

# *When the Path Gets Rocky*

*A Lenten Journey of  
Sorrow and Joy*

## Introduction

*A Chat for Faith Teams*

*Accompanying the Devotional Series*

*“When the Path Gets Rocky: A Lenten Journey of Sorrow and Joy”*

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

**NOTE to Faith Team Leaders:** This Faith Chat is an introduction to the five-part devotional series focusing on holding sorrow and joy. It contains a variety of options allowing its use either at a monthly or even weekly gathering of a Faith Team. Faith Team leaders are encouraged to use bits and pieces as they see fit. The goal is to have a meaningful conversation that is supportive and allows participants to explore and deepen their faith. By design, there is more material than could possibly be used in a single session.

## **Gathering (15 minutes: 0:00-0:15)**

### **Coming Together - (12 minutes: 0:00- 0:12)**

*Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.*

*Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.*

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

### **Introduction: (3 minutes: 0:12- 0:15)**

Loss is a part of life. No matter our age, education, ethnicity, or gender, we all grieve. At times the loss and the resultant grief rocks us to the core of our being. In a moment our world changes and we are numb, disbelieving what has happened. At other times, the loss is small, a mere temporary inconvenience until we find something else to "love." No matter, grieving is a reality that we must address as we journey through our days.

In a time of pandemic, there have been heightened losses. In addition to the deaths directly related to the virus, there are a host of accompanying losses. There has been unemployment, economic hardship, social isolation, and major life events postponed or canceled. Schools,

churches, restaurants, supply chains, travel, and community life has been disrupted by COVID. To make matters worse, there is social unrest and political divisiveness. Instead of coming together for the purpose of finding solutions to our problems, we have retreated into partisan and tribal bunkers that forego collaboration and compromise.

And we are sick of it all. We want to get back to “normal” routines and go about our lives before we had to worry (or argue) about masks, vaccinations, and boosters. Can't we all just be happy, focus on positive things, get along, and carry on?

Nice as that might sound, when loss occurs, there is a need to grieve. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we need to go through the grieving process. For future health and well being, we need to acknowledge our losses, detach from what is 'no more', mourn, and finally be open to new possibilities. There is no way around, over, or under it. We must go through it. It is a journey.

Lent is a good time for journeys. For centuries, in the forty days (plus six Sundays) before Easter, Christians have meditated and reflected on the journey Christ made to the cross. It was a path full of loss and suffering as Jesus encountered the brokenness of human existence.

In the midst of loss, Jesus brought the healing and restorative power of God. Abiding with a hurting humanity, God transforms and creates newness of life. There is cause for us to hope.

Using selected scripture from the Gospel of Luke, Psalms of Lament, and the book of Job, this Faith Chat series will seek to hold the paradox of sorrow and joy alongside the promises of God. *When the Path Gets Rocky*, will walk along uneven and at times bumpy ground.

Up front, we need to recognize that although we all experience loss, we are not in the same place. Some folks in our Faith Teams have recently experienced the death of loved ones, some are experiencing losses of health and dreams, others still are facing financial hardships. Among each group there is likely a combination of open wounds and scars. We will all need to be sensitive to one another and accompany each other no matter where we find ourselves.

Walking through loss together, we have the opportunity to hold both sorrow and joy while we trust in God who is always present and has the power to heal our every ill, mend our wounds, and resurrect our lives.

# Engaging God's Word: (10 minutes: 0:15- 0:25)

## Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)

### Luke 15: 1-7 (NRSV)

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

*For those who are using this Faith Chat for more than one session, you may choose either to repeat the verse above or choose one of the alternate options. Use the same questions below to reflect upon your guiding scripture text.*

- “After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them. As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.” Luke 4: 38-41 (NRSV)
- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. “ Psalm 22:1-2 (NRSV)

and

“From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For

he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.” Psalm 22:21b-25 (NRSV)

[Notice the remarkable change of tone in the beginning and end of this Lament.]

- “Job said: “Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man-child is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, or light shine on it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds settle upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night—let thick darkness seize it! let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. Yes, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry be heard in it. Let those curse it who curse the Sea, those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan. Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none; may it not see the eyelids of the morning— because it did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb, and hide trouble from my eyes.” Job 3: 2-10 (NRSV)

## **Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)**

What stands out for you in these words of scripture?

What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What insight does it contain regarding sorrow? Joy?

What does it teach us about our relationship with God? With others?

How does it challenge you? Comfort you?

What promise does it contain concerning God?

