



EMBODIED LITURGY FOR FAMILIES CHRISTMAS 2020

INTRODUCTION

At Christmas, we remember the Incarnation, the act of Jesus taking on flesh as a human being; the mystery of being 'in very nature God' yet making himself into the weakest of all - a newborn, human baby.

To celebrate and remember the Incarnation, we want to encourage engaging physically with the Bible, prayer and worship as families this Christmas. In 2020, many of us have experienced a strange out-of-body existence, as we stare at screens and see friends only from a distance. The embodied act of shaking hands, of hugging a friend and of a friendly pat on the shoulder has been impossible.

Many of us are also planning a very different Christmas than usual. Less seeing people, less travel, less busy. Rather than fitting in another Disney movie in that new space, could we dive deeper into the mystery of the Incarnation? Could we spend time seeking God, however messily, as families, and see God meet us and lead us into 2021?

So choose a time that suits your family - after breakfast or just before bedtime works best for our family - where you can create a holiday habit. Explain to the child/ren that you will follow a special prayer diary over the holidays. Choose how many and which to use, depending on what suits you. We have older children, so have added some questions that would not work with toddlers - we have marked these as "for longer attention spans" as all kids are different, it's not just about age!

We've decided on one opening prayer to repeat each day, as we all thrive on ritual, and it will allow us to absorb some wonderful truths about Jesus and the Incarnation.

Merry Christmas! from Sara & Sam

We recognise that the physical nature of these prayers means that they need to be adapted depending on ability.

OPENING PRAYER TO USE EACH DAY:

Jesus is Lord (by Michael Perry)

Explain that one person will lead this prayer (you can take turns each day), and that the prayer starts loud and with everyone standing upright. For half the prayer, you'll get quieter and quieter, and your body lower and lower (adults may move from standing to seated, children - we suspect - may spend the middle part flat on the floor), and then move the opposite way in the second half.

This prayer is based on Philippians 2:5-11, and hopefully by the end of the holidays, you will know it and its profound truth by heart.

(gradually getting quieter, body lower)

Equal with God:

Jesus is Lord

Emptied himself:

Jesus is Lord

Came as a slave:

Jesus is Lord

Found as a man:

Jesus is Lord

Humbly obeyed:

Jesus is Lord

Went to his death:

Jesus is Lord

Death on a cross:

Jesus is Lord

(getting louder, body higher)

God raised him up:

Jesus is Lord

Gave him the name:

Jesus is Lord

Higher than all:

Jesus is Lord

Every knee bow:

Jesus is Lord

All tongues confess:

Jesus is Lord

Glory to God!

Jesus is Lord!

DAY 1: FEET

Opening prayer: Jesus is Lord

Worship: Psalm 31

Encourage everyone in the family to try to get their feet as far away from each other as possible - either by doing a great, big lunge or by doing a wide plié squat. Then, as everyone holds this position, read this excerpt from Psalm 31:

In you, Lord, I have taken refuge;

...

Turn your ear to me,

come quickly to my rescue;

be my rock of refuge,

a strong fortress to save me.

...

I will be glad and rejoice in your love,

for you saw my affliction

and knew the anguish of my soul.

You have not given me into the hands of the enemy

but have set my feet in a spacious place.

Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;

my eyes grow weak with sorrow,

my soul and body with grief.

My life is consumed by anguish

and my years by groaning;

my strength fails because of my affliction,

and my bones grow weak.

...

But I trust in you, Lord;

I say, 'You are my God.'

*My times are in your hands;
deliver me from the hands of my enemies,
from those who pursue me.*

*Let your face shine on your servant;
save me in your unfailing love.*

...

*Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the Lord.*

Explain:

If you were very cramped, there would be little space between your feet. But the Psalmist praises God for setting their feet in a spacious place - with space to breathe and not be cornered by whatever we think of as the enemy, be it people who seem against us or the Covid-19 virus.

The space between your feet represents all the good things that God has provided. Take turns thanking God for good things in your life and for setting your feet in a spacious place.

[For longer attention spans: there are some very real descriptions of the physical outworking of grief in these psalm: have you ever felt as though your 'bones grow weak with grief' in 2020? Perhaps spend a moment feeling that grief in your body, and maybe pray for people who are mourning right now.]

Bonus activity: Go outside somewhere muddy (if you're in the UK), or a sandy beach (if you're in Australia or NZ) or somewhere snowy (if you're somewhere far North). See who can, by standing or leaping, create the widest-apart footprints. Perhaps mark or write in that space about God's provisions.

