

LUKE 24: 13-35



2023-2024 Devotional Guide

ELCA Schools and Learning Centers



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ELCA Schools and Learning Centers

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2023-2024. In accordance with the ELCA's guidelines for  
inclusive language, our devotional seeks to illustrate the  
expansive nature of God.

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**2023-2024 EDITION**  
**ELCA SCHOOLS AND LEARNING CENTERS**  
**DEVOTIONAL GUIDE**

**ON THE ROAD / EN LA CARRETERA**

LUKE 24:13-35

In the story of the disciples **On the Road** to Emmaus, they were unaware that the resurrected Jesus was walking with them. It was only through the hospitality of sharing a meal and the intentional act of breaking bread that Christ was revealed and their eyes were opened to his presence. The ELEA is on the road, walking with you, providing resources, support, and encouragement.

Although the disciples were in a state of confusion and disappointment while they were **On the Road**, they found solace and companionship in their interaction and walk with Jesus. Journeying together as Church and School fosters a sense of community, belonging, and understanding between staff, students, and families. Dialogue and shared experiences contributed to a supportive and nurturing environment for the disciples — and also for us in our shared ministries.

While **On the Road** Jesus engaged the disciples in conversation, actively listening to their concerns and questions. He patiently explained the Scriptures and helped them understand the significance of his resurrection. Your attentive listening to the needs, questions, and perspectives of staff, families, and the community builds respect and collaboration. Your prayerful discernment creates an environment where Christ's teachings, principles, and love are woven into the fabric of your program.

Dear leaders, you are on a remarkable journey. Embrace the story and lessons of **On the Road** to Emmaus as you navigate the complexities of your roles. With Christ as your guide, you are privileged to transform environments, shape lives, and nurture souls. As dedicated leaders continue to walk the path with purpose, compassion, and unwavering faith — knowing the ELEA is your traveling companion. Blessings on your journey!

*Cory Newman,*  
Executive Director, Evangelical Lutheran Education Association

**AUGUST 6, 2023**  
**TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MATTHEW 14:13-21

Jesus and his disciples faced many challenges on their journey. It must have felt overwhelming to try and organize feeding for more than 5,000 people. No wonder the disciples' first reaction was to send the people away to find something to eat.

In John's version of this story (John 6: 1-14) we learn a boy with them shared what he had, five small loaves of bread and two small fish, to help feed the crowds. In return, God blessed this resource for serving others. When Jesus looked at the disciples he did not see lack. With eyes of love, Jesus saw an offering and made it not just enough, but more than enough!

This reminds me of the story of Jonas Corona. When he was four years old Jonas began volunteering with his family at a homeless shelter. It made him sad to see children with not enough to eat and needing new clothes to wear. Two short years later Jonas took action and gathered items to benefit un-housed youth. Since then Jonas has organized drives, picked up donations, and shared resources with over 80,000 people. Learn more about the organization Jonas started: <https://loveinthemirror.org/about/>

**Reflect:** What need in your community speaks to your heart? What resources do you have that combined with others might help meet this need? What faithful step might you take to make this a reality?

**Pray:** God of generosity, thank you for accompanying us and looking at us with eyes of love. Help us always to look to you and to share the resources we have been given on our journey in life — trusting you are working through us to love and heal the world as we go. Amen.

Jill Beverlin, Appleton, WI serves as the Program Manager of ELCA's Coaching Ministries. ELCA coaches provide accompaniment for Lutheran school leaders on their journeys of facilitating education for children.

**AUGUST 13, 2023**  
**ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PSALM 105: 3B-4

*LET THE HEARTS OF THOSE WHO SEEK THE LORD REJOICE.  
SEEK THE LORD AND HIS STRENGTH; SEEK HIS PRESENCE  
CONTINUALLY.*

At the beginning of Joseph's story in Genesis 37, he is wandering in the fields looking for his brothers when a man asked him, "What are you seeking?" (verse 15)

In Matthew 14, the disciples in the midst of the chaotic sea, do not recognize Jesus as he walks on the water towards them, until Jesus speaks the reassuring words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Verse 27b)

Psalm 105 encourages us to seek the Lord who will guide us with his joy, his strength, and his presence.

New beginnings can often be exciting and overwhelming at the same time. As we go back to the classrooms, the schedules and routines of our schools, let us recognize Jesus as he walks towards us and with us, continually speaking love and instilling peace in our hearts and minds.

As we seek Jesus' presence, his reassuring words will guide us through the joys and struggles of the school year ahead.

**Reflect:** As this new school year begins, what are you seeking?

**Pray:** Jesus, our strength and joy, guide us to seek you and see you. Amen.

Gaye Rodriguey, Coupeville, WA, serves as a Stephen Leader and Minister at Oak Harbor Lutheran Church.

**AUGUST 20, 2023**  
**TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

GENESIS 45:7

*GOD SENT ME BEFORE YOU TO PRESERVE FOR YOU A REMNANT  
ON EARTH, AND TO KEEP ALIVE FOR YOU MANY SURVIVORS.*

We want to leave a lasting imprint on the hearts of those we love and on the world as a whole. We want to be remembered for the best of who we are and how we live. We want to have lives that matter. It is our legacy!

God has chosen each of us to carry out a remnant of love just as Joseph did. He is not bitter or angry for what his brothers did to him. Joseph is generous and kind, being the best of who he is. Joseph reveals a generous love generated by God and leaves a lasting imprint on his family.

You have the opportunity to continue Joseph's remnant of love. As a child of God you are encouraged to love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Joseph made a choice to plant seeds of forgiveness and thoughtfulness.

What one small thing can you do to plant goodness and generate love?

**Reflect:** Share a compliment or pay attention to who needs encouragement. Catch someone doing right and praise them. Following in Joseph's footsteps, what do you want to preserve as a remnant of love on earth?

**Pray:** Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of love shown through Joseph's heart and desire. Guide and lead us in what our remnant of love will be and how to live it out in faithfulness. Above all, help us to clothe ourselves in love. Amen.

Deenna Eley, Huntington Beach, CA, serving as an ELCA coach for over 5 years, also serves at First Lutheran Church in Fullerton, CA as a pantry coordinator and church administrator.

**AUGUST 27, 2023**  
**THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
ROMANS 12:1-8

Verse 6 in the Romans text tells us, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . . the teacher, in teaching . . .<sup>8</sup>the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness." The challenge for us as individuals is to open our hearts and minds to new and unexpected opportunities.

Some years ago the ELEA staff and board engaged in a Spiritual Gifts Inventory. While I have participated in these exercises before and since, this particular time stands out in my memory because it was so eye opening. Not only did I gain insight to my colleagues' true gifts, but also to my own.

We all assumed that we would score highest in teaching, since we were a room full of educators, but that was not the case. My strongest gift, it turned out, was hospitality. One person learned that her strongest gift was compassion and she had never seen herself as a particularly compassionate person.

Paul tells us clearly that we are indeed each different and that's what makes for a well-rounded body of Christ. Remember that the children you serve all have their own gifts, abilities and strengths. When you are frustrated with "that" child — the difficult one, the slow learner, the one who doesn't seem to be working to what you believe is their potential — take the time to determine their gifts and build upon the positive.

**Reflect:** What can you do to determine and build upon the gifts of "that" child (or adult) in your life?

**Pray:** Gracious God, help me exercise patience and discernment with the children I teach, the people I work and live with, and with myself. Amen.

Gayle Denny, Goodyear, AZ, retired educator, administrator and  
former ELEA Executive Director.

**SEPTEMBER 3, 2023**  
**FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

MATTHEW 16:21-28

*24 IF ANY WANT TO BECOME MY FOLLOWERS, LET THEM DENY  
THEMSELVES ...*

When we follow Jesus there is no telling where he might lead us, and that can be a frightening thought. Like those first disciples we might wish to correct, contradict, or side-step Jesus' declaration for today.

When the crowds surrounded Jesus on the mountain, the disciples wanted to send them away for it was supper time, but Jesus said, "No, tell them to sit, feed them." When Jesus walked along the road, he befriended those who others avoided and shunned; he ate with outsiders not with the powerful influencers of the day.

Like the disciples, we might choose to focus on what is being given up and what is being lost ... we might wish to take a more measured approach. And yet, to look out only for one's self is to miss all that God has to offer when we trust in and follow Jesus.

The discipleship that Jesus calls for is to be so captured by God's loving vision for the world that the ordering of our steps in life is not directed back upon ourselves but instead stepping toward others — toward the world that God has placed us in. It is there that we find what it means to gain life, to have purpose, to discover joy in serving and giving, to live and walk like Jesus.

**Reflect:** If you are following the leader, Jesus the Christ, where might his steps take you today?

**Pray:** Faithful, loving God, thank you for being at the side of those who are lonely, hungry, and afraid, or are in need. Help me to trust in you, and to look for where you are leading me deeper into new life today. Amen.

Ramie Bakken, Cambridge, WI Regional Candidacy manager,  
accompanying those preparing to serve as rostered ministers in the  
ELCA.



**SEPTEMBER 10, 2023**  
**FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

MATTHEW 18:15

*15A IF YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER SINS AGAINST YOU, GO AND  
POINT OUT THE FAULT WHEN THE TWO OF YOU ARE ALONE.*

“Mom, he hit (shoved, touched, looked weirdly at) me!” These are common refrains in our household of three young children. My spouse and I teach them to calmly say to the offending sibling: “Hey, I didn’t like that,” but still, someone often comes running to mom or dad.

We all experience conflict, whether in our homes, churches, schools or other places of work. Children in our care experience conflict; we cannot completely prevent it. Rather, we can teach and model how to work through conflict constructively.

While it’s tempting to complain to a third person or air grievances on social media, Jesus in Matthew 18 suggests a better way: go to the one who offended you in private and talk about it. It is a deceptively simple advice.

When properly addressed, conflict can bring growth, even success. In our walk as Disciples of Christ, our “success” is living in harmony with others, God, God’s creation, and ourselves. We will walk through conflict on our journey in life. We will also get glimpses of God’s peace and presence in relationships with others. In peace and in conflict, God is there.

