for grace.

January 24, 2026

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Romans 16:24

Long after my Dad died, my Mother would recall and talk about a time when she yelled at Dad angrily because she'd said something to him several times, and he ... in another room ... didn't hear her. Perhaps he was distracted. Maybe, with the TV on, he simply didn't hear her. Perhaps his hearing was beginning to fail. At the time, Dad was going to the hospital each month for 72 hours of chemotherapy infusion treatments, during which he was completely sedated and tube-fed. He, and we, had more important things on our minds than his hearing. With the fear we felt and the stress we were under, it was natural for all of us to be on edge, to lose patience at times, and yet..... Years later, Mom still felt sick with guilt when she thought about yelling at her husband ... her sick husband. Her guilt over that remembered incident triggered other regrets and remorse. Soon, she'd be awash in grief that was for more than just the loss of her spouse. At the time, I read something that I shared with Mom: "Grief is a wound that, in time, can heal cleanly, from the inside out. But grief coupled with guilt cannot heal cleanly. Guilt festers within us and can prevent healing. Guilt must be taken out of the wound for it to heal cleanly ... from the inside out." Mom understood that concept, that truth, but she still struggled to give herself grace and to forgive herself. Twenty-five years later, I learned how hard that is to do. After Mom's death, I had painful memories of how I'd yelled at her when she rubbed her eyes, eyes made dry by her being on oxygen 24 hours a day. I'd yelled out of fear and frustration – rubbing her eyes only made them worse – and Mom knew that. She knew I loved her and only wanted her to be better. But that memory often stabbed me with guilt after she was gone. Is there anyone – *anyone? anywhere?* – who has not said or done something for which they feel deep regret, feel guilt? That's unlikely. We're all so human, and while we can tell others to give and accept grace – love, healing, forgiveness – it can be hard for us to do so for ourselves. Tomorrow: Everyday grace.

January 25, 2026

Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and Godly fear. Hebrews 12:28

So often in life, we deal fairly well with the big challenges – illness, emergencies, family crises – because strength somehow rises up within us, perhaps as a gift from God, and we do what we must do. But it is often the smaller things – the little failures, the missed opportunities, our own declining strength and capacities – that cause guilt with a small 'g' to accumulate in our minds and hearts. Maybe we haven't kept in touch with family or friends as we hoped to do. We haven't attended to our own physical health. Or maybe, there are too many things we've left undone. Years ago, a journalist I knew, an older woman, moved to a lovely new condo from the home in which she grew up and lived all her life. She was in her sixties at the time. She loved her new home, but a decade or so later, something was detracting from that enjoyment. She told me she was ashamed of something, ashamed that her large condo basement was filled, top to bottom, with things she'd brought from her family home but had never had time to sort through or organize. In her late seventies, she didn't have the energy or strength for a task that seemed overwhelming. "I think of it every day," she said. "Just knowing what I have

to do and can't do spoils my day and makes me feel ashamed." I reassured her at the time, but now, decades later, I understand what she meant. I juggled many tasks and maintained my home happily until back pain hit me. Now, physical work is a challenge, and I've fallen behind in other tasks as well ... while the days rush by at ever greater speed. I know I'm more active than many people my age, and I'm grateful for the strength I have, the things I can accomplish. But I no longer have a second gear – even, when I was younger, a third gear – that used to allow me to say, at 6:00 or 7:00 p.m., and again at 10:00 p.m. or later, "Okay, what can I do next?" Disappointment with myself, frustration with not getting things done, and anger about the realities of aging spoil many of my days, as they spoiled days for my journalist friend. One day, when I sat in silence with God, the word grace rose in my mind and heart. I knew Who was speaking to me. "Give yourself grace," the voice said. "See the whole picture— the good, beautiful, and promising parts of life. There will be time ... in my time ... and all will be well. You have my grace. Now give yourself your own grace." May it be so for all of us. Amen.