Bible story:

Read the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet from John 13:1-17 in your favourite Bible

Ending prayer:

Strip off shoes, slippers and socks to reveal your feet. Start by holding your feet as one person reads the prayer:

Jesus, as I hold my feet, I remember you holding your friends' feet. Feet that were dirty and smelly from walking in the dust all day. But you loved your friends then, and you love us now. As I touch my feet, help me feel your loving touch too.

Hold onto your toes.

As I hold onto my toes, and feel how differently sized they are, I'm reminded about the difference between big and small. Thank you Jesus that you chose to become a tiny baby, small and helpless, to know what it's like to be us.

Wiggle your toes.

As I move my toes, I'm reminded of how much I use my feet every day. In the Bible, it says "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15). Help me bring good news everywhere I go today and this holiday.

Touch someone else's foot

Jesus washed his friends' feet and told us to do the same. As I touch someone else's foot, I'm reminded that we are to serve one another, no one putting themselves above the other. Help me to serve those I'm with today.

Amen.

DAY 2: KNEES

Opening prayer: *Jesus is Lord*

Worship: *Psalm 95*

Read this part of Psalm 95, moving from standing to kneeling.

[stand upright]

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord;

let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

Let us come before him with thanksgiving

and extol him with music and song.

[kneel with one knee on the ground]

For the Lord is the great God,

the great King above all gods.

[kneel with both knees on the ground]

In his hand are the depths of the earth,

and the mountain peaks belong to him.

[kneel, sitting down on your calves]

The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

[fold over your knees with your arms outstretched]

Come, let us bow down in worship,

let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;

for he is our God

and we are the people of his pasture,

the flock under his care.

Discuss: (as much as attention spans allow)

- What does it feel like to kneel?
- What would it feel like to kneel: in your classroom / workplace in front of teacher / boss? On the street? Before a toddler? Before a bully?
- Why does kneeling make you feel these things?
- Why might kneeling be dangerous?
- What are we saying to God by kneeling?

Bible story:

Read the story of Jesus calling Simon Peter from Luke 5:1-11 in your favourite Bible.

Ending prayer:

Start by standing up. Choose one person to read the prayer and encourage the rest to follow the movements.

Jesus, when I'm upright, I remember how many things I can do. Just like Peter was good at fishing, there are things I'm good at. Thank you God that I am good at ... [invite everyone to thank God for something they are good at].

Kneel down, as low as you feel like.

Jesus, when I kneel down, I remember that I'm also weak, that there are many things I can't do. I ask you for help with these things in my heart, and pray that I, like Peter, might see you do miracles in my life.

Stand halfway up, as if sitting on an invisible chair.

Jesus, when I rise, I feel my muscles resisting and I'm reminded that you want to strengthen and equip me to do new things, just like you called Peter to a new task. Thank you for "strengthening my feeble arms and weak knees" (Hebrews 12:12).

Amen

DAY 3: SHOULDERS

Opening Prayer: *Jesus is Lord*

Worship: *Psalm 81*

Find a backpack or shoulder bag for everyone and fill with heavy things before putting them on. Then read these first verses of Psalm 81, the Message version:

*A song to our strong God!
a shout to the God of Jacob!
Anthems from the choir, music from the band,
sweet sounds from lute and harp,*

*Trumpets and trombones and horns:
it's festival day, a feast to God!
A day decreed by God,
solemnly ordered by the God of Jacob.
He commanded Joseph to keep this day
so we'd never forget what he did in Egypt.*

*I hear this most gentle whisper from One
I never guessed would speak to me:
"I took the world off your shoulders, **everyone take their bags off!**
freed you from a life of hard labor.
You called to me in your pain;
I got you out of a bad place..."*

Explain:

A big theme in the Bible is God rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt, and making them free. For them, a symbol was that they didn't have to carry heavy things on their shoulders for other people any more.

We are not slaves in that physical way, we are free to do what we want. But sometimes we can feel burdened by problems and concerns, and we can almost become slaves to these worries.

[For longer attention spans: Can you think of a way someone might be enslaved to their worries? Do you know anyone whose burdens are hindering their freedom?]

Bible story:

This is less of a story and more of a physical reading of Matthew 11:28-30. Begin by choosing someone to read.

