



The Evangelical Covenant Church
MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES

2 0 2 1 W E E K O F P R A Y E R

Breathe

TOGETHER

BY TAMMY J. LONG

DEAR COVENANT FRIENDS:

We invite you to join with us in prayer through our 2021 Week of Prayer resource, Breathe Together.

For more than 60 years, the Evangelical Covenant Church has provided materials for a week of prayer during the month of January. Whether you choose to use this resource at the beginning of the year or later, it will both challenge and equip disciples of Jesus to live a life of prayer and continually seek new ways to develop this life-giving practice. This year's Week of Prayer theme is "Breathe Together" and is authored by Covenant pastor Tammy Long, who writes:

In this season of uncertainty, one thing is certain. Jesus is alive and the only answer for our time. His death and resurrection prove he was who he said he was and that everything he said was true. Through the power of his Spirit, Jesus is with us. He is our help and our hope. Whatever concerns we may have or circumstances we may find ourselves in, Jesus invites us to come to him, breathe, and embrace his words: I AM.

May you meet Jesus in a special way this week.

The Week of Prayer can be used by individuals or groups, over one week or over the course of seven weeks. Each day/week of the resource includes reflection, an image, and breath prayer prompts. We encourage you to use these as starting points. Feel free to customize the resource for your context, adding your own prompts to further enhance the discussion and enrich your time of prayer.

Download the resource at covchurch.org/2021prayer to print your own. Guides are available in English and Spanish.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact us at mdd@covchurch.org, or visit our website at covchurch.org/prayer.

Making Disciples Together,



MICHELLE SANCHEZ, EXECUTIVE MINISTER OF MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES



Breathe

... **BECAUSE I AM**

In this season of uncertainty, one thing is certain. Jesus is alive and the only answer for our time. His death and resurrection prove he was who he said he was and that everything he said was true. Through the power of his Spirit, Jesus is with us. He is our help and our hope. Whatever concerns we may have or circumstances we may find ourselves in, Jesus invites us to come to him, breathe, and embrace his words: I AM.

As we enter into this week of prayer, each day focuses on one of Jesus's I AM statements with reflection questions to draw us closer to Jesus and listen to what he may be saying to us about who he is, who we are, and how he is inviting us to respond to his nudging.

A guided breath prayer and an image for visio divina are included to provide sacred space for us to be still with Jesus around each day's I AM prayer.

May you meet Jesus in a special way this week.

ABOUT BREATH PRAYERS

Nothing is more refreshing than a deep breath to refresh and calm the body, mind, and spirit. When prayer is added to this practice, we create a holy moment where we can become aware of how close God is to us.

Followers of Christ have been saying breath prayers for centuries. These prayers turn our hearts and minds toward God, allowing him to restore our souls in a moment of meditation or petition.

To practice breath prayer, breathe in as you whisper the first part of a phrase or verse (or silently say it in your head), then breathe out as you whisper the rest of the phrase or verse.

For Example:

SPEAK, LORD (*inhale*) ... your servant is listening (*exhale*).

JESUS SON OF GOD (*inhale*) ... have mercy on me (*exhale*).

I AM ANXIOUS (*inhale*) ... but my trust is in you (*exhale*).

ABOUT VISIO DIVINA

Visio divina, or “sacred seeing,” is another prayer practice that has been around for centuries. It involves allowing our hearts, minds, and imaginations to prayerfully enter into an image to see what God may stir or wish to say to us.

The steps for this practice are simply:

- Open your heart and mind, and ask God to guide your experience.
 - Take a first look at the image.
 - Notice what you notice, what stirs within you.
 - Take a second look and look more deeply.
 - What do you notice about your reactions? What draws you? What repels you? What intrigues you? What emotions are stirred?
 - Reflect on or journal what has surfaced for you before God.
 - Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you consider what God may be saying to you.
 - Is there an invitation or something you wish to say to God?
 - Thank God for your time together.
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Bio | **Tammy Long is co-lead pastor of South Bay Community Church in Fremont, California.**

She is an ordained minister with the Evangelical Covenant Church, a trained spiritual director, and a writer. She has a master’s degree in education from Cal State East Bay and a master’s degree in Christian formation from North Park Theological Seminary.



Tammy is passionate about seeing people connect with God and grow deeper in love with the Trinity, both individually and in community. Whether through preaching, teaching, spiritual direction, facilitating a small group, or leading a retreat, Tammy finds her deepest joy in walking alongside others as they draw closer to the heart of God to experience spiritual transformation.

She enjoys reading, movies, traveling, yoga, being in nature, and spending time with her husband, adult children, and grandchildren.



BREATH PRAYER

Jesus, bread
of my life

You alone
nourish and
fulfill me.

