

Many members. One body united in Christ.

Invocavit

St. Matthew 4:1-11

22 February, Anno Domini 2026

Beloved flock of the Good Shepherd,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Collect of the Day for Invocavit is a rich treasure that has been handed down to us from our forefathers in the faith and is worth taking time to reflect on. Hear again what the Church prayed earlier. “O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of Your Church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of the world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.”

The world in which we live is filled with immeasurable luxuries and comforts. We all drove to church this morning instead of having to walk or even hitch up the horses to the wagon. We live in houses where with the touch of a button, not only do we get to avoid the extremities of the heat and cold, but we can adjust the temperature by that one degree that will better suit our fancy. We have clean water piped into our homes that we can then heat for our nice warm showers (unless you are taking on the discipline of cold showers!) and so that we don't have hunch over the sink washing dishes by hand or take our laundry down to the crick to scrub on the wash board and hang on the drying line. We have credit cards that allow us to live beyond our means so that we don't even have to wait until next month to get what we want.

The life we live is a lot more like the Garden of Eden than the wilderness into which our Lord was driven by the Holy Spirit after His baptism. All of our creaturely comforts make it much more difficult to be mindful that this world is, truly, a wilderness. We imagine that everything is safe, that people are basically good, that everything will always work, that we can blindly trust experts and the people in authority. And that is exactly how the devil wants it. He wants us in a perpetual comfort-induced coma so that we are easy prey, so that instead of him having to do the hard work of attacking, we do the work for him and slip off into eternal death. It is so incredibly easy to be blind to the fact that we stand in perpetual danger of both body and soul and that it is only by God's grace and mercy that we have even

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a single morsel of bread. It is not without reason that our Lord Jesus Christ warns us that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter eternal life.”

Occasionally something happens to remind us that things aren't as great as we thought. A healthy athlete stricken by a heart attack. A sudden flood that sweeps away a cabin full of young girls. The bursting of pipes under your house that demands that money that you had worked to put away for a special project. The revelation of a network of powerful and influential people who have for years been doing things of the utmost depravity with impunity. Such things might make us pray a few times. But the churches that filled after 9/11 emptied just as fast and the Twin Towers came crashing to the ground. We quickly forget or we somehow convince ourselves that such things won't happen to us. We fail to take these things as the warnings that they really are, that the world is filled with evil, that the devil is on the march to sweep as many souls into fires of eternal judgement as he possibly can before the Lord returns which he knows full-well is approaching. If we knew and appreciated the dangerous wilderness in which live and that our only hope and help is in Christ Jesus, we wouldn't be able to offer enough Divine Services during the week, there wouldn't be enough hours in the day for me to hear confession, and no one would need to be exhorted to gather their families together daily for prayer and hearing the Word of God.

Praise God that we don't know every danger that surrounds us constantly. Even the most stout-hearted would faint in overwhelm. But God in His mercy does send us reminders that all is not well. And especially is that true for His dear children. Because He loves us and does not want us to be lost, He brings us into times of need as He brought Israel, freshly delivered from slavery, into the barren wilderness to teach them. They had to learn to trust solely in Him. Their faith had to be tested by the fiery trial. After exposing the false gods of Egypt as utter frauds, the Lord attacked the more sinister idols of the Israelites hearts - daily bread, comfort, and the thoughts of their own hearts. These are much more deceptive idols. These idols we fiercely guard and defend. And the only way we learn to turn away from them and to the only true God is if God takes them from us so that we can see that these are not gods, they can't help us, they don't care about us, and that the devil very often uses them to lead us away from God.

But this is what we pray for in today's Collect. We are asking our Good Shepherd Jesus to guide us in safe paths because we know that we are surrounded by dangers to our souls. Some of them are obvious but many of them are not. Many of them are hidden behind good things. Many of them masquerade as harmless. We need

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the Good Shepherd whose knowledge and sight are pure to show us the way.

However, it is one thing to pray for God's guidance. It is another thing completely to receive it and follow it. Typically what we really want is for the Shepherd to follow us wherever we want to go and keep us from having to suffer the consequence for our sin. We want to go where we can be lazy and comfortable. We want the assurance of eternal life without having to set aside the things of the world or discipline our flesh or read the Bible or pray or gather in the house of God. We want Jesus to give His approval to our greed, our idolatry, our irreverence, our impiety, our apathy, our immodesty, our gossip, our pride, and all our other sins. We want to conduct ourselves like foolish children, indulging whatever our flesh desires at the moment and then simply have Jesus pat us on the head and smile and make sure that we don't have to suffer any of the consequences of our wickedness.

But that is not ever what Christ does. He never goes with you in your sin. He has given to you the full counsel of truth in the Holy Scriptures. He has declared to you with the utmost clarity what is good and what is evil. And we have no excuse for not knowing it. We have the Word of God literally at our fingertips 24/7. And because it is so accessible our Biblical literacy is as low as it has ever been. We assume that we can just read it later. We think that because we know that Jesus died and rose for us there isn't anything else God can teach us. We should know the Bible better than any of those who have come before us. The only reason for not being able to recite the Ten Commandments or the Creed or the promises of Holy Baptism or any of the psalms is our stubborn refusal to learn them and instead fill our heads with the vile lyrics of pagan singers. Parents, our heads should be hung in shame over the things that we allow our children to consume and be exposed to as though we have no choice or control. We complain that we are too busy to talk about what God says in His Word, to teach them the Small Catechism, to have family devotions while we sign them for yet another activity. We can make up a million excuses that might gain a sympathetic ear among sinful men, but we know they are just that and God certainly isn't buying a single one of them.

