

EQUIPPING...
FOR THE WORK OF MINISTRY



EASTER SEASON DEVOTIONS
WRITTEN BY LEADERS IN
THE MONTANA SYNOD

Introduction

In the fifty days of the Easter season, the church ponders the mystery of Jesus' resurrection and the disciples' challenge to understand the new world that was opened to them as they witnessed to the risen Christ. The words ring out, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!" In these days (our 2nd Easter!) impacted by the Coronavirus, we have journeyed through a year of discomfort and anxiety and through the Lenten season with hope on the horizon as more and more people are vaccinated. Yet we wonder what the next days, weeks and months will bring. We wonder what "normal" will look and feel like, suspecting that it will not look like the before pandemic time.

There are some things upon which we can cling and which give us hope for the days ahead. As the disciples pondered what resurrection and new life meant for them, I imagine that they worked to wrap their heads around their new normal. Because Jesus lives, they would live, too. Because death was not the end, but a gateway to new life, they need not fear death. They lived and experienced a seismic shift. There are those who are stating that it will take decades for people to unpack and comprehend the shifts that have occurred over the last year of our lives. But there are some things of which I am already certain: the presence of the risen Christ has sustained us and God's people have responded with compassion and courage in the last months. People have been generous to care for others and for their congregations in a way that has been awe-inspiring. People have learned new skills and made shifts in how they live and communicate that will continue to impact all of us.

Into these days in the Easter season, please receive the gift of these reflections, provided for you by pastors of our congregations, LPAs and lay leaders, Bishop Jungling, and the staff of the Synod. As the Montana Synod is focused on equipping God's people for the work of ministry, (based on Eph. 4:11-12), it is helpful to focus together on a text and devotional reflection that encourages us to walk together as the Montana Synod being equipped to be the people of God, followers of Jesus, and bearers of the good news of God's love and grace.

Thank you for your participation in your congregation, and for helping to bear God's love and care to your community and to the world. As the disciples were sent out to proclaim Jesus' gift of new life, may we also bear witness in word and deed to the new life that is ours in Christ.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Yours, in this new life,

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission

Montana Synod, ELCA

Resurrection Sunday, April 4, 2021

The Day of the Resurrection

“So the [women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

So ends the original ending of the gospel of Mark. (Mk 16:8)

The women hear that Jesus has been raised from the dead, resurrected and alive just as he promised. And they flee and say nothing because they are afraid.

Why were they afraid? Well, maybe it was because in Jesus’ resurrection, everything changed! Everything was different and new! A capital “N” New!

But “in with the New” sounds to us like “out with the old.” Which means loss. Which frightens us. For those women and for us, Jesus’ New means death of the old, and perhaps rightly so, for clinging to the old too often destroys us.

This fear, though, is unnecessary. For like those women, we have been equipped for New Life. That’s what Jesus’ teachings and healings and signs were all about – he is preparing us for the New Life he is giving us. In fact, all of Jesus’ ministry was about equipping his followers for ministry, for following Christ and doing his working in the world, for dying and rising with him. And he isn’t finished equipping. The Spirit is coming on Pentecost to equip us even more.

And so we can proclaim “Christ is risen!” without fear this day. Because, with Christ, we are risen too! Risen and equipped to live a new way, a different way, Jesus’ way!

Pastor Laurie Jungling, Bishop, Montana Synod

Easter Monday, April 5, 2021

Luke 24:13-35

“Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” (Luke 24:15-16)

Where do we find ourselves in the account of Jesus’ appearance on the road to Emmaus?

Like the two disciples, we are on a journey. As they walked, the two struggled to make sense out of the confusing events of the Passion. We struggle to walk faithfully. Our right feet stride in God’s sacred and eternal realm while our left feet stumble in this secular and temporal age.

The two disciples are insignificant characters and so are we. Yet, Jesus chose to walk with them and Jesus walks with us. Jesus opened the Scriptures to them just as the Word is opened to us.

Jesus revealed himself in the breaking of the bread and reveals himself to us in the Sacrament. Yet, before that revelation, the disciples did not recognize Jesus. It is easy for us to see Jesus when we gather for worship. But Jesus walks with us 24/7 and we often are unaware of his presence.

The two disciples bore witness to the resurrected Jesus and that same purpose has been entrusted to us.

Blessed Redeemer, open our eyes to your presence, open our ears to your calling and open our hearts that we might serve you. Amen

John Munding, LPA, St. John’s Lutheran Church, Helena

Tuesday, April 6, 2021

Matthew 28:1-15a

In Matthew's resurrection account, there are fantastic and clearly other-worldly events taking place. A great earthquake causes the stone to roll back from the tomb. An angel appears at the open tomb to greet both Marys. The guards are scared (nearly to death) as they see the angel.

Then Jesus appears to the women. He speaks familiar words: "do not be afraid." He tells them to go to the rest of the disciples. In this passage, Jesus' appearance as the living one is confined to two verses. Two out of fifteen! The rest of this passage includes the conspiracy plan of the guards, chief priests and other leaders. They scheme that if they can convince people that Jesus' body has been stolen, then that story will be perceived as the truth.

But somehow, the religious leaders' plan didn't work out. Their "story" was never the one that stuck. Just a few days ago, we worshiped, joining in the chorus, "He is risen. He is risen, indeed." After a year of questions and chaos and all that we have experienced (and now a 2nd Easter celebrated in a new way) this story, of Jesus' death and resurrection holds us, molds us. Because Jesus is alive.... We are not afraid. We claim the promise of hope and proclaim that his new life is also ours.