## **Exploring Connections (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)**

*Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion. For those who are using this Faith Chat over multiple sessions, you might want to do one of the supporting Jesus-healing stories in Option A for each session.*

## **Option A: Healing Abounds in Jesus**

*Choose one of the following healing stories from Luke's Gospel. If you are using this Faith Chat for more than one week, you might want to select a different story for each session.*

### **I. The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

Jesus taught using parables. These little vignettes revealed important wisdom about God and God's reign in human life. Using the power of metaphor, parables inspire and ignite the imagination, drawing us ever deeper into our relationship with God and others. The Parable of the Lost Sheep is the first in a trio of "lost" parables found in chapter fifteen of Luke's gospel. They are each told in response to the criticism that Jesus received from the religious establishment regarding his table fellowship with outcasts and "sinners" (those labeled as separated from God and excluded from 'holy' community.) God desires restoration of broken and separated humanity that suffers from loss. Through connection and fellowship with Christ, we find new life and joy even in the midst of suffering.

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.*

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

Luke 15: 1-7 (NRSV)

### **Questions for discussion:**

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus-story? How about joy? What insights in "holding sorrow" or "holding joy" might this parable contain for you?

What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about God's response to loss on account of this Jesus-story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this parable contain?

## **II. Casting Out Demons in Capernaum**

Near the start of Jesus's ministry in the Gospel of Luke, there is an encounter in a synagogue in Capernaum. A man with an "unclean" demon is in the holy place. The demon verbally assaults Jesus's authority. Jesus responds by rebuking and exorcizing the demon out of the man, restoring the tormented soul without harm. Not only does Jesus teach about the restoration of God's reign but embodies the word. Lives are restored and reconnected to God by the grace, authority, and act of the one who is the Christ (or God's Chosen One.)

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.*

"He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority. In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm. They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, "What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!" And a report about him began to reach every place in the region."

Luke 4: 31-37 (NRSV)

### ***Questions for discussion:***

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus-story? How about joy? What insights in "holding sorrow" or "holding joy" might this story contain for you?

What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about God’s response to loss on account of this Jesus-story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this story contain for you?

How does this story relate to **Luke 15: 1-7** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

### **III. Healing in Time for Dinner**

Before church buildings were built, the early church gathered in a variety of places for worship. Among them were the houses of believers. In these places, scripture was read, prayers raised, and bread was broken in the sure and certain hope that the Risen Christ was present. In this healing story, which follows a healing in the synagogue, we find that Simon’s mother-in-law was disabled by a high fever. Jesus healing allows for her to resume her role in the life of the community. Restoration to community is one of the outcomes of Jesus's tour of healing.

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.*

“After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.

As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them. Demons also came out of many, shouting, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.”

Luke 4:38-41 (NRSV)

#### ***Questions for discussion:***

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus-story? How about joy? What insights in “holding sorrow” or “holding joy” might this story contain for you?

What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about God’s response to loss on account of this Jesus-story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?



What hope or promise does this story contain for you?

How does this story relate to **Luke 15: 1-7** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

#### **IV. Touching Lepers**

Leprosy was a debilitating skin condition at the time of Jesus. Highly contagious, leprosy isolated the infected from their families and faith community. Living on the physical outskirts of the community, Lepers were required to warn passerbys of their condition so that they would not infect others. Jesus violates the rules and touches the unclean lepers, demonstrating that God's reign is not reserved only for the "clean and holy."

*Read the story and use the questions below to discuss..*

"Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him. And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go," he said, "and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them." But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray."

Luke 5: 12-16(NRSV)

Where do you find sorrow in this Jesus-story? How about joy? What insights in "holding sorrow" or "holding joy" might this story contain for you?