Men, this is most true of us. God has made us the guardians and protectors of those in our homes. We are charged with leading these little flocks behind the Good Shepherd as He lights our path with His Word. We are to defend and shield them from the crafts and assaults of the devil by being examples of godly piety and devotion and speaking the truth of God's Word against the lies of the devil and the world. You are, like it or not, the spiritual heads of your homes. You are in charge of the souls of your wives and children. And if these have not yet been granted to you, then you should be preparing for when they are. God has laid that holy duty

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upon men and supplied you with the weapons and the armor that you need. Above all He has given you His Word. Study it. Meditate on it. Memorize it. Talk about it. He has also commanded you to call upon Him and seek His help and aid. You have His firm promise that He will hear you and answer you. He has given you a pastor, a fellow soldier on the battle field through whom He graciously forgives you your sins and encourages you as the battle rages on. He comes to be with us as we gather together as His people. Standing in our midst He teaches us, He binds up our wounds, He feeds and nourishes us. He comforts the brokenhearted and binds up the wounds we have suffered. Keeping our households in the true faith is the duty that covers, defines, and shapes all the others. But if you are setting aside time in the Word of God and prayer with your family or the opportunity to gather with the body of Christ and sit at the feet of Jesus for sports or a job or sleeping in or video games or family time then those things have become sin and a stumbling block to you. You are doing the devil's work by keeping yourself and your family away from Christ the consequences of which, for you and them, are too terrible to think about.

This is why our Lord was driven out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit immediately after His Father said "You are my Beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased." He went to be tempted in every way as we are but to succeed where we fail, to resist where we cave in, to say "No" where we say "Yes". And while we typically think of those forty days of fasting as putting Jesus into the weakest position possible, it is also true that those forty days were preparing Him, training Him to fear, love, and trust in His Father alone. That time of fasting was also a time of intense prayer and meditation on the Word of God. Those three always go together. This is why Lent is a time of fasting. Fasting from the pleasures and comforts of the world trains us to resist the devil's lies which offer us an easier way, a way that doesn't involve taking up a cross and dying. Likewise, the practice of almsgiving during Lent, trains us to deny pleasures to ourselves so that we can provide for the needs of others. So also, prayer teaches us to not trust in our own work but in the will and work of God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do not be fooled by the luxuries and the technological or medical developments which surround you, many of which promise to protect you or keep you safe or make your life better. It's a lie. The sin that entered this world when Adam and Eve first traded the Word of God for the promise of something better will not be stopped by an app or a drug or more money in the bank. Nothing man does will save him. Nothing man does will atone for his transgressions. Nothing man does will protect him in this world from the dangers of this wilderness. Christ alone can do these things. And He has. He has obeyed. He has

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resisted. He has fought. He has bled and died. And He has risen again as the Mighty Victor. And now He guides you on the safe path that He has cleared so that you may walk it and arrive at the promised land of His heaven which is the full and perfect rest for which we all long.

But that way is the way of the cross. On this way our idols must die. On this way we must die to sin and to self and to the world. We must say “no” to the cares and riches and pleasures of this life and “yes” to the things of righteousness - prayer, gladly hearing and learning the Word of God, confessing our sins and receiving Christ’s absolution from His servants, receiving often the Body and Blood that were shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins, raising our children to above all know Christ, being slow to anger and eager and quick to forgive, putting away all obscene talk and coarse joking from our lips, humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God, encouraging one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, quietly and faithfully doing the work God has given us to do in our vocations. These are the safe path. By these things the Lord shields you from all harm and guards and protects you from all evil. Your flesh will not like any of it and will resist and try to convince you that you don’t need these things. The world will not understand and mock you, persecute you, call you a fool, and maybe even do to you what it did to Jesus. The devil will attack. He will hold your sins before you. He will let you have no peace within or without. He will offer you all kinds of pleasures and comforts and easier paths to deter you and draw you onto the broad and easy path that leads to your eternal destruction.

The way of the cross is the only way but do not be afraid. Do not be deceived. Though the Lord Jesus did suffer and die, He is risen and glorified. He, who shares our flesh and blood, vanquished all the enemies that threaten to harm us. Our Great High Priest is merciful and patiently bears with and forgives our weaknesses, covering them with His righteousness and holiness in Holy Baptism. Our glory awaits and it is eternal. What we will be we do not yet know, but we know we will be like our Lord Jesus. But not yet. Not here. Not in this world. Our best life cannot and will not be now. Now we live by faith, not by sight. Now God’s people sojourn in the wilderness surrounded by ravening wolves. But we are unwilling to trade the glory of the world to come for the fake and fleeting pleasures of this life.

May our gracious Father so strengthen us that we may follow our Good Shepherd in the way that He leads so that we may spend all of eternity with Him in the joy and bliss of heaven. In the light of that glory all the struggles that we endure now will be but a fleeting memory. God grant it for the sake of Christ.

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In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.