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE PRAYER

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." JOHN 6:35, NRSV

Who doesn't like the smell, taste, and texture of warm fresh bread from the oven? Bread is the embodiment of nourishment. In all its forms, bread is the most widely consumed food in the world. Historical research suggests bread has been part of the human diet for at least 30,000 years! In the Bible, bread is mentioned more than 400 times. So when Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life," his listeners took notice.

Not long after Jesus fed 5,000 people (John 6:1-14), the crowd was hungry for more. Yet they weren't hungry for what Jesus was really offering, they just wanted more bread. Jesus came to feed our deepest hunger—our soul's hunger for eternal connection with God.

But there's more. We also hunger for love, purpose, safety, protection. We hunger to be known, for joy and peace—the list goes on. We often experience deeper longings and hunger that we may not even be aware of. **While we naturally seek to satisfy our hunger, we may discover that a deeper hunger, a wanting something more, persists.**

Just as physical bread satisfies our physical hunger, Jesus longs to satisfy the deepest hungers of our hearts. Jesus's gift of eternal life through faith is vast and deep and about more than going to heaven. He longs to satisfy and nourish every dimension of our lives.

He said he came that we might have abundant life, which touches every aspect of life in soul-satisfying fulfillment. When we are hungry for more, we sometimes look everywhere but to our true Source for nourishment and fulfillment. But Jesus reminds us, "I am the bread of life."

For Reflection

- Do you have areas in your life where you feel unsatisfied?
- How might drawing closer to Jesus satisfy your hunger?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

- _____ **CENTER** your body and mind to be with Jesus.
- _____ **NAME** in one word something you hunger for.
- _____ **SLOWLY INHALE**, "Jesus, Bread of my life."
- _____ **SLOWLY EXHALE**, "You alone nourish and fulfill me."
- _____ **REPEAT** the breath prayer until you feel Jesus's peace.
- _____ **LOOK AND LISTEN** for Jesus to share ways he satisfies your hunger today.



BREATH PRAYER

Jesus, light
of the world

May I see and
reflect your life.

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD PRAYER

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." JOHN 8:12, NRSV

Have you ever been to a place where there are no windows, no lights, or no stars? A place so dark you can't even see your hand in front of your face? Such darkness can be palpable, oppressive, even suffocating. We can't see. We bump into things. We lose our way.

We were not meant to live in darkness.

Our world under the weight of sin is like that—dark, oppressive, heavy, and evil. We have lost our way. We are bumping into each other and evil lurks. One has only to look at systemic racial injustice, poverty and economic disparity, health and education inequities, misogyny and bigotry, oppression, and greed to recognize our world is very much in darkness.

When Jesus said, "I am the light of the world," the timing coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles. At dusk during the celebration, four giant candelabras would be lit, signifying the pillar of fire by which God guided the children of Israel through the wilderness at night (Exodus 13:21). The original hearers would have recalled the story—but Jesus's invitation was about a different type of darkness. Jesus was referring to spiritual darkness and our separation from God due to sin. Jesus is the light who dispels darkness and reunites all who believe in God—from darkness to light, from spiritual death to eternal life.

And Jesus is our light today. Through his Spirit, he guides us in our confusion and dark seasons. He points the way, so we don't get lost. Anyone who follows Jesus not only walks in his light but also has the light of life as children of light. Just as the moon reflects the sun, we reflect the Son in our dark world. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world."

For Reflection

- Is there an area in your life where you feel you are walking in darkness and need the light of Christ to guide you?
- Where might Jesus be inviting you to reflect his light in this dark world?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

- CENTER** your body and mind to be with Jesus.
- THINK** where light is needed today (for you personally or in the world).
- SLOWLY INHALE**, "Jesus, Light of the world."
- SLOWLY EXHALE**, "May I see and reflect your light."
- REPEAT** the breath prayer until you feel Jesus's peace.
- LOOK AND LISTEN** for God's light for you and through you today



BREATH PRAYER

Jesus, you
are my gate
In your fold
I'm safe
and secure.

I AM THE GATE FOR THE SHEEP PRAYER

“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” JOHN 10:7, NRSV

Scottish theologian George Adam Smith (1856–1942) was traveling through the Holy Land when he encountered a shepherd with his flock. The shepherd showed him where he kept the sheep at night. It was an enclosure of four walls, open to the sky with only one way in. “When the sheep are in here,” the shepherd explained, “they are perfectly safe.”

“But there is no door,” Smith replied.

“I am the door,” the shepherd responded. “When the light is gone and the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space. No sheep can ever go out without crossing my body, and if a wolf tries to come in, my body blocks his path; I am the door.”

This I am statement is translated as both “door” and “gate,” but the meaning is the same. Jesus alone is the opening by which his sheep can come into the fold, the kingdom of God. Once through the gate, they are safe from thieves and robbers who intend to hurt, kill, and destroy.