*(Note: Please seek help from others first if a conflict involves abuse, threat of abuse, or if you feel unsafe confronting someone in private.)*

**Reflect:** What conflicts are you experiencing and how can your faith inform how you manage them?

**Pray:** God of peace, be near us in our conflicts. Help us speak clearly and directly and work for peaceful resolution, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

Lisa A. Smith, Anchorage, AK, serves as Director for Evangelical Mission for the Alaska Synod of the ELCA and as occasional referee for her three young children’s disagreements.

**SEPTEMBER 17, 2023**  
**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
EXODUS 14:19-31

The story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea is right up there among the most dramatic scenes in the Bible. When I want to go deeper into a Biblical story, I try and imagine myself in the character's shoes. What must it have felt like to be an Israelite on that momentous day?

They had fled Egypt boldly, but now the Egyptian army was hot on their tails. For all the hopeful adrenaline rushing through their veins, I imagine there was fear and trembling too.

What courage it must have taken to keep on walking in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation. They let Moses know in no uncertain terms that maybe it would have been better to remain enslaved than to die in the wilderness. And when Moses stretched out his hand, and the Lord drove back the sea, it took even more courage to trust that the sea would remain dry until they got to the other side.

Yet they did not walk alone. They had each other. They had God. They had a "buffer zone," the pillar of cloud; God's very self, protecting them day and night.

We all have our wilderness moments. Maybe you are walking through one right now. Remember that you, too, have a community to lean on. And you have God leading you — always! We can take the next steps forward, knowing that our God is in the business of making a way out of no way.

**Reflect:** Recall a time when you had to have courage. What made it possible for you to take the next steps forward?

**Pray:** Lord God, lead us from chaos into your blessed peace. In all of our varied roles, help us to reach out to one another, knowing that we are stronger together, trusting in you. Amen.

Pastor Maren Hooper, New Berlin, WI, has served as an Interim Pastor in six congregations in the Greater Milwaukee Synod, ELCA.

**SEPTEMBER 24, 2023**  
**THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MATTHEW 20:1-16

It's not fair! How many times a day do teachers hear this from their students? Usually these exclamations occur when a student feels slighted or treated unjustly — a toy must be shared, or a snack must be distributed equally. Fairness becomes a numbers game. If I get this, then you get that. Why is it that so many people are not happy with the outcome? There are days when teachers and administrators, feeling overworked and tired, want to join in and say, "It's not fair!"

Jesus teaches us about the kingdom of God through the story of the landowner. We learn that God has this fairness thing all figured out. In God's kingdom, justice is not about what we deserve, or is rightly ours. Instead, justice is for everyone who is willing to answer God's call. It's as if Jesus is telling us that it's only fair that everyone has the same amount of God's everlasting love. There is not more or less depending on length of discipleship. Only equal amounts, which is more than enough. God takes the numbers game and turns it upside down.

It may be unfair to receive one less goldfish cracker than a classmate, or to share a toy with someone who truly doesn't need it, like "I" do. But when it comes to a relationship with God we have full access, in equal amounts, with all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Are you okay with that? Is it fair?

**Reflect:** Challenge of the week: See everyone as receiving the same amount of God's love. Is it enough? Do you want more?

**Pray:** Dear God, we humbly praise and thank you for your unconditional love. Continue to teach us to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly on the road with you. Amen.

Jenny James, Ellicott City, MD, Director of First Lutheran Preschool  
and proud ELEA member in Region 8.

**OCTOBER 1, 2023**  
**EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MATTHEW 21:23-32

“By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” I chuckle when I read these words as they remind me of what I have been asked, more than once, here at my church.

Sometimes the question is framed around issues of church property — using the fellowship hall, creating a garden, or decorating a hallway. Sometimes the question is about a role in church ministry. Usually, the question comes from someone who is well-meaning. It is during those times that I remember a phrase coined by Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber at the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering, “There’s grace for that.”

In this reading, Jesus answers a question with a question. It’s one of the things I love about Jesus. He goes on to tell a parable about two sons. Neither does the will of their father, illustrating that we are all in need of God’s grace.

As we travel “on the road” with the children in our care, and God travels “on the road” with all of us — let us remember we are all born in the image of God. There is a place for everyone in God’s kingdom, especially in the church. When we reframe things to make them about something larger than ourselves, we gain perspective. Expand your perspective on the good news that God’s forgiveness is not based on our idea of fairness, but rather on abundant, inconceivable grace.

**Reflect:** Have you ever changed your mind about a sure point of view? What does it take? Who is your authority?

**Pray:** God of love, you know our weaknesses and faults. Give us your grace to overcome them, keep us from those things that harm us, and guide us to you, our true authority, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Linda Chambers, St. Augustine, FL, serves as Director of Memorial Lutheran Chapel School and Family Ministry Director of Memorial Lutheran Church. She was the ELEA National Board and was selected as the ELCA Early Childhood Director of the Year in 2015.

**OCTOBER 8, 2023**  
**NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
EXODUS 20:1-20

For many, the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai are rules for the Hebrew people to live by. Often the rules were enforced by the religious leaders of that day in ways that were punitive.

As Lutheran Christians, we might think that the Ten Commandments are not relevant to us in light of our redemption in Jesus' death and resurrection, until we see them as a gift of grace.

The Ten Commandments are meant to show us how-to live-in harmony with God and each other, living in and sharing the fullness of God's grace.

**Reflect:** When you hear the term Ten Commandments, what comes to mind? How can we teach our children that rules are a gift of love?

**Pray:** God of grace, help us to embrace the Ten Commandments as an invitation to live in close relationship with you. Release us from the quest for perfection, remembering that you abide with us in your perfect love always. Amen.

Karen Kress, lifelong learner and teacher in ELCA schools and churches, lives in God's grace in Waupaca, WI.

**OCTOBER 15, 2023**  
**TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
EXODUS 32:1-14

“The Golden Calf” is the title of the reading from Exodus. The people of Israel have again become weary because Moses had not returned from the mountain. The people of Israel asked Aaron to create a calf and he did, with all the gold the Israelites brought with them from Egypt. Aaron placed an altar before it for the people to worship as they wished, believing it was statues like this that freed them from Egypt — not God.

The saying, “the person that dies with the most fabric wins,” brings to mind “The Golden Calf.” What good is having too much of something when we are gone, or when a possession has replaced God as the center of our lives? God wants us to be present and work to help our fellow human beings. God wants us to serve as God serves us. The more stuff we have the harder it is to feel peace and satisfaction in living simply. We do not need stuff to be happy. God will provide everything we need.

As teachers and administrators we are to be models of serving others with love and patience. Patience is a difficult concept for children to understand — often for adults, too. With patience there are rewards.

**Reflect:** How many times have we become so impatient while waiting for someone or something, that we give up and go a different direction — not caring what the consequence will bring? Have you ever wanted something so badly that the want outweighs the need? Is status more important than being humble and living within our means?

**Pray:** Dear God, Thank you for providing us with all that we need. Help us to be patient when waiting for our needs to be met. Guide us to be positive models so the children we care for will know you are the one and only God. Amen.

Michelle Schaffer, Norwalk, OH Christian Day Nursery School Director  
for the last 16 years.

**OCTOBER 22, 2023**  
**TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MATTHEW 22:19-21

What is God's? We navigate life attempting to answer this question. We travel a road with twists and turns; around each bend, there is a mass of worldly treasures and desires. We hope to clearly see our Good Shepherd on the road beside us, and before us, leading us away from temptation. However, the road of life is challenging for all of us.

Much of teaching, or preaching for that matter, really comes down to lifting up what is God's and what belongs to the world. It is a lesson that gets repeated almost every Sunday. We can look around and know that idolatry exists everywhere. We constantly fail ... even our cell phone use tells us the truth, and that is just one of many examples!

Teaching is a precious opportunity to share God's Word, model prayer, and provide the love of Christ to children. It also gives us an opportunity to be called to our own wakefulness. Prayer and the stories of the Bible bring understanding to children to know that we serve a God filled with grace and love. It also gives us, the teachers, needed reminders of what belongs to God and what belongs to this world. It is hard work, but thankfully Jesus walks with us and leads us. For this, we give God thanks and praise.

**Reflect:** How can you and your students recognize the gifts God gives to the world? How can you find fun and meaningful ways to give God praise and thanks for your students?

**Pray:** Generous God, thank you for giving us special gifts to wonder about and to share with others. We thank you for giving us hippopotamuses and grasshoppers, smiles, and rainbows. We thank you most of all for teaching us how to love one another. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Susan Dollinger, Pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Longview, WA, has taught years of Sunday school and confirmation. She has had a role in every VBS for 15 years. She has a deep love for Godly Play and has taught it to both children and adults.

**OCTOBER 29, 2023**  
**TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MATTHEW 22:34, DEUTERONOMY 6:5

In Matthew 22:34 Jesus is asked the question, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" His reply is familiar to many, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37)

The origin of Jesus' reply might not be as familiar. When Jesus replies he is quoting a prayer that is originally found in Deuteronomy 6:5. The religious leaders asking Jesus this question would have known the prayer well. The prayer in Deuteronomy 6:5 is called the Shema and in Hebrew means, "to hear." The people of Israel would have said this prayer daily. It begins, "Hear O Israel." The Hebrew word for hear doesn't only mean to hear; Shema means to hear and do — to put into action what one has heard.

When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus replies with the Shema. He is saying, hear what God says and be obedient to it. Our obedience to God and our faith in God requires action and according to Matthew 22:37 it is the greatest commandment.

**Reflect:** As we go along the road God creates before us each day, are we hearing God? Are we taking action and being obedient to what we hear?

**Pray:** God, help us to live out your commands and be obedient to your will. Amen.

Emily Copeland, Marble Falls, TX, serving as Director for St. Peter's  
Lutheran School



**NOVEMBER 1, 2023**

**ALL SAINTS DAY**

PSALMS 34:1-10, 22

Before writing this psalm the psalmist, David, had passed through a time of trouble and is calling for the community to join him in thankful praise. All of us can relate to the feelings he would have experienced, as we, in our own lives, have gone through hard times or times of trouble.

