



WCA 2024 December Prayer Guide

How Christmas Heals Our Divided Lives
by Carolyn Moore

Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! — Romans 7:25a

I'm thinking about the two sides of me. There is the person I am and then there is the person I want to be. Those two people seem always at war with each other inside my brain. On my good days, I somehow manage to act like the person I want to be but let a little stress seep into my life or a conflict erupt, and this other person shows up wearing my skin. I default to a version of myself I don't like, someone who poaches peace and breeds chaos. Psychologists might call that person my "false self" or my "shadow side." Whatever the term, what a powerful self it is! Few things are more disappointing than finding out too late that I've given in to that "self" ... *again*.

I suspect I'm not alone in this struggle. The apostle Paul speaks for all humanity when he writes to the Romans,

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing." (Romans 7:15-19, NIV).

We all know too well this cycle of frustration — of reaching for our better nature only to find ourselves discouraged by a repeat appearance of our baser side. Knowing what we know about ourselves, we ought to be all the more awe-struck by the glorious theology beneath the Christmas story.

What we celebrate at Christmas is the fact that God came to us in human form. Theologically, this takes us much deeper than a manger scene. While the technical term — hypostatic union — wipes away the warmth of that pastoral picture, it invites us to consider the real gift of this cosmic reality. The incarnation is the melding of divinity with humanity. He who was fully God held together the power of his divinity with the experience of his humanity ... *perfectly*. And because he did, he now has power enough to reconcile those two natures within *any* person.

When Jesus our Messiah entered into our world, he became the first of a new kind of person, one who identified completely with our limits without releasing his divine nature. His birth did not erase the fact that he was the Word who spoke all creation into existence in Genesis chapter 1. His death did not negate the fact that he was the Warrior who battled with death and won in Revelation chapter 19.

Fully God, fully man. If we slight him on the God side we slide into theological liberalism, focusing on his teachings and example without embracing his cosmic power. If we slight him on the human side, we're in danger of unitarianism — unable to accept the unique nature of the Son or his humanity in the temptations, his frustration with fallenness, his suffering on the cross. But Jesus resisted sin, because he *felt* it. He loved his enemies *as enemies* because he sensed their opposition. He forgave people because he experienced the grief of their sins against God. He experienced life as a human, but perfectly. And because he has made perfect peace with these two parts of himself, he is able — this Spirit-Man — to offer us both pattern and permission to seek wholeness for our own broken lives. In fact, Jesus has accomplished in his body through the perfect union of divinity and humanity what we all long for most: *peace*.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul speaks of Jesus as the answer to the “dividing wall of hostility” that exists between two kinds of people. He writes,

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its command and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Paul makes reference here to a spiritual barrier between two kinds of people, but it is no stretch to say that the walls *between* us are also walls *within* us. In fact, I suspect that the dividing wall that builds inside fallen people creating chaos and disease is the very one that creates the hostilities between us. We battle each other because we battle ourselves, and fear eggs us on. We long to be saved from the stress of unanswered questions and the pressure to be what we can never be, but we're afraid of discovering we aren't worthy of the salvation we're offered. Meanwhile, we ignore the remarkable gift of incarnation. As the prophet Isaiah wrote:

... it was our weaknesses he carried;
it was our sorrows that weighed him down.
And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,
a punishment for his own sins!

But he was pierced for our rebellion,
crushed for our sins.
He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be healed. (Is. 53:4-5, NLT)

This is such good news! In Jesus Christ our Lord is the miracle of a perfect God at peace with an imperfect world. He is the one answer with power to speak peace into the divided mess that is us. In his own body — in that union of divinity and humanity — Jesus proves that peace for imperfect people longing for a perfect world is possible for us, too. Which means that something as clinical-sounding as “hypostatic union” is as personal as our longings and as hopeful as the empty tomb. It is our assurance that Jesus has come not just to get us to heaven but to heal our divided lives *now*.

Knowing that Jesus has power to tear down all “dividing walls of hostility,” we can begin to practice the peace that Jesus has shown us in himself. Even if we don’t feel it, we can “act as if” (to borrow a phrase from recovery circles) Christ’s work is sufficient to heal our divided selves. We can act as if our biggest internal battles are won on days when doubt creeps in. We can act as if our recovery is complete even if we’re still on the journey, and as if our relationships are healed even if they are still in process. We can act as if our physical health is improving, as if our depression is healing, as if our finances are stabilizing, even while those things are still under construction. In short, we *can* know peace in this life, and Jesus — full God, fully man — is our assurance of this truth. The same power that held his divinity and humanity together can hold us together, too, and the God of peace, as Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “can sanctify (us) through and through” (1 Thes. 5:23) — spirit, soul and body. This makes Christ Jesus all the more worthy of our worship, and the Incarnation all the more worthy of our celebration.