[Check that everyone knows what a yoke is, and if needed, explain and / or show a picture of one]

Invite the rest of the family to stand side to side next to each other, cross their arms and hold onto both of their own shoulders (if they can reach).

Jesus said:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Let go of shoulders and shake out your arms for a moment, then gently place your arm on the shoulder of the person next to you.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Ending Prayer:

Position yourselves so that everyone can gently hold the back of someone else's shoulders (if you're too few to make a circle, perhaps take turns and pray the prayer twice).

Take a couple of breaths and be aware of the sensation of hands on your shoulders.

At Christmas we read the prophecy of Isaiah that the government, the leadership, will be on the shoulders of this tiny baby.

Jesus we thank you that you do not ask us to carry the world on our shoulders, but rather, that you carry it for us.

In Galatians 5:1 it says:

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

In a moment of silence, we think about the things that burdens us.

And we give them to Jesus.

Thank you for freedom.

Amen

DAY 4: ARMS

Opening Prayer: *Jesus is Lord*

Worship: *Psalm 91*

Ask everyone to hold their arms out, straight in front of them, palms up. Then lift your arms up and over so that your palms are facing the top of your head. This will represent the covering and protection of God as you read this first section of Psalm 91 from the Message version:

*You who sit down in the High God's presence,
spend the night in Shaddai's shadow,
Say this: "God, you're my refuge.
I trust in you and I'm safe!"*

*That's right—he rescues you from hidden traps,
shields you from deadly hazards.
His huge outstretched arms protect you—
under them you're perfectly safe;
his arms fend off all harm.*

*Fear nothing—not wild wolves in the night,
not flying arrows in the day,
Not disease that prowls through the darkness,
not disaster that erupts at high noon.
Even though others succumb all around,
drop like flies right and left,
no harm will even graze you.*

*You'll stand untouched, watch it all from a distance,
watch the wicked turn into corpses.
Yes, because God's your refuge,*

*the High God your very own home,
Evil can't get close to you,
harm can't get through the door.*

Discuss:

- When have you experienced God's protection this year?

(for longer attention spans)

- We know that bad things happen not only to people who behave badly - many wonderful people have caught Covid-19 this year. How can we understand these verses about God's protection while knowing that bad things still happen?

Bible story:

Read Mark 10:13-16 from your favourite Bible.

Explain:

Jesus, who himself had chosen to come as a small child, had a soft spot for the kids playing and running around his legs. In fact, he had a soft spot for anyone seen as weak or insignificant.

Children tend to be more embodied than many adults - stomping when angry, jumping when happy and so on. Adults learn to keep physical expressions on the inside - possibly not helping our stress levels!

It's lovely then to see that the grown-up Jesus doesn't just say a blessing over the children, but he takes them in his arms.

The Word that became flesh knows that a hug means just as much as a kind word.

Ending Prayer:

Start by holding your arms out wide in front of you.

This is me, God, this is how I feel today...

[ask everyone to share a word or make a face describing how they feel]

Hug yourself as tight as you can.

Thank you, God, that you love me. Help me feel your warm hug of love today. Help me share that love with those around me.

Perhaps end the prayer time by sharing a hug with someone else, to spread the love.

DAY 5: FACE

Opening Prayer: *Jesus is Lord*

Worship: *Psalm 34*

Lift up your arm with the palm towards your face. Turn your face towards your palm and spread your fingers wide. Imagine that your palm is the sun and close your eyes. Imagine what it feels like to turn your face towards the sunshine. Then read the psalm:

*I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
I will glory in the Lord;
let the afflicted hear and rejoice.*

*Glorify the Lord with me:
let us exalt his name together.
I sought the Lord, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.*

*Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.*

...
*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

Discuss:

- Have a go at making the facial expressions for these emotions: anger, joy, fear, disgust, sadness, shame, excitement.
- Why do you think the Psalm says that those who look to God will not have faces covered with shame? [hint: Jesus 😊]

- Do you know anyone with a radiant face? Practise thinking about a happy memory or good things in your life, and smile!

Bible story:

Read Matt. 17:1-8 in your favourite Bible. Ask everyone except for the reader to close their eyes and imagine the scene. Read it slowly.

Explain:

God's natural state is shining bright holiness, his shining face was terrifying enough to send three grown men facedown on the ground.

- Why "facedown" do you think?