I used to struggle with the idea of being thankful during hard times. How can we possibly offer praise and thanksgiving for a difficult situation? Studying psalms such as this one, along with other Bible passages (i.e. Philippians 4:4-7) has helped me to realize we most certainly can and should give thanks to God — always! Yes, even during times of trouble and after they have passed.

Perhaps we are not thankful for the difficult circumstances themselves, but we can sincerely be thankful and recognize that God is always there for us before, during and after times of trouble! God is our refuge! What a comfort and blessing to know God is our shelter! Leaning on God during hard situations is when we truly taste and see God's goodness. Having God as our refuge is worth singing God's praise and always something to be thankful for! We can and should put our trust in God!

Join me in singing God's praises no matter what we are going through on this day!

**Reflect:** Where do you turn for your refuge and strength during times of trouble?

**Pray:** Dear God, thank you for being our refuge. May we always remember to turn to you no matter what we are facing, both good and bad. May we always trust in you and offer you our praise. Amen.

Becky Popio, Uniontown, OH, serving a vital congregation for over 16 years as the children's and family ministry coordinator, also supporting the infant-school age child development center.

**NOVEMBER 5, 2023**  
**TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PSALM 107:1-7, 33-37

*'O GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD, FOR [GOD] IS GOOD; FOR [GOD'S]  
STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOR EVER.*

*<sup>35</sup>[GOD] TURNS A DESERT INTO POOLS OF WATER, A PARCHED  
LAND INTO SPRINGS OF WATER.*

I have lived in the Sonoran Desert of AZ for the past 37 years. Being a desert dweller has taught me to see in new ways — to appreciate the subtle shades of green and to grow in wonderment at God's creativity on planet earth.

In our attempt to create a xeriscaped backyard we planted Rain Lilies, a low-water use, drought-tolerant plant. Regardless of how much or how little I water, the slender, green stems turn brown, wither and die. But — a few drops of rain and thin, 6-inch green stalks reappear, rising from the ground overnight, showcasing fragile pink and white blooms. I never tire of the phenomenon that literally brings tears of awe and reverence to my eyes. The Rain Lilies are a reminder that it is not "my doing," but God's.

Our household's favorite mealtime prayer practice, especially when we have guests, is reading the Caldecott Medal-winning book, "BEFORE WE EAT from farm to table." It offers in well-crafted words and illustrations a reminder and celebration of all the people who are involved in nourishing our bodies and souls as we gather at the table. I may have worked all day purchasing, preparing, and serving — but the meal served is not "my doing" alone, but the work and dedication of those seen and unseen, locally and globally.

**Reflect:** Like the disciples On the Road, we often do not notice or recognize who supports us in our roles. Who are all the people that make it possible for you to fulfill your vocation — people whom you may know and those whom you may never meet? Look around your office, room or building ... take inventory and a moment to "send thanks upon the air."

**Pray:** O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good! Dad gracias al Señor, porque Dios es bueno!

Linda Staats is a Champion for ELEA.

**NOVEMBER 12, 2023**  
**TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MATTHEW 25:1-13

Traveling Light.

As we reflect on "road stories," I can't help but remember how packing has changed in the Age of Covid ... smaller bags, fewer garments, less stuff. Wherever we're heading, we're expected to travel light.

Except for the young women in Jesus' parable — traveling light may mean running out of oil for their lamps, especially when the Bridegroom is delayed. In fact, half of the girls have lamps that have run dry before they are even needed.

As of us who teach and lead may be tempted to travel light as well, in so many ways. So here's a thought — how about if we change the thrust of this phrase? Instead of packing less oil — less prayer, preparation, partnership or passion — what if we remember that the "LIGHT" is what matters. However and wherever we travel in our walk with God and God's dear ones, it is the LIGHT that guides, illumines and warms our path.

So, by all means, travel light -- and especially travel LIGHT!

**Reflect:** How can we "pack" for our journeys of faith? What needs to be included and what discarded? Most of all, how do we keep the lamps burning, the light shining?

**Pray:** Creator of Lights, you shine on our way, and call us to burn bright in service to our neighbors and as educators of your children. Teach us prudence and passion, and keep us shining in your service, In Christ our Light. Amen.

Bill Hurst, Torrance, CA, Pastor and Mission Director of First Lutheran Church and School, educating children from infancy through 8th Grade for nearly 70 years.

**NOVEMBER 19, 2023**  
**TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

MATTHEW 25:14-30

*<sup>14</sup> FOR IT IS AS IF A (PERSON), GOING ON A JOURNEY, SUMMONED HIS (STAFF) AND ENTRUSTED THEIR PROPERTY TO THEM;*

Sharing the journey of life and faith requires us to entrust things to one another. Together through our Schools and Learning Centers Ministries we are entrusted with responsibilities:

- To live with the children entrusted to us as a community of God's faithful each day,
- To bring them to the life-giving, life-sustaining word of God,
- To teach them math, music, science, art, religion and everything in-between,
- To place in their own hands the Holy Scriptures while nurturing them in faith and prayer

On the road to Emmaus Jesus embodies the larger truth that God not only joins us on the road and journey, God also entrusts us with the good news of God's enduring love to strengthen us along the way. I adapted our entrusted responsibilities above from the Rite of Holy Baptism. Parents and sponsors of newly baptized take on those who are young. It is intended to encourage and not to overwhelm! As we invest ourselves in this ministry through our gifts, skills, time and care, we come to see the fruits of our work as together we learn: to trust God; to proclaim Christ through our words and actions; to care for each other, our neighbors and the whole creation of God; and to work for justice and peace.

**Reflect:** What particular gift has God entrusted to you? How have you been sharing those gifts with your School/LC? What is a gift you witness in someone you work with?

**Pray:** God of place and journey, fill our hearts with gratitude today for all the gifts you entrust to our care. Help us to share these gifts through our faithful living. In Jesus' name, Amen.

R. Adam Berndt is doing his best with the 9 and 6 year olds entrusted to his care while serving as pastor of Cross of Hope Lutheran Church and School in Albuquerque, NM.

**TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**NOVEMBER 26, 2023**

MATTHEW 25:31-46

I am frequently in gatherings and workshops that begin with small group discussions. A popular starting question is, “Where did you see Jesus today?” Matthew 25 is often pointed to as the basis for saying, “I saw Jesus in a homeless person that I talked with” or “I saw Jesus a person who was selflessly volunteering in an afternoon tutoring program.” I applaud these answers and the desire to connect our faith with servant-minded daily life. But still, that question makes me nervous, because I feel pressure to have an answer. Sometimes, I do think that I may have seen Jesus in a person or a situation. But sometimes, I’ve got nothing.

Taking a closer look at Matthew 25 is helpful. The goats separated to the left did not recognize Jesus in the people they were *not* feeding or clothing or visiting. The sheep separated to the right did not recognize Jesus in the people they *were* feeding and clothing and visiting. Nobody saw Jesus.

Mathew 25 is not about me seeing Jesus; it is about Jesus seeing me. Then, continuing on in Matthew’s Gospel, we come to Jesus’ promise at the end of chapter 28: “I will be with you always.” This is good news! Jesus promises that whether you see him or you do not see him, Jesus is with you — always.

It can be a challenge these days to be an educator in any setting, including in our Lutheran schools and congregations. Take from Matthew 25 assurance that Jesus sees and appreciates your selfless service.

**Reflect:** Can I trust the promises of Jesus more than I trust my observations and feelings?

**Pray:** Gracious God, thank you for the opportunities and the capacity to feed, clothe, and visit those in need. Amen.

S. John Roth serving as bishop of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod, with a number of congregations with preschools and early learning centers.

**DECEMBER 3, 2023**  
**FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**  
MARK 13:28-29

When I was a child, Advent seemed to last forever! The waiting for Christmas (and gifts) made the days and weeks drag by ... no Christmas carols ... no Christmas tree ... no Christmas cookies that mom was busy baking and giving away — just cold, darkening skies. I have grown to appreciate the waiting and longing and budding anticipation of Advent and its purple-blues. Each year I use the frustration of anticipation to help create a space in my heart, and a space in my life, to welcome yet again the birth of the One who came to save us.

Today, on the first Sunday of Advent, let us look at the season as an opportunity to pause and remember. And, in the remembering, prepare our hearts and homes to receive the miracle of life renewed and of hope reborn. Advent calls us to think long and deep thoughts. To see behind and beyond the blatant commercialism. To think into God's creation and intention for us—to love God and to love one's neighbor. To let the Advent lessons, candles, and calendars lead us ever deeper into an appreciation of the wisdom of this waiting season.

This gift of Advent is a joyous and sobering time of preparation. For soon we will meet again the Babe, newly born. We will sing ancient carols and unwrap gifts given in love. That is the spirit of Advent ... waiting in the 'soon, but not yet.' May your hearts be strengthened by eager anticipation in this bluish-purple season that we call Advent.

**Reflect:** What can you do to make this Advent a fruitful season for those you serve?

**Pray:** God of Advent longing and promise, fill our hearts with joyous anticipation as we await your coming again. Bless our anticipation and our preparation. Amen.

Joe Aalbue has been a pastor for 52 years and worked with Preschools in six of the seven congregations he served.

**DECEMBER 10, 2023**  
**SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

ISAIAH 40:1-11

*"THE LORD WILL FEED HIS FLOCK LIKE A SHEPHERD; HE WILL GATHER THE LAMBS IN HIS ARMS, AND CARRY THEM IN HIS BOSOM, AND GENTLY LEAD THE MOTHER SHEEP.*

When I was growing up my family raised a small flock of sheep. Because of this I have always loved all the references in the Bible to God being our Good Shepherd, and we being God's sheep.

When our ewes (female sheep) had baby lambs, I remember that if a ewe had just one or two lambs, she would usually be able to take care of them by herself. But if she had three lambs at a time (once, we even had a ewe give birth to four lambs!), she would be overwhelmed and would need help taking care of them. That is when my family and I would step in and bottle-feed the lambs to make sure that they were getting enough food to grow and thrive. As the lambs grew up, the ones who were bottle fed were the ones who were most comfortable around us, as we had provided the extra care they needed.

The Lord is our Good Shepherd, who feeds us, God's sheep. God provides us with what we need to grow and thrive, and when we get overwhelmed, God gathers us up and carries us in the arms of our loving and caring Good Shepherd.