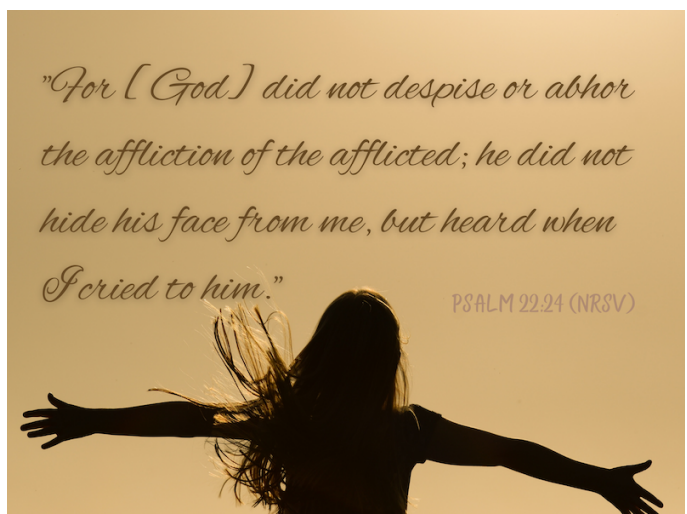
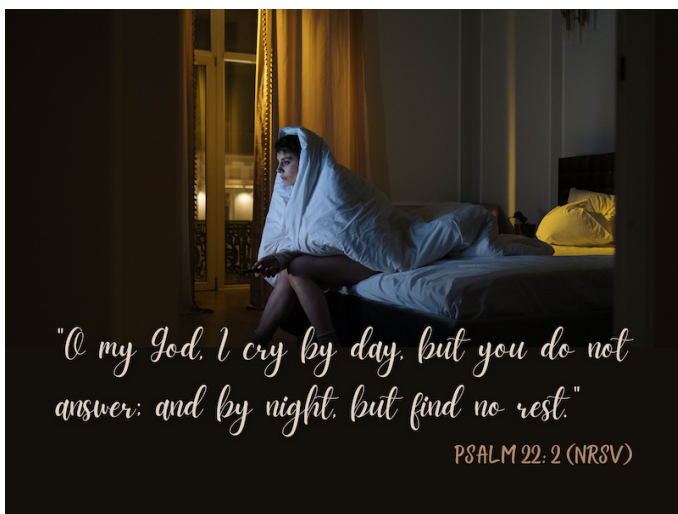
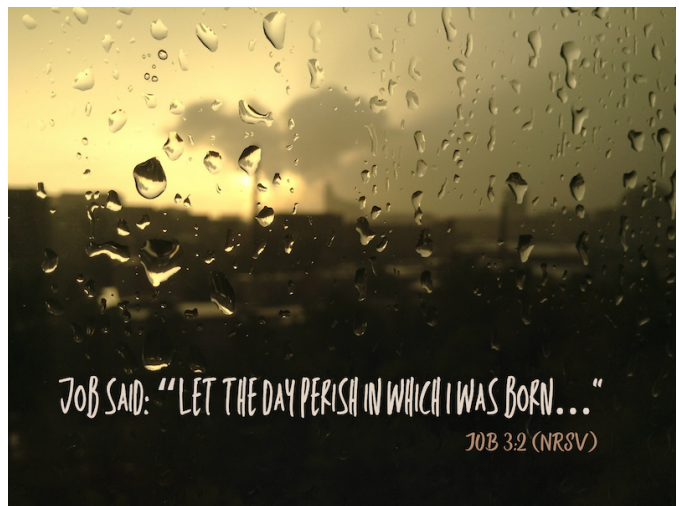
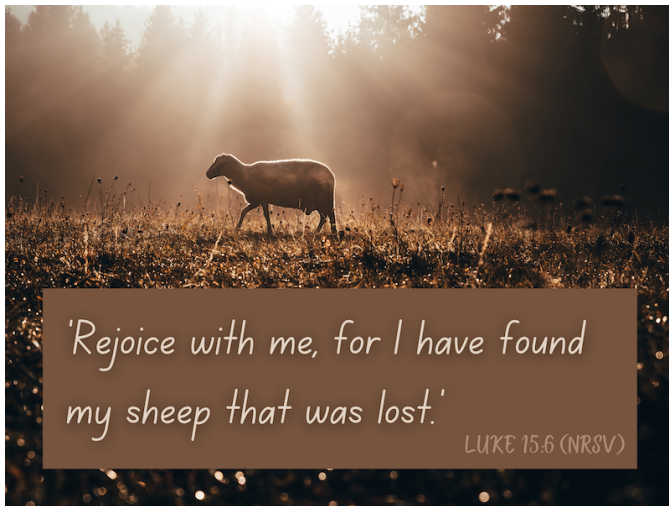
What personal experiences of loss inform your reading of this story?

What do you learn about God's response to loss on account of this Jesus-story? Through this story, what is Jesus inviting you to consider, feel, or do?

What hope or promise does this story contain for you?

How does this story relate to **Luke 15: 1-7** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

## Option B: Inspirational Images



*Discuss the Inspirational Images above.*

How do you connect or disconnect with them?

In what ways do the images express sorrow and joy?

Where do you see God present (or absent) in each image?

What other images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

## **Option C: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:**

*Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.*

Sharing only where you feel comfortable, what losses do you bear? Are they recent or embedded in your past memory? What emotions accompany you as you grieve? How do you “hold” your sorrow?

Where have you experienced God’s presence during times of loss? Did you recognize it while you were in the midst of things or later as you reflected back upon the situation?

From your experience, can you speak about the paradox of sorrow and joy? How can it be that we can be both filled with sorrow and joy at the same time? Was there a time that you are willing to share in which you both laughed and cried simultaneously?

What role does faith play as you grieve? As you rejoice?

How does trust in God’s promise to always be near and to love us, aid in our journey through sorrow and joy? What action does it invoke in us as we journey alongside others who are in different places when it comes to sorrow and joy? How might we take part in the creative and redemptive - life healing and affirming - work of God?