January 26, 2026

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:23-24

Grace has a long history with human beings. Prior to the Reformation, before Martin Luther challenged many of the practices of the church, people were told, often by charlatans, that they had to buy 'indulgences' to free deceased loved ones from purgatory, from hell itself, or to avoid other punishments. Beyond the misuse of 'indulgences', Christians had the mistaken notion ... developed over many centuries, through what they were taught ... that they had to 'do' something to earn God's favor or forgiveness. But that isn't what Jesus taught. Jesus told us, simply and powerfully, how to live in accordance with God's loving will and in God's presence. Jesus embodied grace; grace that is a gift to us from a loving God— a God who sees our sinfulness and loves us anyway. Through Jesus, we can know this God, and through Jesus we are redeemed to live with God, in this life and the next. There can be no greater gift, and a gift is something given to us, not something sold to us.

January 27, 2026

Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed.

2 Timothy 3:14

"Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." So said Thomas Edison, who knew something about perseverance. Almost everything we achieve in life ... the things worth having and accomplishing ... come after many hours, days, and even years of diligent work. Not every day brings a brand-new idea or an amazing victory, and we can't live on the mountain peaks of life – those moments of great success and triumph – continuously. Our lives are journeys through the peaks and valleys, and many of our days are what we would call 'ordinary'. But it is in this everyday faithfulness that we are achieving life's purposes. Gandhi once said, "Most of what we do is unimportant, but it is absolutely essential that we do it." It is in the routine moments that we build a family, a faith, a life. God blesses us and is with us every day, even in the ordinary days. That is what makes all of life *extraordinary*.

January 28, 2026

All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.

Exodus 24:7

Anyone who thinks the Bible is dull reading has probably never read it. The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are as exciting as any adventure story or historical novel. (Okay, the laws in Leviticus and the lists in Numbers are tough to plow through, but we can be amazed by the sheer detail and memory reflected there.) The stories of Moses, of Abraham, of Joseph, of Gideon, of David, of Esther, of Daniel ... of God's reaching out to human beings and his embracing of the Hebrew tribes ... are riveting. These stories are filled with mystery, discovery, warfare, betrayal, passion, revenge, repentance, and reconciliation. The panorama of God's dealings with the Hebrew tribes often reads like a story of current-day people and families. From these Scriptures we can learn what the Hebrews learned: that a living, loving Creator God is with us, to guide us and abide with us, to protect and provide for us. In that relationship lies our freedom, our happiness, and our greater good.

January 29, 2026

I have been young and now I am old.

Psalm 37:25

Late night talk show host Johnny Carson often included teasing questions in his monologue: “How bad was it?” “How old is he?” He’d then say, “It was **so bad** that ...”, “He was **so old** that ...” and the audience would laugh. In this, my birthday month, I’ve asked myself that humorous question – “Just how old am I?” – and the answers abound. I’m old enough to remember our excitement when the Sears Roebuck catalog arrived. As a little tyke, I couldn’t imagine that there could be so many things for sale in the whole world. I’m old enough to remember our black telephone with an oval base and a skinny neck, with the receiver resting on top of that neck. We had a ‘private’ line while some neighbors had something called a ‘party’ line. I remember riding the trolley with Grandpop, when I was two or three, and loving it! That’s why I love to ride the Powell-Hyde or Powell-Mason trolleys to Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco. It’s like being with Grandpop! I’m “so old that” I remember going for rides in the car on Sunday afternoons, always stopping for ice cream somewhere along the way. That was our pleasant entertainment when stores were closed on Sunday and there were only three main channels (3, 6, 10) on TV. I remember church bus trips to Atlantic City each summer, to enjoy the beach and boardwalk, long before there were casinos. There were ‘changing areas’ near the boardwalk, where you rented a locker for your clothes when you changed into a swimsuit. Everyone brought food from home on those trips. Grammy made fried chicken, Mom brought fruit and cookies, and Dad hauled a cooler with water and soda. I’m “so old that” I remember getting a ‘spring coat’, new shoes, and a hat for Easter each year. (The grown-up ladies always wore hats to church.) In all these musings, it occurs to me that I’m not just old ... I’m rich. I’m blessed with memories of a simpler time: a time before life centered on cell phones and TikTok; when people had contact with a dozen or so others each day – neighbors, co-workers, store clerks – but it was personal contact, people actually talking to one another, instead of being flooded by hundreds of names, faces, messages, and images on social media and the internet. Those growing-up years had their problems and evil happenings, nationally and world-wide, but I have so many memories of good things that I’m not just old, I’m rich. Maybe you are, too.