**Reflect:** When have you felt God's love and care in your life?

**Pray:** Dear God, thank you for being our Good Shepherd, for feeding us and taking care of us. When we feel overwhelmed, help us to find rest in your loving arms. Amen.

Rev. Kristen Corr Rod serves on the staff of the Northeastern Iowa Synod. Her children go to St. Paul's Lutheran School in Waverly, IA.

**DECEMBER 17, 2023**  
**THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

JOHN 1: 6-8, 19-28

*<sup>23</sup>JOHN REPLIED IN THE WORDS OF ISAIAH THE PROPHET, "I AM THE VOICE OF ONE CALLING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY FOR THE LORD.'" (NIV)*

In the middle of Advent we don't think much of the effort and activity that it takes to put in a garden. As a child I learned to hoe from my father. He was very patient as I hoed row after row that were not straight. I don't remember him ever being angry about rows that were less than straight. We planted them anyway. Bushy plants covered less than straight rows. Tall slender flowers, told a different story.

When I think of those rows of vegetables, fruits, and flowers, and the conversations I had with my dad during those times, I remember his words about his chosen profession as an entomologist. He believed it was a call to study the tiny creatures of the earth, even getting to name them. This idea of making the way straight for the Lord is John's answer to his call to teach about the coming of Jesus, God's begotten son. It wasn't always straight, even for John.

In Advent, as we wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we have an opportunity to remember God's patience with us, so we can create the path (straight or not so straight) to God's hoped for world of love, mercy and forgiveness. Making a way doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be visible for others to follow.

**Reflect:** How will you make a path to God for others to follow?

**Pray:** Jesus we know you are always patient with us. Help me make a path to you that others can see. Help us plant seeds of love, patience, mercy and forgiveness that produce fruit for all to enjoy and share. Amen.

Pastor Elizabeth Clothier serves as Senior Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church and School in Marysville, Ohio, a church with a long history of teaching people about the love of Jesus that began in 1878, supporting a pre-k through 6th grade school.



**DECEMBER 24, 2023**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**  
2 SAMUEL 7:1-11,16

In addition to countless young people, many of you who work with and care for God's children and youth in Lutheran high schools, elementary schools, and early childhood education centers have traveled on uncertain road these pandemic years.

God reminds King David of the challenges through which God sustains him on David's transformational journey from under appreciated shepherd to revered king, "I have been with you wherever you went," God says. (2 Samuel 7:9a)

God remembers the decades spent leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. God keeps moving with the Israelites and does not even demand a house or temple. God then promises to keep traveling alongside David by ensuring that David's line of descendants will last forever.

God keeps God's promises. Just as God accompanies the Israelites and King David, God promises to travel alongside you on your life's journey. The God who cares for the Israelites and King David can be called upon to sustain you as you guide and support the young people in your care on their developmental journeys—no matter how uncertain the road might appear. The God of Israel and David will be with you wherever you go.

**Reflect:** When have you experienced God traveling with you on life's road?

**Prayer prompt:** Do you know someone who feels that they are alone? Ask how God might reach out to them through you. Trust that God will be with you where this journey takes you.

Pastor Karl Biermann, Centerville, OH, serves as ELCA Foundation regional gift planner for Indiana, Kentucky, and Southern Ohio. He helps people direct their legacy giving to a variety of ELCA ministries, such as schools and education centers.

**DECEMBER 31, 2023**  
**FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY**  
LUKE 2:31-33

One day a child in my preschool class asked if we could have a superhero theme. The children wanted to bring in their superhero toys and costumes. Since superheroes help people, I asked them how they could help others. We collect food for others during our weekly chapel time, so someone suggested we collect food.

We decided to ask our neighbors for help. We put notes on our neighbors' doors sharing our plan and gave them a bag to fill with food and request to place it outside their door a few days later.

Collection day arrived! To say the children were excited would be an understatement. We put on our superhero costumes and capes and "down the road we went to see what God would provide." Each superhero took a turn "flying" to a home to gather a generous bag of food.

With our two wagons filled, we brought all the food back to the church, not knowing that a treasure lay hidden among the donations. While the church volunteers were sorting through the food, a woman knocked on the door. She was in dire need of a special kind of baby formula. Incredibly, the baby formula she needed was included in what the children had collected.

God had prepared everything. God's light was revealed to the woman who needed formula, to the superheroes who collected the food, and to the church members and neighbors who heard the story. Glory be to God!

**Reflect:** Share a gift from God that you are thankful for.

**Pray:** Dear God, help us see what you are doing in our classroom, in our neighborhood, and in the world. Help us share and show your glory to one another. Amen

Cindy Decker, recently retired, was the director/teacher at St. Mark Preschool, Mt. Prospect, IL for 21 years and teacher at Messiah Lutheran Child Care Center, Park Ridge, IL for 10 years.

**JANUARY 7, 2024**  
**FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**  
GENESIS 1:1-5

What a joyful time we are in. God gave us this beautiful Earth and light to better see all the wonders it holds for us.

I went into our Pre-K class and asked the children what they thought of when I said light — their response: unicorns, puppies, moms, and dads. It is amazing that even at this age they understand that light means happy, fun, and safe.

When I, in turn, asked the children, “What do you think of when you hear the word dark?” responses changed a little. Many of the children said scared, then a few named moon and stars. I asked why they were scared of the dark. The general answer was because they couldn’t see anything. I reminded them that yes there is dark, God started creating in the dark, but that darkness is not bad. Even on the darkest of nights, God gives us stars that remind us of his love. We are never alone; God is always there.

Jesus has blessed us all. He is our shining star when we feel lost. No matter how glum things may look, Jesus and God are standing by our sides to help us find our way, grow, and love.

**Reflect:** We all experience darkness. Sometimes we can see the beauty in it and other times we just see the emptiness. How can you find beauty in the darkness today? How will you help others find the light in their darkness?

**Pray:** God, I let the darkness of the world consume me from time to time, but then I see your light and it lifts me back into the fullness of your light. Thank you for staying by me. Thank you for giving me hope, even when it is hard to find. With you, I know all things are possible. Amen

Mary Adams, Director of Ahwatukee Preschool, Phoenix, Arizona.  
Partnered with the ELEA for just about 10 years

**JANUARY 14, 2024**  
**SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

1 SAMUEL 3:1-10, (11-20)

*4<sup>A</sup> THEN THE LORD CALLED, 'SAMUEL! SAMUEL!'*

Have you ever experienced the sensation referred to as “a little voice in my head”? Often it is describe as one’s conscience speaking, intuition, an inner voice, or a feeling pulling them in a particular direction.

As a parent, I suggested to my children that it was a voice nudging them to pause and listen before jumping to a decision or action. The pause could be ever so brief, but the point was to listen to that little voice or feeling because it could have significant implications. And, that voice could be an invitation.

In 1 Samuel chapter 3, God tries to repeatedly get Samuel’s attention while he is sleeping, with almost comical results. But with the help of Eli, Samuel finally recognizes the voice to be that of God speaking to him and responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (v. 10) In this story, as in others in the Bible, the inviting, guiding and occasional difficulty to discern the voice of God is the beginning or redirection of a life-changing journey of faith, learning, and service.

God reaches out to us in a variety of ways and through a variety of people and invites us to follow or change course for reasons that may not always be clear to us. Pause and pay attention to that intuition, those rumblings in your stomach, or voices in your head; invite God to "Speak, for your servant is listening."

**Reflect:** When have you suspected that God was trying to tell you something through one of your students? How can you help your students be attentive to the people around them, the little things in life, and the ways that God may be speaking to them?

**Pray:** Wise and loving God, help me be responsive to your guidance and the Spirit at work within me so that I can follow and serve where and when you need me. Amen

Rod Boriack, Des Plaines, IL, is retired and writes Prayer Ventures for the ELCA, and serves on the board for Lutheran Outdoor Ministries.

**JANUARY 21, 2024**  
**THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**  
JONAH 3:1-10

Jonah didn't want to do what God wanted, so God had to ask a second time. Having just recently been spewed out of a large fish's mouth, Jonah was now more receptive to the road before him. Jonah chapter 3 verse two begins, "Get up and go..." When have you been asked to get up and go where you didn't want to go?

In Jonah's case, he's pretty sure God is going to forgive the Ninevites because the whole city including the animals fast and are covered in sackcloth, demonstrating their repentance. It's not even that Jonah's mad because he himself has to forgive the Ninevites; he simply has to proclaim God's displeasure with them. But even that road can be difficult.

Jonah didn't want to have anything to do with the Ninevites because they were his people's enemies. He didn't want to be in community with them, so he certainly didn't want God to care about them either.

Community (especially with people we don't care for) can feel like more work than it is worth. And yet, God will remind us a second time (or more) that a community with boundaries is God's preference for God's people — it's meant to be a gift. Sure enough, Jonah was right, instead of destruction, "God changed God's mind about the calamity that they were going to bring upon them and did not do it." (verse 10)

**Reflect:** If God can change God's mind, how might we change ours too, about who is welcome in our community?

**Pray:** Holy Wisdom, Bless us with a community that stretches us and welcomes us. Amen.

Pastor Janelle Hooper, TX, serves on the Board of the ELEA and as Program Manager for Ministry with Children for the ELCA.

**JANUARY 28, 2024**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20

*18A) I WILL RAISE UP FOR THEM A PROPHET LIKE YOU FROM AMONG  
THEIR OWN PEOPLE*

The Israelites went through a lot of change. It's a long story of travel, famine, enslavement, exodus, and eventually the Promised Land. And when they thought it was all settled, the people are taken into exile and face an occupation from Rome. Nothing is certain aside from the fact that things don't stay the same. Change is not always easy to deal with.

We too, face changes. Beyond our personal experiences of change, our communities, our country, and the world are constantly changing. Some we celebrate, and some we lament. The good news is that no matter what changes we face, God promises to continue speaking to us. As the Israelites journeyed toward a new life, God gives the message to keep listening. There is no need to look for direction from other sources, as God's word and message will continue to direct them from a voice among them, not from divination or foreign gods.