How shall we pray? The following guide to prayer offers both personal and communal prompts for each week. The hope is that you’ll spend time with these prompts daily, so they have time to marinate and seep deeper into your spirit. I recommend the use of a journal as you contemplate the directives.

Week of December 1 -- Against Division

Personal: We have come through a season of division within the tribe we all loved. That has been resolved, but now we are left to ask ourselves: is there any division of heart within *me*? Am I divided in my care for others, in my desire to forgive, in my acceptance of the reconciliation toward which Jesus calls? How do I need to pray and journal this week around unresolved anger, hurt, bitterness, unforgiveness? And what decisions do I need to make so that my words and actions line up with the “me” that Christ has designed me to be?

Community: Are there ways in which you are personally called to pray for healing among those who have left the UMC? Are there words of repentance given by the Spirit that He is inviting you to pray on behalf of the whole?

Week of December 8 — Toward Unity

Personal: What are the “as if” prayers you need to be forming for your own life, so that unresolved areas are being prayed over prophetically, rather than anxiously? Practice listening for areas that need a prophetic word, then pray hopefully over what you hear.

Community: Even while our world reels from wars, severe weather, and the discouragement of another election season, we still have a responsibility to seek the peace of the places to which Christ has called us (Jeremiah 29:7). Pray for unity in the Spirit over your own church, city, annual conference, and country. Pray “as if” prayers over areas that are still broken — as if the Lord is healing, as if the circumstances are resolving, as if God is reconciling all things.

Week of December 15 — Prince of Peace

Personal: Where in my life do I lack peace? Do I harbor any “dividing walls” of hostility, doubt, fear, or anxiety? Are there areas of my life where I am doubting Christ's ability to breed peace or bring resolution? How do I need to confess these areas, and what is my next step on the journey toward peace (keeping in mind, of course, that peace is a process, not a moment, and that Jesus invites us into the journey)? Give honor and glory to the Prince of Peace as you pray into your own healing.

Community: Do I detect any areas of dis-ease or chaos in the Body of Christ? How is Jesus calling me to pray into what I am noticing? Which leaders need my prayers as they contend in these areas of concern?

Week of December 22 — Incarnation

Personal: Ask the Lord to show you all the ways you benefit from the incarnation and as those ways are brought to mind, turn them into prayers of praise and thanksgiving. Do this daily, allowing the Holy Spirit to take you deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the Incarnation.

Community: The Global Methodist Church is *global* in aspiration. While we have not yet planted a church in the soil of every nation, we ought to aspire to this goal for the sake of spreading scriptural holiness across the globe. Pray for the countries where we already have churches -- where we are already incarnating the gospel — and then choose two or three countries where we do not yet have a presence and pray for God’s provision of evangelists ready to spread scriptural holiness in those lands. And pray over each of our congregations, that they might be able to celebrate Christmas without interference from enemies of the Gospel.

Countries where we have a presence:

1. Nigeria
2. Malawi
3. Zimbabwe
4. Central African Republic
5. South Africa
6. Zambia
7. Rwanda
8. Thailand
9. Bulgaria
10. Mexico
11. Kenya
12. Ethiopia
13. Philippines
14. North Africa
15. Panama
16. Peru
17. Uganda
18. Democratic Republic of Congo
19. Slovakia
20. Spain
21. Tanzania
22. Angola
23. Mozambique
24. Canada
25. United States

Week of December 29 — Sanctification

Personal: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24) Meditate on this blessing, word by word, and seek the Lord’s affirmation of it in your life. Examine your own spirit for any doubt around God’s ability to “sanctify you through and through.” This is a distinctive of our tribe — that we can be wholly sanctified. Are there ways in which you resist that teaching? Are there ways in which, as you close out this year and resolve to begin again in 2025, you might recommit to the path of sanctification?

Community: Dr. Kevin Watson says that if we as Methodists are not teaching and preaching the doctrine of entire sanctification, we are taking up a needless space in the Body of Christ! Pray that our pastors and leaders will embrace this call to sanctification, to holiness. Pray that God might impute his character and make us holy as he is. Pray that as we begin a new year, we will seek the holiness of God first, before all other things.