Thieves and robbers come in many forms. In this passage Jesus is referring to false prophets and hypocritical religious leaders. But thieves and robbers include anything that draws us away from Jesus and the abundant life he offers (John 10:10). Fear, anxiety, stress, storms of life, unbiblical teachings, even our fleshly nature can hurt us and rob us of the peace and protection Jesus offers. First Peter 5:8 says, “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.”


We discipline ourselves by staying close to the Shepherd. In the sheep pen, we are safe from predators, thieves, and robbers. **We are safe under Jesus’s watchful eye.** Jesus said, “I am the gate.”

For Reflection

- Do spiritual robbers and thieves in your life threaten to disrupt or harm your relationship with Jesus?
- In what ways does Jesus remind you that you are safe with him?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

- _____ **CENTER** your body and mind to be with Jesus.
- _____ **THINK** about a place that’s welcoming and safe for you.
- _____ **SLOWLY INHALE**, “Jesus, you are my Gate.”
- _____ **SLOWLY EXHALE**, “In your fold I’m safe and secure.”
- _____ **REPEAT** the breath prayer until you feel Jesus’s peace.
- _____ **LOOK AND LISTEN** for ways Jesus protects and keeps you today.

A full-page photograph of a shepherd in a hat and vest, seen from behind, standing in a field of tall grass. He is looking over a large flock of white sheep that are grazing. The background is a lush, green hillside covered in dense trees and vegetation, bathed in the warm light of late afternoon or early morning.

BREATH PRAYER

Jesus, my good
shepherd
I belong to you.

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD PRAYER

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” JOHN 10:11, NRSV

Sheep are mentioned in the Bible more than 500 times, more than any other animal. The obvious reason is the pastoral culture of the times, but sheep can also be a metaphor for our current reality.

First, sheep are biologically and anatomically defenseless. They do not have natural ways to protect themselves, so they need a shepherd. Second, sheep often get themselves into trouble. Although sometimes sheep are stereotyped as dumb, they can actually be as intelligent as rodents and monkeys. One reason sheep get into trouble is because they are followers. It's part of their herd instinct. A story out of Eastern Turkey reported 400 sheep falling 15 meters to their death because they followed one sheep off a cliff.

Sheep also get in trouble because of their sight. Sheep have excellent peripheral vision. They can see far on either side without turning their heads, but it is difficult for them to see what is directly in front of them.

So sheep often stray from the path to get a better look or because they are curious. They are easily sidetracked or lose their way.

Sound familiar?

Good shepherds in Jesus's day were devoted to their sheep. They would talk and sing to them, and anoint them with oil as a pest repellent. A good shepherd provided nourishment, refreshment, and protection. Good shepherds were so involved with their sheep that they knew and called each one by name. They were willing to risk their own comfort and even their lives for the sake of their sheep.

This is the caring and sacrificial relationship Jesus has in mind when he says, “I am the good shepherd.” The word translated “good” is associated with beautiful, honorable, and intrinsically good. Our good Shepherd is a guide who can be completely trusted as we follow him.

For Reflection

- Consider the most loving, caring, nurturing person in your life. What does it mean to know that their love is only a fraction of God's love and care for you?
- When do you feel most connected and closest to God?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

 CENTER your body and mind to be with Jesus.

 WRAP YOUR ARMS AROUND YOURSELF and feel Jesus's love.

 SLOWLY INHALE, “Jesus, my good Shepherd.”

 SLOWLY EXHALE, “I belong to you.”

 REPEAT THE BREATH PRAYER until you feel Jesus's peace.

 LOOK AND LISTEN for ways Jesus expresses his love and care for you today.

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE PRAYER

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” JOHN 11:25, NRSV

There has been so much loss and pain this past year. We yearn for new life, even though our new normal is still unfolding. In varying degrees, we all have experienced the death of life as we’ve known it and we feel that grief. Some of us have lost loved ones in this season, resulting in grief upon grief.

When Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he is speaking to his dear friend Martha, days after the death of her brother, Lazarus. Martha and her sister, Mary, had mixed emotions because they were happy to see Jesus—but also disappointed, maybe even angry, that he had not come sooner. In their minds, Jesus could have prevented the death and pain they were experiencing. Even so, they were honest with Jesus about their feelings and affirmed their belief and trust in him (see John 11:21-27).

Sometimes we are reluctant to be honest with Jesus. It can feel inappropriate to express our disappointment, frustration, or anger. But Mary and Martha knew they could be real with him because of the closeness they shared. Their disappointment did not change their belief in him. Their honesty cleared the air, so to speak, and Jesus was present and attentive with them. Mary and Martha went to Jesus with their grief, and in response, he listened, he cried, and he gave them hope. And that all happened before the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead.