Likewise, our world today needs to continue listening for God's voice — and that voice will be there. As a church we are called to listen, but we are also called to speak. In a world where people are struggling and people are in pain, we are called to look for signs of grace and speak truth to power to make a difference. God's voice is not absent. We can further the kingdom by sharing the promises of God where ever we are.

**Reflect:** What are you living through today that leaves you longing to hear God's voice? Where do you feel called to speak God's word of justice and grace so that others can hear it?

**Pray:** We thank you for continuing to speak to us in modern times. Help us to seek your voice and empower us to speak your grace to those who need to hear it most, so that we can witness your justice emerge in the world. Amen.

Michelle Ketepa is a 25-year veteran in youth and family ministry. She currently lives in Southeast Michigan with her family.

**FEBRUARY 4, 2024**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY**  
MARK 1:29-39

In these verses we experience Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and many others who were sick. The news of Jesus' healing powers spreads quickly and many came to see him and be healed.

It is fascinating that the text notes that the "whole town gathered" and Jesus healed "many." As someone in ministry who often wonders if I am doing enough and often focuses on who I am *not* reaching, it is somehow comforting to hear that even Jesus didn't heal everyone. Maybe this is a reminder to take time to think about those we are reaching.

As people who work with our children and youth we have the privilege of nurturing and caring for those who are learning about the world around them. We have many opportunities to bring love, kindness, healing and comfort to those in our care.

In verse 35 Jesus rises early in the morning to pray. He knew that spending time in prayer, to recharge and connect with God, was essential to his work and for his ability to care for others.

You and your work are important too! Take time to pray, breathe, rest and renew! Nurture your spiritual life, so you can care for and love your students in the best way possible.

Thank you for the good work you do for and with our young people!

**Reflect:** How are you caring for your body, mind and spirit?

**Pray:** Gracious God, help me see and celebrate the difference that I am making in the lives of the students and families that God has entrusted to my care and me. Amen.

Shawna Berg is Director of Children's Ministry at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Eden Prairie, MN. She has worked in Children, Youth and Family Ministry in the Twin Cities for 27 years and has a passion for supporting kids and families as they grow in their faith.

**FEBRUARY 11, 2024**  
**TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY**  
2 KINGS 2:1-12

It's hard to hear the truth when the truth is something we don't want to hear, especially when it's a matter of the heart. "The diagnosis is ... The outcome appears to be ... I'm sorry, but it looks like we need to ..." In each case the mouth speaks what the heart is full of, as it borrows Elisha's words, "Yes, I know; keep silent." My heart doesn't want to hear that right now. Or ever... My heart can't hear that right now. Or ever ...

The truth of our reality often lies beyond our ability to truly grab hold of it. In today's passage the student-prophet Elisha knew that his teacher and guide Elijah would soon be taken from him. Yet, Elisha persisted in his insistence to journey alongside Elijah; and by doing so reaped more precious moments to learn and to glean from his mentor. Moments that included witnessing Elijah perform a mighty miracle that would no doubt provide the answer Elisha needed to the question his mentor would soon ask him, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." Elisha, the witness, confidently responds, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

May we as teachers provide our students with the opportunities to learn and to grow and to see miracles in their midst, despite being surrounded with so much that is hard to hear.

**Reflect:** How can we as teachers and leaders journey alongside our students in the midst of their truths, that they may learn and glean from our walking-by-faith example?

**Pray:** Lord, help us to be living and bold-breathing examples of your incredible, steadfast love on this earth, that our students may know you are with them and for them. Amen.

Tera Elness is Director of Children, Youth, & Family Ministries at American Lutheran Church of Windom, MN in addition to enjoying her life as a speaker and writer, sharing daily on Facebook - Tera's Online Christian Journey, and on Instagram - terajejan



**FEBRUARY 14, 2024**

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday is a solemn day of prayer that begins the season of Lent. On this day we may receive ashes marked on our forehead in the sign of the cross with the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We were first marked with the sign of the cross at our baptism, when the Pastor using oil says, "Receive the sign of the cross, a sign of God's endless love and mercy for you." During Lent's 40 days, we are invited to carry out the disciplines and practices of fasting, prayer, and works of love. During Lent, we return to God's mercy and grace, marked with the cross of Christ.

My wife, Ellie, taught 1st grade at Riviera Hall Lutheran School at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Redondo Beach, CA. Paul Spaulding was the pastor. One year, on Ash Wednesday, he brought a can filled with pieces of paper into the first-grade classroom. He told the students that the pieces of paper were from the previous year's Good Friday service. Members were asked to write on a piece of paper something they had done or not done that they were sorry for. They then came forward and nailed their piece of paper to the wooden cross. Jesus died on the cross for our sins.

Pastor Spaulding then lit a match and threw it in the can burning up all the pieces of paper. Once burned, all that was left were the ashes. Those ashes were used at the evening's Ash Wednesday service. Our sins are forgiven! Thanks be to God.

**Reflect:** What is something you have done or left undone that you regret? For which you are sorry?

**Pray:** Almighty and ever living, merciful God, you hate nothing you have made. You forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, repenting of our sins, we may receive full pardon and forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

Deacon Robert Federwitz, former ELCA Director for Schools, retired,  
living in Millville, New Jersey.

**FEBRUARY 18, 2024**  
**FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT**  
GENESIS 9:8-17, MARK 1:9-15

My dad was a man of empty promises. The first decade of my walk with the Lord it was hard for me to believe I could rely on God's promises. No matter how many sermons I heard or how many scriptures I read, I could not come to believe that God would keep God's word.

In Genesis we learn of God's promises to humankind — the establishment of a covenant and the promise God will never flood the earth again. Reading through Genesis 9:8-17 I noticed for the first time that when the rainbow is spoken about God states this is how the promises will be remembered. I've read that scripture time and time again, and never noticed that phrasing before.

In the song, "Way Maker" by Leeland, God is referred to as "promise keeper." The Hebrew phrase 'shomer habrit' is translated loosely as 'guardian and care of the covenant.' This insight, for me, adds depth and meaning to the original text.

In the day-to-day work with children, we arrive with our plans, our curriculum, and our ideas of how we should train the children in the way they should go. However, when we surrender the lives of the children we are entrusted with, to the One who not only keeps the covenant but guards it to make sure it comes to pass; the stress and pressure begins to fade away and we realize God is pleased with us for showing up for the children in our care.

**Reflect:** What are promises from God that you are waiting on to be fulfilled?

**Pray:** God thank you for keeping your promises. Help us to trust that you will always remember your covenant to us. Amen.

Eliana Katchkey, Dallas, TX, serving as Youth and Family Director for Christ Lutheran Church and Preschool.

**FEBRUARY 25, 2024**  
**SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT**  
MARK 8:31-33

Jesus' lesson plan for this day was hard, and very important, as tends to be the case with hard lessons worth teaching. We can imagine Jesus practicing his words and delivery in front of the mirror. There was no winging it. He needed his message to be clear and concise. He needed his delivery to be confident and steady, no matter how he was feeling about it.

Finally, he gave the teaching and the reception was a mix of bewilderment and denial. So much so that Peter actually pulls Jesus aside to try to do some damage control — to try and convince Jesus to soften the message, to comfort the disciples, even to take it back. But then there is a little detail tucked into verse 33 that is easy to skip. Before Jesus soundly rebukes Peter, Jesus turns and *looks* at his disciples.

Why does he do this? Why does Mark include this detail? What if Jesus turns to look at his disciples for strength? To remind him of his mission? To remind him why he was willing to go through so much? To remind him why the truth is worth fighting for?

In the midst of so many competing expectations, we all need to do this. We need to remember our “why.” And you, like Jesus, know that the “why” are the students. The dear ones who rely on your guidance and trust you to tell the truth and show them the way forward.

**Reflect:** What competing priorities are making it hard for you to be faithful to your “why” and to your mission?

**Pray:** Jesus, our brother, give us the courage to be faithful to our calling. Keep our eyes focused on what matters and keep us from looking from side to side where fear, comparison, and self doubt cloud our vision. Amen.

Sami Johnson, Jacksonville, NC, serves a congregation 1.5 miles from the largest US Marine Corps base on the East Coast. We strive to share the good news of God's love for all people with the active duty, veteran, and civilian communities in Jacksonville.

**MARCH 3, 2024**  
**THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT**  
EXODUS 20:1-17

Exodus 20 is the text for the Ten Commandments. It begins by establishing the God of the Israelites, who brought them out of bondage and then out of Egypt. God sends them into the wilderness and "on the road" for a 40-year journey.

Music and literature abound with references to being on the road as an analogy for life. From birth to death we walk this pilgrimage through a challenging world, headed to the heavenly home we know is waiting for us. We each walk the road of life traversing mountains and valleys, deserts and floods, but not entirely alone. Pause to look around and actually see one's fellow travelers that for at least part of our journey are walking the road with us — family, friends, colleagues, and loved ones.

Do you travel with angels unawares? Is Jesus walking with you? We have no clouds of smoke and pillars of fire to lead us. Have God's children been abandoned, or are we too caught up in our lives to recognize the presence of Jesus and his representatives?

Let our journey be one of anticipation and celebration, today and toward the future promise. On our way rejoicing — as individuals, the ELEA, as all God's children loved and forgiven! Christ is the way, assuring we have strength for the journey with Jesus as our companion and guide.

**Reflect:** Who walks the road with you, is by your side, representing Jesus? Whom might you not recognize as such, but whom you could heart-fully consider?

**Pray:** Bless and guide those saints whom you have given me as fellow travelers on my road. With open hearts, lead us all to your light. Amen.

Alan Feddersen, Oro Valley, AZ, retired, served as Lutheran school teacher and/or administrator in IL, OH, CA, Hong Kong, and as ELEA Director of Schools for Southern CA & Hawaii. Written in memory of Carole, beloved wife, educator and scholar.

**MARCH 10, 2024**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT**

JOHN 3:2:13-22

*16FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON,  
SO THAT EVERYONE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM MAY NOT PERISH BUT  
MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.*

As a confirmation student, John 3:16 was the scripture verse that represented my faith story. I didn't know much about the Bible, but I knew this verse. Growing up, I journeyed with great Sunday school teachers and pastors. I didn't always remember all the Bible stories, but I knew God was with me on my journey.