January 30, 2026

... he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Cor. 12:9

You never know when awareness of blessings will come to you ... when you realize how rich you are, no matter how old you are. A few months ago, I took my cousin to the hospital for routine tests. I waited for her in the main reception area. I had a book to read, but mostly I just did ‘people watching’. The people who passed by provided a passing parade of humanity and of life lessons. Most people walking by – or limping or being wheeled along – were older. My mind whispered, “You’re getting older, too, sweetie. Time carries us all along.” One woman who came by stole my heart. She was using a walker, pushing it with obvious effort. She progressed across the large room, then sat for a moment before continuing toward the elevator for the testing area. A little while later, she returned, repeating the journey across the polished floor. Beautifully groomed, her navy blue outfit matched the tote bag on her walker. When she used her walker, she was bent over at the waist. The only direction in which she could look was down; the only thing she could see was the floor beneath her. She used the markings on the floor for navigation, and she twisted her head to the side – clearly, a painful, physical strain for her – to get her bearings. Perhaps, when she sat down, it was to refresh her view as well as rest her body. As she sat down to rest after her return from the testing area, she looked up, saw me, and gave me the warmest, sweetest smile. At that moment, all my physical complaints evaporated as I smiled back at that beautiful, brave soul. So much effort to push herself along, so frustrating not to be able to stand erect or see in front of herself, and yet... there was that smile. I touched my hand to my heart in a gesture I knew she understood. I silently thanked God for the pleasure of this woman’s presence, and for the reminder of my own blessings. I didn’t know, then, that God was not yet done with his ‘lessons in the waiting room’.

January 31, 2026

The blessing of the Lord makes me rich.

Proverbs 10:22

As the hours went by in the hospital’s waiting area, the passing parade of humanity continued, and it continued to be fascinating. The majority of people coming through were accompanied by someone: a spouse, caregiver,

or adult children. ("Careful, Pop. Hold onto my arm.") Life in any place, at any time, is more manageable when we have someone with us, near us, for us. Maybe that's why I wasn't prepared for the next arrival. The man had short, dark hair and seemed to be in his late thirties or early forties. He was wearing orange prison garb, and two uniformed law enforcement officers accompanied him. The man's ankles were shackled and chained together. He could only take very small, shuffling steps forward. A wide leather belt around his waist anchored other chains that looped around his chest and appeared to be attached to the shackles on his wrists and the chains on his legs. Although his arms and legs were chained, limiting his movement, the law enforcement officers kept their hands on his arms, probably to steady him or guide him. I assumed the man was at the hospital for medical tests because his guards were leading him to that area. As they passed by, the prisoner looked up and saw me. I had been watching him and now found myself looking into his face. Our eyes met, and his face turned red, as if he was embarrassed, and he turned away, looking at the floor as he shuffled by. I thought of the words from scripture, "Remember the prisoners as if chained with them ..." (Hebrews 13:3), and my heart ached for him, just as it had for the woman with the walker. I had no idea what he had done, but I could imagine how I would feel if I was chained and in prison garb. I prayed for him, as I had for the bent-over woman, and suddenly all of humanity seemed, to me, to be linked together; linked in our weaknesses, in our splendor, and in God's love. A moment later, I saw my cardiologist coming down the hall. "Jim!" I said. He grinned, came over, and gave me a big hug. "Hiya, kiddo!" he said. "How are you? You look great!" "I'm fine," I said. "I'm fine. I'm very blessed. In fact, I'm rich." What else can you say when you've just watched the passing parade of humanity?

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January Prayers, Thoughts, and Blessings



Thoughts, Prayers, and Hopes for 2026