We often think of this I am statement in terms of eternal life for those who believe, but there is more. When Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life,” he is saying all power and life is in his hands. He is saying that even death is not the final word. Jesus’s words offer us hope even now, for all who believe, regardless of how things appear. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

For Reflection

- Are you completely honest with Jesus? Are there things you need to say to “clear the air” for hope to break through?
- Where in your life, community, or world do you desire hope for new life?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

- CENTER** your body and mind to be with Jesus.
- THINK** where you have a need for the hope of new life.
- SLOWLY INHALE**, “Jesus, resurrection and life.”
- SLOWLY EXHALE**, “Resurrect hope today.”
- REPEAT** the breath prayer until you feel Jesus’s peace.
- LOOK AND LISTEN** for ways Jesus is resurrecting hope and new life.



BREATH PRAYER

Jesus, the way,
truth, and life

May I be your
witness today.

I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE PRAYER

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." JOHN 14:6, NRSV

The disciples are facing Jesus's imminent departure. Jesus tries to prepare and comfort them, but they are filled with questions: Why are you leaving us? Aren't we supposed to be following you? How do we know the way? Jesus explains where he is going and that he will return when everything is ready (John 14:1-3), but they are confused and afraid.

Confusion, loss of meaning, uncertainty, and fear of what looms ahead has plagued humans throughout history, and Jesus offers us the same response he gave the disciples: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Jesus addresses the deepest questions of the universe: Is there a God? How can we know him? Do we live forever? And how can we truly live with God, one another, and ourselves in peace, harmony, and love?

The answer? Jesus is the way to God, he guides us in the truth of God, and he offers us abundant and eternal life with God.

And yet, the world resists. The world scoffs at the idea that there is only one way to God. The world seeks to define abundant life by its own terms. But Jesus's death and resurrection verified everything he ever said. His disciples eventually understood, and followers of Jesus have been his witnesses ever since.

As the world searches for meaning, purpose, and peace, **Jesus's invitation remains the same: Follow me.** I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

For Reflection

- Do you believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life? Have you put your trust in him? (You can today!)
- Who in your sphere needs to know the truth about Jesus?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

 CENTER your body and mind to be with Jesus.

 VISUALIZE someone(s) in need of the truth about Jesus.

 SLOWLY INHALE, "Jesus, the way, truth, and life."

 SLOWLY EXHALE, "May I be your witness today."

 REPEAT the breath prayer until you feel Jesus's peace.

 LOOK AND LISTEN for ways to share the truth about Jesus today.



BREATH PRAYER

Jesus, you are
my vine

I abide in
the warmth
of your love.

I AM THE VINE PRAYER

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." JOHN 15:5, NRSV

Did you know every branch of a vine grows directly from the main stem? Branches that have produced fruit are pruned back to remain close, or to "abide," near the stem for most of the year. Then, in season, branches grow out quickly again to bear fruit. Non-producing branches are cut and burned.

Just as vine branches are to bear fruit, so are we. Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit" (John 15:8, NIV). But branches cannot produce fruit on their own. To produce fruit, the branch must abide, or remain connected, with the stem.

And the same is true for followers of Christ. **We are completely dependent on Jesus for the fruit he desires to produce in us.** Apart from him we can do nothing. Apart from him any fruit we think we are producing decays and dies.

Have you ever noticed pruned branches from a fruit tree? When they are first cut, the branch looks alive. The fruit doesn't die right away. Even on the ground, the branch appears to be alive because the leaves are vibrant and the fruit fresh. Externally all looks well, but internally the branch is already wasting away. It is no longer abiding with the tree.

The same is true when we fail to abide with Jesus. From the outside it may look like we are doing well, producing fruit even, but there is growing decay of the soul. For a while, our fruit may appear to be alive, but decay becomes evident as we realize something is not quite right.

Instead, Jesus invites us to abide in him and he will abide in us in a mutual relationship of love. Jesus tells us to remain in his love by obeying his commands which leads to fullness of joy (John 15:9-11). For us to live into that joy and produce fruit to the glory of God, we must abide in Christ. Jesus said, "I am the vine."

For Reflection

- What is the health of your fruit?
- What rhythms and practices help you remain in Christ's love?

Contemplate the image and reflect.

_____ **CENTER** your body and mind to be with Jesus.

_____ **IMAGINE** you are sitting in the sun, feel the warmth.

_____ **SLOWLY INHALE**, "Jesus, you are my Vine."

_____ **SLOWLY EXHALE**, "I'm abiding in the warmth your love."

_____ **REPEAT** the breath prayer until you feel Jesus's peace.

_____ **LOOK AND LISTEN** for opportunities to bask and abide in Jesus's love today.

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