The storytellers of the faith in my life shaped me as a child, a teenager, a young adult, and still to this day. The people of faith — the Church — give me the strength and comfort I need to believe in a God who loves and walks with us in our earthly journeys.

Jesus is here not to condemn us but to help us believe that God is with us and for us.

All teachers of the faith are encouraged to remind students that God is a loving God who embraces us with love.

John 3:16 not only represented my faith story as a youth, but is an excellent scripture verse to lead my life's faith journey as well.

**Reflect:** What is a Scripture verse that guides your faith journey?

**Pray:** Gracious God, give us wisdom and compassion to know that you are for us and not against us. Amen.

Pr. Michael Jannett, Tucker, GA, serves as the Assistant to the Bishop for Formation and Communication for the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA, working with children and youth in GA, AL, MS, and TN.

**MARCH 17, 2024**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT**  
JEREMIAH 31:31-34

A covenant, a binding agreement, and a promise for the performance of action — the Old Covenant with the Lord was written in stone and on scrolls. It was conditional, transactional, and based on laws requiring action; it was in an external form. The Lord said he was going to make a New Covenant with the people, within them, on their hearts. Everyone who takes part will have it internally; a desire to obey God, as a part of our conscious and character.

These verses remind me of the covenants (verbal agreements about house rules, chores, and curfews) between parents and kids we often have in our homes. As a youth when I didn't follow the rules that I had agreed to, it was a broken agreement with consequences. That's representative of the Old Covenant that was based on action.

As I got older, my actions turned into respect for my parents. I was grateful for all they did for us. There was peace and security knowing I had a home, food, and clothes. Like the New Covenant, my heart changed towards a desire to live within the house rules. We often mature and develop our character and expanded our consciousness to accept the protection being offered by the different rules of life. And just like the New Covenant, it is an internal change.

**Reflect:** God is a God of mercy, forgiveness, and love. In what way this week can you demonstrate mercy, forgiveness and love towards a person, group or within a community event?

**Pray:** Thank you, Lord for your ever-present grace and forgiveness. Place in my heart the desire to renew and grow my relationship with you daily, through thought and prayer. Amen.

Kimberly Morse Julian, Ephrata, WA, office manager and ministry support at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and freelance Christian writer.

**MARCH 24, 2024**  
**SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT**

MARK 11:1-11

The Palm Sunday story is one of the easier Bible stories to teach to young children. There's an animal, a parade, and fun words to shout while waving arms or palm branches in the air. Children enjoy participating in the parade to honor Jesus and shouting "Hosanna!" In this part of the story, it appears that Jesus is on the road to success. Our part is only to watch from the sidelines or follow behind.

However, this is only part of the story. It's more challenging, but important, to teach children about the rest of the story. The triumphant parade route soon turns into an arduous journey toward death on a cross. It is important for all of us to take the whole journey with Jesus this week. We are part of the crowd shouting "Hosanna," and we are also part of the crowd shouting, "Crucify him!" We eat the Last Supper with Jesus, and we also betray him. We boast that we will never deny Jesus, and yet we deny him three times before the night is over.

We are on the road with Jesus during Holy Week, and Jesus is on life's road with us every day of our lives. After the tragedy of the crucifixion comes the joy of the resurrection. Children enjoy the story of a stone rolled away, an angel, disciples running, and the opportunity to shout more exciting words, "Jesus is alive!"

May we always look on this story with the excitement and wonder that children express.

**Reflect:** How will you journey with Jesus this week?

**Pray:** Dear Jesus, Hosanna! Blessed are you who come in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven! Amen.

Melissa Roselle, Springfield, IL, lifelong Lutheran, currently serving as  
Director of St. John's Lutheran Preschool.

**MARCH 31, 2024**  
**EASTER DAY**  
MARK 16:1-8

Jesus shared with his disciples what was to come in the days and weeks leading up to his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. Though they heard him teach and predict the Passion, they did not fully understand what was going to happen. What did Jesus really mean by foretelling that he must suffer great things at the hands of the authorities, be killed and on the third day be raised? As surely as he told his disciples, he was crucified and then three days later rose from the dead!

There are times when the things we see or hear are beyond the scope of our human understanding -- news that is confusing, shocking, or hard to understand. We learn, with the disciples, that though we may be inundated with bad news for a little while, Jesus doesn't leave us in that space.

The Easter story teaches us that death brings about new life. Earlier in scripture, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24)

There are things in our lives, in our ministries, and in our schools that may fall by the wayside, sometimes wanted and sometimes not. In it all Jesus promises to be with us, bring us through times of death, and bring about new life. Much like the single grain that dies into the earth, it bears much fruit!

**Reflect:** What practice or aspect of your ministry is in need of a "death," and with the help of God, new life?

**Pray:** Gracious God, your mercy and love are more than we can comprehend. Stir up in us new life through the joy of your presence through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jonathan Boynton, Winchester, Virginia, has served as pastor at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church for almost 10 years. He supports Pre-K education through Grace Lutheran Preschool that has been a mainstay in the Winchester community for more than 60 years!



**APRIL 7, 2024**  
**SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER**

JOHN 20:19-31

*<sup>21</sup>JESUS SAID TO THEM AGAIN, "PEACE BE WITH YOU. AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, SO I SEND YOU."*

"Peace be with you." Tensions were high when Jesus appeared to the disciples. Here was a group who had left behind their livelihoods to follow this Rabbi. And suddenly he was gone. Now what? The ache of grief and loss, the shock of what had transpired in recent days, the confusion and chaos of what might happen next, and the fear of being discovered by the Jewish leaders all hung in the air simultaneously. And now the news that Jesus is alive threatens to splinter the fragile group.

"Peace be with you." Jesus understood the heightened emotions that swirled about that day. So he came with his "peace." When the Son of the living God says, "Peace be with you," Peace. Is. With. You! He does not speak empty words. Everything Jesus says is full of intentionality and power. He then says, "As the father has sent me, so I am sending you." Jesus sends them full of peace, to carry peace, and to bestow peace.

Jesus knows all you encounter today: the testing anxiety, the tense conversation, the less-than-ideal home life, the doubt or lack of self worth, the myriad boulders that students and teachers alike pack with them in their "backpacks" for the day. So Jesus comes with his peace. And he sends you, full of peace, to carry peace, and to bestow it upon students, colleagues, and families alike. He has given you the Holy Spirit as your guide.

**Reflect:** Who in your path may need the blessing of Jesus' peace today?

**Pray:** Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Amen. (Prayer of St. Francis)

Annie Duarte, Scottsdale, AZ, serving as a preschool and Sunday school teacher at New Covenant Lutheran Church and School.

**APRIL 14, 2024**  
**THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER**

LUKE 24:32

*WERE NOT OUR HEARTS BURNING WITHIN US WHILE HE WAS  
TALKING TO US ON THE ROAD ...*

Burning hearts.

The disciples had met Jesus on the road and had dinner with him. When he left, they exclaimed, "Were not our hearts burning within us?"

Burning hearts.

What warms your heart? Doesn't it happen when someone says to you, "I love you?" Doesn't your heart burn when a former student says to you, "You were my all-time favorite teacher." And doesn't your heart burn when you reflect upon the incredible way God has met you on your journey and led you to this place for this particular time?

So, feel Jesus' presence in your classroom every day. Take time to pause, pray, and remember. Let the Spirit enter your heart. Feel God's presence in your soul and let your heart not only be a "warm heart" but let it BURN!

**Reflect:** Recall a time when the presence of God in your life gave your heart an especially warm feeling.

**Pray:** Lord, Come into my heart and into the hearts of my students. May your presence be so real that it not only warms my heart but also makes my heart burn with satisfaction and joy. Amen.

Melvin M Kieschnick has felt his heart burn many times in his more than 50 years as a Lutheran School educator both nationally and internationally. He and his wife live in Carlsbad CA.

**APRIL 21, 2024**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
ACTS 4:5-12

Most public buildings, including schools and churches, have a visible cornerstone, often with a date carved into it. Today, cornerstones are largely symbolic or ornamental. The entire building would not come crashing down if the stone were damaged or removed. Still, the cornerstone reminds those, who use and value the building, of its history and foundation.

Our reading today identifies Jesus as the stone whom the builders rejected, but who has become the cornerstone. That is, Jesus is the foundation upon whom our entire faith is based. As teachers, parents, pastors, or mentors for young children, we strive to remind children of Jesus' importance in our lives. He is the firm foundation on which those who have gone before us stood, and he is the firm foundation on which we stand today. He is neither a mere symbol nor an ornament.

Still, each of us, at times, manages to do just that — turn Jesus into something symbolic or ornamental. We identify as followers of Jesus, and yet we fail to honor God with our thoughts, words, and deeds, and we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We fail to build our lives on the one true cornerstone, the only one whose death and resurrection have saved us. Our true cornerstone, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is with us now, forgiving us, guiding us, comforting us, inspiring us, and loving us. Our cornerstone is Jesus and his grace.

**Reflect:** How might others see that Jesus and his grace are your cornerstone today?

**Pray:** Jesus, thank you for your grace and mercy. May that grace and mercy be my cornerstone today and always. Amen.

Pastor Linda Strader serves as the pastor of outreach and discipleship at St. John's Lutheran Church, Springfield, IL. She, along with all the disciples at St. John's, is committed to the ministry done in and through St. John's Preschool.

**APRIL 28, 2024**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

ACTS 8:26-40

*<sup>30B</sup>DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?" <sup>31</sup>HE REPLIED, "HOW CAN I, UNLESS SOMEONE GUIDES ME?" AND HE INVITED PHILIP TO GET IN AND SIT BESIDE HIM.*

Our students face many challenges. Kids enrolled in special education and their teachers know this well. Many young ones are not accurately diagnosed and struggle with "What am I reading?" The letters and numbers easily deciphered by some are frightening puzzles to others.

In the text Philip is led to encounter a traveler and offers a gentle question, "Do you understand?" This allows the traveler to ask for help. The traveler listens to Peter's words about Jesus and carries those words back to Ethiopia, founding, it is thought, the oldest Christian church in that land.