## **Option D: Lamenting Through Sorrow Towards Joy**

Psalm 22 is a classic lament which was used by the early Christian church to grapple with the death of Jesus. Each of the Gospel writers use the psalm to frame the telling of their passion stories which plumb the depth of Christ’s love and suffering.

Biblical scholar, Bernhard W. Anderson writes, “The term ‘lament’ is not an altogether satisfactory label for these psalms. The word may suggest a pessimistic view of life, a ‘bemoaning of a tragedy which cannot be reversed.’ But this is not the mood of the psalmists. What characterizes these psalms, with very few exceptions (perhaps Ps. 88) is the confidence that the situation can be changed if Yahweh wills to intervene (Out of the Depths The Psalms Speak for Us Today, page 75.)

It would serve us well to remember that the lament psalms are as much songs of faith as psalms which praise God and offer thanksgiving. Psalms, like Psalm 22, look through the struggle and desperation that is part of human experience, especially as we suffer loss and face adversity, clinging to a belief that God has not abandoned us. Unlikely as present circumstances may make it seem, God is not only with us but will act on our behalf. These songs of faith are prayers spoken through tears and with voices that are raw. They don't pretend things are fine and that things will magically work themselves out. Instead of denying reality, they have courage to look into the worse life has to offer and have the courage and honesty to speak truth about brokenness.

In all the lament psalms that we will look at in this series, there is a moment (however brief) of transition in which the entire mood of the psalm changes. Things shift suddenly from suffering and sorrow to relief and joy. In Psalm 22, this happens in verse 21: "Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me." At the start of the verse, the afflicted emphatically cries out for deliverance. Without any explanation of how/where/when, God rescues the psalmist. From this point to the end, the song of faith turns into a tune of praise.

Read Psalm 22 in its entirety. Answer these questions:

- The Psalmist cries out in agony, surrounded by enemies and perils, feeling abandoned by God. Have you ever felt such despair? How did your faith hold up during the turmoil and tragedy?
- How might we turn to God in the midst of our suffering and sorrow? What faith practices have you found helpful that connect (and reconnect) you with God when life falls apart?
- Although there is no description of how God rescues in verse 21, something remarkable happens that transforms the psalmist from sorrow to joy. Can you fill in the blanks with an experience from your own life? How have you experienced transformation from sorrow to joy? Where was God during that time?
- How might this lament psalm serve as a resource for you in challenging and mournful times?

## **Option E: Holding Sorrow and Joy - Paradox and Promise in Luke**

One of the ongoing themes of the Gospel of Luke is healing and restoration. From the start of Jesus's ministry in his hometown synagogue (Lk 4: 16-30) to his forgiving words on the cross (Lk 23:42-43), Jesus embodies God's plan of salvation that begins with Israel and extends to the rest of the world. The gospel is full of promise about what God is doing to bring life amid the condition of human brokenness.

At the start of the gospel, Luke writes, "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the

beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Lk 1: 1-4)”

From this introduction, we learn that this account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is told for a purpose. It is so that we might “know” or understand the truth about the God who others have taught us. God is full of steadfast love and mercy. Likewise, love and mercy are essential components to God’s unfolding and ever expanding reign. Knowing such things invites us to live accordingly.

Theophilus literally means, “God-lover.” It may have been the name of a person within the Christian community to which Luke wrote. It could also refer to all “God-lovers.” I like to think that Luke, who is a master storyteller, is addressing his good news account to all those who have come to believe and trust in God. You and I are a part of this group.

We are more than readers of the story of Jesus. We are part of the ongoing reason that this book of faith continues to be the living Word of God. In the story that Luke tells, we are the recipients of the love and mercy that characterizes God’s reign. Jesus comes to us, as he came in the first century, to bring that reign into our lives. What a gift!

And there is more. Not only are we presented with God’s love and mercy through Jesus, but we are given a resource through which we can live our lives. Love and mercy become a pathway for us to travel through the enduring paradox that our lives are full of both sorrow and joy. These polar opposites are ever present and we are caught in the tension.

The paradox of suffering and joy can be found throughout the gospel of Luke. These polarities exist side by side as people bring their hurts and brokenness to Jesus. Joy is found as the restoration Jesus brings is received. But not all receive God’s reign with delight. Rejection occurs throughout and is exemplified by the crucifixion.

Questions for discussion:

- Where have you observed the paradox of suffering and joy in your life? How can there be both suffering and joy present together?
- How might love and mercy provide a pathway for us to travel through this paradox?
- Where have you noticed the reception of God’s reign of love and mercy? Where have you seen it rejected?
- What does the promise of God’s restoration mean for us?

## **Sending (15 minutes: 1:10- 1:25)**

### **Sharing of Appreciation for Learning (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)**

*Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.*

What can you do differently going forward based on these insights/learning from this Faith Chat?

### **Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)**

**Salt, Light, and Prayer:** Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

**The Lord's Prayer:** Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.