But Jesus tells his friends "do not be afraid." They had seen a glimpse of "the Word", when before perhaps they had only seen "the flesh"

Ending prayer:

There is an ancient prayer of blessing in the Bible, sometimes known as Aaron's blessing. Part of the blessing is for God to shine his face on us. As we pray this blessing over one another, pray that we might reflect some of that radiance on the world around us.

In many Jewish homes, parents pray this blessing over their children after they have lighted the shabbat candle on Friday night, while resting their hands on their children's heads. Why not take turn placing your hand on each others heads and praying the blessing?

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face towards you
and give you peace.*

(Num 6:24-27)

DAY 6: HEART

Opening Prayer: *Jesus is Lord*

Worship: *Psalm 27*

Who knows what a beating heart sounds like? Decide on a tempo and create the boom-boom rhythm of heartbeat with a gentle hand to your chest together. Then read this excerpt from Psalm 27:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation -
whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life -
of whom shall I be afraid?*

...

*Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;*

*though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.*

...

*My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, I will seek*

...

I remain confident of this:

*I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.*

Wait for the Lord;

*be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.*

Explain & Discuss:

In this psalm the heart is described as the place where fear might come from, the place where we make decisions and the place for deep trust in God.

Jesus says that we can know what's in people's heart by what comes out of their mouth: "...the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." (Luke 6:45).

- Can you think of someone who you think has filled their heart with good things, because real goodness comes from their mouth?
- What are some of the unhelpful stuff in our hearts that sometimes slip out in our words? [adults, be first to confess to this!]
- How can we fill up our hearts with good things this Christmas holiday?

Bible story:

Read Luke 7:11-17 from the NIV if you have it. Keep your hands on your heart as you hear the story.

Discuss:

- What do you think it means that Jesus' "heart went out" to the grieving widow?
- How do you think Jesus felt when he saw her?
- When does your heart go out to people? How can we become more compassionate like Jesus?

Ending prayer:

Keep your hands on your heart, and take turns saying:

This is on my heart today, God: [add a word or two]

Then take turns to let your "heart go out" to each person, by moving one of your hands off your own heart and place over the other person's heart, and say these words from the Psalm:

Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

DAY 7: WHOLE BODY

Opening Prayer: *Jesus is Lord*

Worship: *Psalm 139*

Take your time reading this excerpt of Psalm 139, doing all the actions in the **[brackets]**.

*You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me. [move hands like a scanner from top to toe]
You know when I sit and when I rise; [sit, then stand]
you perceive my thoughts from afar. [hands on head]
You discern my going out and my lying down; [walk around, lie
down]
you are familiar with all my ways.*

*Before a word is on my tongue [tongue out]
you, Lord, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before, [stand, one hand on your belly,
one on your back]
and you lay your hand upon me. [hand on top of head]*

...

*For you created my inmost being; [hands on heart]
you knit me together in my mother's womb. [hands on belly]
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well. [do some big star jumps]*

...

*How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them! [hands on head]*

*Search me, God, and know my heart; ["body scan" end on heart]
test me and know my anxious thoughts. [hands on head]*

*See if there is any offensive way in me, [hands over eyes]
and lead me in the way everlasting. [point forward]*

Discuss:

- What can your body do that you think is wonderful?
- What do you think it means to be "fearfully made"?
- Do you know any amazing facts about how your body works? (for example, your body produces about half a litre of saliva each day, bones are four times stronger than concrete and every second your body creates 25 million new cells)

Bible story:

Jesus makes very clear that loving him is not just something we say, or even something we feel - but it involves all of us. Read this challenge from Jesus (mark 12:30) and do an action for each thing. We've repeated and mixed it up a bit to give you a full-body work-out:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart [hands on heart]
and with all your soul [do "jazz hands"]
and with all your mind [hands on head]
and with all your strength [do a push-up].*

*Love the Lord your God with all your mind,
all your strength,
all your soul,
all your strength,
all your heart,
all your mind,
all your soul,
all your strength.*

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Discuss:

Think of ways you can love God with all these different and whole parts of you. You could write it here:

HEART _____

SOUL _____

MIND _____

STRENGTH _____

Ending prayer:

In Romans 12:1, Paul writes to the church and encourages us to offer our whole bodies as worship to God. The Message version explains this nicely:

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.”

At the end of this little set of prayer times, think about what it means for you as a family to worship God with your whole selves.

Finish by saying the words of the verse to each other.

THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND MADE HIS DWELLING AMONG US.

John 1:14