Philip showed empathy, listened carefully, and questioned gently. Rather than imposing solutions or advice, he spoke of what he knew of Jesus. Thus the Ethiopian traveler could match Philip's words with his own worries and hopes. These strategies are useful in many areas, including teaching. We too are challenged to encounter our students with a gentle question, "Do you understand?" We hope they will then ask for the understanding they need.

God bless you, your students, co-workers, and parents as you share the love of Jesus in the questions you ask and the gentle ways in which you speak.

**Reflect:** With what kinds of understanding do students struggle? How do you "sit beside" them in their struggles?

**Pray:** Help us to "sit beside" our students, ask gentle questions, and wonder together about things that puzzle us. May Jesus' love shine through all our words and deeds. Amen.

Rev. Beth Orling, now living in the Pacific Northwest, remembers fondly her time with the children at St. John Care, Westville, NJ.

**MAY 5, 2023**  
**SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
JOHN 15:16-17

To be chosen, to be selected for a special purpose, to be shown that purpose – could anything be more inspiring, helpful and uplifting to aid us in our daily task?

It is a special calling to labor day-by-day to form young minds, witness to God's grace and mercy, and make an eternal difference for others.

It is usually a privilege to be chosen. When we were kids, many of us felt validated and loved when we were chosen for a team or a special assignment. We have been chosen to be on God's team. We have been given a special assignment that fits the needs of God's kingdom and our own gifts.

This calling from God will pull us out of our comfort zone, beyond our own abilities, and teach us to trust God and love, as God has loved us. We are not left alone in this for we have the power of prayer that calls upon God to fulfill God's promises to us and all for whom we care.

**Reflect:** What is your special assignment for today? For the next few days? What has God laid on your heart that might take prayer and courage to risk the love you have for a person(s) that needs to know God's mercy through you?

**Pray:** Dear God, we give thanks that you have chosen us for this special call to nurture and care for the children whom you love. Lead and guide us so that we are enabled to inspire others to seek all the good you have for them. Amen.

Pastor Marcia Schultz, Grace Lutheran Church, Gulf Shores, AL.  
Graduate of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, SC.  
Class of 2008.

**MAY 12, 2024**  
**SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
JOHN 17:6-19

Prayer is a vital part of our faith journey. It is a gift and invitation to be in conversation with God who loves the world beyond measure. As we read in John 17, Jesus held his disciples in prayer as their journey together neared an important turning point — his death and resurrection. Jesus had walked many a dusty road alongside the disciples, physically present with them. While they carried with them all that they had learned and witnessed in his ministry, Jesus' death and resurrection would change the way the disciples experienced his presence.

Jesus' prayer revealed that his ongoing presence in their lives would be evident in the joy that flows from their connection with God. This is the same God who sent the Son out of love for the world. With this abiding love, Jesus' disciples were sent. It was certain that the road ahead would be difficult. Jesus promised through his prayer that the same protection and belonging the disciples enjoyed during his earthly ministry, would go with them.

As disciples of Christ in this day who have been called to journey with the very young, the same presence dwells with us. We walk with our students through transitions and challenges knowing that Christ is with us. Together we can share in the joy that comes from abiding with the One who loves the whole world and calls us each by name.

**Reflect:** How have you experienced joy in this school year and how might that joy speak to God's presence in that moment?

**Pray:** Ever-present Christ, open our hearts to the joy that flows from your presence among us. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to walk with each other in the joy that comes from life in you. Amen.

Deacon Nancy Wagner, Bellville, OH, served over the past 20 years in multiple congregations, focusing on faith formation and spiritual formation ministry with an emphasis on children, youth and families.

## MAY 19, 2024, DAY OF PENTECOST

### ACTS 2:1-21

*68 EACH ONE HEARD THEM SPEAKING IN THE NATIVE LANGUAGE OF EACH.*

I was waiting in the pharmacy while two children were waiting with their parents. In the course of the wait the children became best friends, inventing an elaborate make-believe game that included romping around the waiting area. Their mothers looked tired and wary of judgment — the children were jubilant. When it was time to go they did not want to leave the imaginary world they'd created together in the waiting room.

Have you ever watched children who don't know one another dive into play together? I love sitting as a silent observer, witnessing the unfolding of play-centric friendships. Children are wonderful at engaging others they don't know — I suspect it has something to do with their fluency in the language of play.

On Pentecost one of God's deeds of power was "each one heard them speaking in the language of each." It's hard to imagine this spontaneous understanding when we think of the workings of the world of grownups. It's not hard to imagine when we think about children playing together on a playground.

I wonder if God provides children with this language because it's the place we are meant to start — we are meant to play with and delight in the people around us. Children are so good at this. How can we be better?

**Reflect:** How will you use the language of play in your ministry? Where will you find delight in playing with those in your care?

**Pray:** Gracious God, thank you for giving us children to teach us how to play. Help us to learn to speak the language of play and to find common ground by playing with those around us. Amen.

Beth Townshend Volesky has worked for over 20 years in ELCA youth ministry programs across the country. She and her active-duty military husband find new places to play with their four children in every duty location.

**MAY 26, 2024**  
**TRINITY SUNDAY**  
JOHN 3:1-17

In John 3 we encounter Nicodemus, a "teacher of Israel," who comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Though he sees the "signs," Nicodemus lacks understanding of what Jesus is doing. While some debate the reasons for Nicodemus' nighttime visit, I am drawn to Nicodemus' curiosity and questions.

Though he struggles to make sense of what Jesus is doing, the learned "teacher of Israel" humbles himself, adopts the posture of a curious student, and asks, "How can these things be?" Although Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus' responses, he stays engaged, asking additional questions as he works through his own doubt and confusion.

Can you relate to Nicodemus? Walking away from Jesus would be the easier option. Yet, Nicodemus chooses to remain in relationship. Though confused, Nicodemus seeks enlightenment. His is a faith-seeking understanding; to make sense of signs and wonders that he sees but cannot understand.

Like Nicodemus, we often struggle to make sense of what God is up to in the world. We too, ask, "How can these things be?" And, if truth be told, there may be times when we want to walk away because God has not answered all of our questions. But faith is not a trivia contest, is it? At its core, faith is relational, a trusting relationship with our triune God worked in us by the Holy Spirit. And it is enough. How can these things be?

**Reflect:** What are you curious about? How are you challenged to grow in your understanding of God's activity in your life?

**Pray:** Creating, redeeming and life-giving God, you invite all people into relationships with you. Strengthen us and walk with us amid our questions and doubts as we participate in your saving, renewing, and healing mission for all creation. Amen.

The Reverend Jon Brudvig, Pastor at Salem Lutheran Church, Lenexa, KS, has previously served congregations with early childhood and after-school ministries.



**JUNE 2, 2024**  
**SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PSALM 139:1-6, 13-18

One of the things I love most about children is their willingness to ask questions and comment on everything they see and hear. When we are outside, one of the boys will announce to the whole class that a garbage truck is coming, even when we can't see it yet. He knows this by the sound of the engine as it turns the corner to go up the hill.

God knows us and loves us when we are planning, leading, learning from the kids, and everything in between. We are each unique and bring different gifts to the classroom and to the team – that is exactly how God designed us. Our world would be so boring if we were all made the same.

It is such a joy to get to know the kids as they journeyed through the year. Their eyes have been opened to new experiences, new friends, and new ways to do things. May they continue to experience the world around them with the new eyes that have developed this school year.

As we move into the season of summer may our eyes be opened to new things we see in this world. God delights in our joys and shares in our sorrows – and God is with us in all of it! My everyday wish is that our students will grow up knowing God is always with them – no matter what.

**Reflect:** God knows us and loves us unconditionally. How do you share this love with the students in your classroom?

**Pray:** God of light and love, be with us as we draw close to the end of the school year. Be with the families and the staff as they move into a new season. Help us see things in the world with new eyes and share your amazing love with all whom we meet! In your Holy Name, Amen.

Becky Cole, Kirkland, WA, serves as Children's Ministry & Preschool  
Director at Holy Spirit Lutheran Church.

**JUNE 9, 2023**  
**THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MARK 3:20-35

Have you ever played baseball or another sport? Have you ever been a part of a club, band, choir, play or musical? If you have, then you know the importance of being on a team. Being part of a team takes hard work, dedication, and may mean putting others before your self.

A successful team is one that works together, lifts one another up, and grows as they face with adversity along the way. Teams stand as one as they work together in accomplishing the goals set before them.

Being a part of a family is like being on a team or in a club — building relationships, working hard, challenging one another and willingly sacrificing for each other. Being part of a family who walks with you is especially important as we grow in our faith.

Life is not easy, especially as we seek where God is leading us. The Bible verses for this week remind us that together we can resist the temptation of the devil. Together we can grow and be lifted up as we encounter the struggles that come our way. We can grow in our faith as we strengthen one another and share what it means to be a part of God's family.

**Reflect:** In what ways do you surround yourself with others that challenge you and yet pick you up when you fall? How do you encourage your students and families to daily listen, support, and walk alongside one another as they serve others?

**Pray:** Lord gives me your peace, understanding, and patience as I work with others in supporting, growing, and building one another up. I pray that through the opportunities at my school or center, others may know what it means to be on a team and part of the family of Christ. Amen.

Michael Rottmann, Principal Grace Lutheran School, Winter Haven, FL.  
served on the ELEA National Board of Directors for 8 years, most recently as President.

**JUNE 16, 2024**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

1 SAMUEL 15:34 -16:13

*<sup>7</sup>BUT THE LORD SAID TO SAMUEL, 'DO NOT LOOK ON HIS APPEARANCE OR ON THE HEIGHT OF HIS STATURE, BECAUSE I HAVE REJECTED HIM; FOR THE LORD DOES NOT SEE AS MORTALS SEE; THEY LOOK ON THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE, BUT THE LORD LOOKS ON THE HEART.'*

I am short in stature, but mighty in other ways. This verse resonates with me because I am reminded quite often that it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside, what matters is what is inside your heart. I read this verse when I become discouraged because I often feel like people are looking at me on the outside without knowing who I really am on the inside. It is like the saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover."

The theme for this year's ELEA devotional is based on the Emmaus Road. The disciples thought they were walking with an ordinary man, but it wasn't until the breaking of the bread that they realized it was Jesus — himself!

In our life's journey we encounter people whom we think we know, or have decided we don't want to get to know based on what we have heard or what we see. Instead, what if we looked at each person as created in the image of God, seeing the positive qualities of a person and not the bad behaviors (sin) that humans create. We are beautiful and wonderfully created by God.

**Reflect:** If we are created in the image of God, how can we look at others without allowing our human flaws getting in the way?

**Pray:** Creator God, thank you for making each of us in your image. Help us to see others for who they are and not what they look like on the outside or how they behave. Let us love one another as you have loved us. In your name we pray. Amen.

Deacon Darcy Mittelstaedt, Bishop's Associate for Leadership and  
Lifelong Faith Formation in the Southwestern Texas Synod that  
actively supports Preschools, Schools, and Centers as ministries in our  
congregations.

**JUNE 23, 2024**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

PSALM 9:9-20

*<sup>9</sup>THE LORD IS A STRONGHOLD FOR THE OPPRESSED, A STRONGHOLD IN TIMES OF TROUBLE. <sup>10</sup>AND THOSE WHO KNOW YOUR NAME PUT THEIR TRUST IN YOU, FOR YOU, O LORD, HAVE NOT FORSAKEN THOSE WHO SEEK YOU.*

We can trust God to calm our storms — if we trust in God's presence with us. When I think about storms, I relate especially to those who work with the youngest among us. As a parish pastor who is bi-vocational (also a parent educator in Early Childhood and Family Education), I know the importance of bringing calm to the littlest ones around us, who may not know yet how to regulate themselves. We need to "download" our own calm to help them find some peace.

Jesus asks the disciples "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" We may have to quiet our own hearts to hear God's voice and to know God's presence. Psalm 9 says, "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed ... you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you."

**Reflect:** "Calm the Storm," a song by Jonathan Rundman, offers powerful music for a devotion or reflection. (Accessed on Bandcamp: <https://jonathanrundman.bandcamp.com/track/calm-the-storm>) What faith or life practices help you know that God calms the storms within and outside of us? How can you be intentional about the gift of peace that God offers us?

**Pray:** Loving God, we live in a world of chaos and challenge. Lead us to hear you, see you, and know your gift of calm in all the facets of our work and lives. Amen.

Mary Kaye Ashley, ELCA pastor, serves Oakland Lutheran, Albert Lea & Grace Lutheran, Austin, MN. She is also a parent educator in MN's Early Childhood/Family Ed. program in Burnsville/Eagan/Savage schools. Mother of three graduates of the Child Development & Learning Ctr @ Prince of Peace Lutheran/Burnsville. Delighted to have served congregations with preschools at Trinity/Eau Claire, WI & St. John's, Kasson, MN.

**JUNE 30, 2024**  
**SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MARK 5:21-43

This week we find Jesus meeting two very different people "on the road." Jesus is engaged in ministry with crowds seeking him as a teacher and a healer. The two Jesus meets this day are both desperate for healing and full of faith in God to heal.

We meet them as "one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus," and as "a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years." The first is a man of importance in the community who has prestige, money, friends, and notably — a name. Jairus begs Jesus to come heal his daughter. The second is a woman suffering from chronic bleeding, making her unclean in the Jewish community and left to a life of not only illness, but isolation and loneliness. Having spent all her money seeking cures for twelve long years, she is destitute. The woman reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak for her own healing.

Jesus gave healing to them both, healing the woman of her disease and awakening Jairus' daughter from the dead. Jesus took time for each one, offered each one his attention. He lifted the woman from her low status, calling her "Daughter," the only woman recorded in scripture that Jesus addressed this way. She finally received a name. Jesus saw no difference between the two and lifted each of them.

May we learn from Jesus' example to recognize the children of God on our journeys and join together in creating a world where all are welcome and worthy.

**Reflect:** Whom do I hold nameless? Who do I elevate? How can I see both through the eyes of Jesus?

**Pray:** Leading Lord, may we work to create a world where all are loved, welcome, and worthy. Bless us to see your image in one another and to recognize all as equal and extraordinary. Amen.

Janean Moriarty, Poulsbo, WA, serves as Director of Vinland Lutheran  
Preschool.

**JULY 7, 2024**  
**SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

MARK 6:1-13

*<sup>1</sup>JESUS LEFT THERE AND WENT TO HIS HOMETOWN, ACCOMPANIED BY HIS DISCIPLES. <sup>6</sup>HE WAS AMAZED AT THEIR LACK OF FAITH. (NIV)*

While home on a college break during my freshman year, I attended an event where I ran into a high school classmate who stated he was surprised to see me, especially since he didn't know I knew how to dance. I asked, "What do you really know about me? You never took time to talk with me during our four years as classmates."

To know "of" a person does not mean we "know" a person, nor of their capabilities. How often do we set "box-like" boundary lines on another's capabilities? We expand our parameters about a person when we get to know them rather than make assumptions about who we think they are or what they can do.

Acclaimed wherever he'd been, Jesus returned to his hometown wanting to serve and minister. His knowledge of the Word was profound, but people couldn't accept it because of who they thought he was. They knew his family background. He was just a "carpenter" — not a scholar! They were looking at his past, not at who he had become.

Everyone has a God-given purpose. Past mistakes, hurts or physical challenges don't have to determine our future. God already knows who we are and will use us to change our family's legacy.

**Reflect:** Who have you become? How has God used you?

**Pray:** Lord, help me see people beyond the boundaries and limits that I have placed on them. God, give me the mindset to help others reach their full potential and capabilities. Amen.

Sandra Nelson, Chicago, IL, serves at Holy Family School. For 25 years she has also actively served in the Children's Ministry at United Baptist Church as Director of God's Precious Children Bible Study and Vacation Bible School.

**JULY 14, 2024**  
**EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
2 SAMUEL 6:1-5; 12B-19

Dance like no one is watching.

This saying captures David's response when he returned to Jerusalem. The Philistines had captured the Ark, which the Israelites had carried with them as they wandered all those years through the wilderness. This holy object held contents that were signs of God's leadership and presence among them including the Ten Commandments. When David finally returns to Jerusalem with the Ark, he is ecstatic and dances with all his might before God.

In a study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, psychologists Marcel Zentner and Tuomas Eerola found that babies will spontaneously groove to music. While babies are not great dancers, they do smile more when they hit the beat. Essentially, it is safe to say that God created us to dance.

There are many types of dance. We know what it is like to dance in our role as educators. We strive daily to ensure supportive and responsive learning environments; dancing to meet each child's unique social, emotional, spiritual, and educational needs. It can be exhausting, but the effort can also be extremely rewarding and filled with joy.

David did not hold anything back – he danced with all his might. The work that we get to do with young children and families is a way of dancing for God. Let us be like David. Let us hold nothing back and dance for God like no one is watching.

**Reflect:** What brings you joy and inspires you to dance in your role serving children and families?

**Pray:** Gracious and loving God, give us joy in the work that we do and feet that are ready to dance. Amen.

Robin Patras serves as Family Ministry Director at Christ the Savior Lutheran Church, Fishers, IN, which includes the weekday ministry of Noah's Ark Preschool & Kindergarten.

**JULY 21, 2024**  
**NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
MARK 6:30-34

In the Gospel for today, the apostles had just returned from a mission trip. They had been traveling, healing, preaching, and teaching. They were eager to tell Jesus about all that they had done. Jesus responded to their stories by inviting them to take a rest from their work. He knew how very valuable both physical and spiritual rest would be for them to continue their important work of teaching. He took them in a boat to a deserted place.

We can relate! The work of teaching and educating children and youth can be exhausting. We often need rest from our busyness. Not just physical rest, but spiritual rest in order to continue the important work of teaching. Imagine yourself as an apostle telling Jesus about your week and then being invited to get in a boat with him and taken to a deserted place to rest.

After resting with the apostles, Jesus went ashore where crowds awaited him. The reading tells us, “They [the crowds] were like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus had compassion for them and started teaching.

We can relate! After resting, we return to the office or classroom where “the sheep” await us. We look into the eyes of our students and following Jesus example; we have compassion as we begin teaching again.

**Reflect:** Who reminds you that rest is important? How and where do you get much needed physical and spiritual rest?

**Pray:** Dear God, help me recognize that when I am overwhelmed that I need rest, so I may continue to reflect your love and compassion through my work. I ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Debbie Streicher is Co-Director at Milestones Ministry, a former president of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA, on the Lifelong Faith Team, and a coach.



**JULY 28, 2024**  
**TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
JOHN 6:1-21

One of the first things that we learn in this story is that Jesus is going to feed the crowd even though they follow him for the wrong reasons. The chapter begins with a large crowd following Jesus, “because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.” Not because they want to learn from Jesus, but because they want to see more miracles. Jesus doesn’t seem to mind why they are there. He sees an opportunity to care for them and to teach them about the coming kingdom. He also sees an opportunity to teach his twelve apostles an economics lesson.

Jesus disciples have witnessed amazing displays of his power. Yet they don't believe that Jesus can feed everyone. Why? When you look at the world through the lens of scarcity, there is never enough of anything. The disciples are looking at Jesus as a scarce resource, only able to do so much. And they want to make sure that they use this resource carefully.

But, Jesus is not a scarce resource. With Jesus, there is always enough! Jesus doesn’t play by the rules of economics. Jesus teaches us a different way of looking at the world — through the lens of abundance. When we see the world through the lens of abundance, not scarcity, amazing things happen.

**Reflect:** Do We Have Enough? It’s so difficult to look at the world through the lens of abundance. Everything around us tells us that it is not true. Even when we have enough, we are taught in many and various ways, that we need more.

**Pray:** How wonderful to know that you are our Provider, Sustainer and Helper. I pray that my eyes will look away from the circumstances of life, which can become so overwhelming, and keep the eyes of my heart fixed on you. Amen.

Judy Twist, Brookfield, IL, is a board member and social media coordinator for the Christian Education Network of the ELCA for the past 10 years. Judy serves her congregation by teaching and leading faith formation programs for children, adults and families.

## REFLECTIONS AND PRAYER NOTES

**Reflect:**

**Pray:**

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