Amen.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger, Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod

Wednesday, April 7, 2021

Mark 16:1-8

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

When I went to the Holy Land, I was surprised to learn that there are two places that people think might have been the burial place for Jesus. One is located within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the Holy Land, it is a practice to build a church over a holy place, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has been built over one option of where Jesus might have been crucified and buried. Christians consider this a very holy place. You can touch the place where Jesus might have been laid in the tomb.

The other place that claims to be where Jesus was laid is the Garden Tomb. There is a place nearby where you can see a skull in a cliff, if you let your imagination work just a bit. The Garden Tomb is just a short walk away from the place of the skull and near the tomb are the remains of old olive presses. There is a cave and at its entrance is a little tunnel. In the tunnel is a huge stone, that, if rolled along the tunnel, would cover the entrance. You can go into the cave/tomb and see where Jesus might have been laid. There is even a higher spot in the stone that would be where the head would lay. I liked this one better and was just sure that this was the real place instead of the place within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It was much less touristy and the peace and quiet seemed just right.

As I was thinking this, the man who had led us to this place said, "This might not be the real tomb any more than the one in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. We really don't know. The important thing is that the tomb is empty. Jesus has risen!"

He was right. The exact placement of the tomb is secondary to the fact that Jesus isn't there anymore. He has risen! Death couldn't keep him in its grasp. And he lives and reigns and loves us and is calling us to be members of the Body of Christ.

Alleluia!

Pastor Brenda Frelsi, Zion Lutheran Church, Glendive

Thursday, April 8, 2021

Acts 10:34-43

Preaching Peace

The church of my childhood is named Peace Lutheran. During their 50 year anniversary celebration one of the charter members shared some stories of how the congregation came to be. Apparently, they chose the name Peace because of some not-so-peaceful interactions with the only other Lutheran (Missouri Synod) church in town. As they started this new ALC congregation, they wanted to be a community that welcomed people into a setting marked by peace.

I attended that church for over 25 years before moving away, and I know that conflict and discontent happened among the members of Peace Lutheran from time to time. But always, the preaching from the pulpit was the gospel of Jesus Christ, whose message from God was a preaching of peace. The people of Peace work through their struggles and hold firm to the promises of God made known in Jesus. And like those first disciples, this congregation has heard the command to preach to the people—in worship, in teaching and learning, in serving one another and the neighbors beyond their building.

The peace we all know as God's beloved people is received most profoundly in the forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus Christ. This peace is a gift we are given to share with the world.

Pastor Lynne Ogren, Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown

Friday, April 9, 2021

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

"Last of all, as to one untimely born, Jesus appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles ... But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." 1 Corinthians 15: 8-10

Elaine and I have recently become new grandparents with the birth of our first granddaughter, Mara. What a joy! New birth! New life! This sounds like Easter!

Paul goes on to talk about Christ's resurrection and ours in the rest of chapter 15 of Corinthians. So, I was a bit puzzled when I read verse 8 where Paul says, *"Last of all, as to one untimely born..."* I looked it up and was shocked! The Greek word means, "a miscarriage, a deformed fetus, an aborted fetus. Paul says his birth into God's kingdom came out of a miscarriage because he persecuted Christians. He felt unfit and inferior to the other apostles.

And yet, the resurrected Christ came to him and chose him. Paul says, *"By the grace of God I am what I am."* The Message Bible says, *"But because God was so gracious, so very generous, here I am. And I'm not about to let his grace go to waste."*

The resurrected Christ raises Paul and us out of the tomb of shame and regret to live as one swaddled in the grace of God. God holds each of us and declares, *"Child of God, you are beautiful and imperfectly perfect in Christ."*

Prayer: Gracious God, when I feel I don't measure up, grace me again. Amen.

Pastor Brad Ulgenes, St. John's Lutheran Church, Helena

Saturday April 10, 2021

John 12:44-50

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates verses 47 and 48 this way: 'If anyone hears what I am saying and doesn't take it seriously, I don't reject him. I didn't come to reject the world, I came to save the world. But you need to know that whoever puts me off, refusing to take in what I am saying, is willfully choosing rejection.'

Looking for God and seeing Jesus. Listening to Jesus and choosing to reject what He is saying. As Spock might say, 'It would seem illogical.'

It isn't logical, but how often do I choose to not take Jesus seriously?

How often do I step up to the plate and say "Don't worry Jesus, I can do all the judging for you!" Jesus, the Light of the world, saved ALL for all time. Tetelesti, 'it is finished'.

Dear God, through Your Holy Spirit empower me to reject my brothers and sisters less and choose the love of God through Jesus Christ more and more. Amen.

Rick Brown, LPA, Faith Lutheran Church, Hamilton

Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2021

John 20:19-31

Christ is Risen...Christ is Risen, Indeed!

I think the real significance of this passage of scripture from John 20 gets overlooked because people get hung up on Thomas, the one who doubted. While Thomas' desire for empirical proof of the resurrection is noteworthy, it pales in significance to the first verse of this passage. *"On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."*

Jesus stands amid this frightened and grieving cadre of friends and gives them what they need most...peace. At a time when nothing else could fill the hole in the pit of their stomach...not money or fame...Jesus gives peace. When fear caused them to lock the doors...Jesus gave peace. Jesus' gift to them was greater than their fear of death and more than they could have even hoped.

Jesus always knows and gives us what we need. In these times of uncertainty and fear, Jesus extends peace to you. What Jesus offers through his death and resurrection is far greater than anything we face in these challenging times...peace through our salvation.

Make the sign of the cross on your forehead and say, "Peace be with you." Spend the rest of your day in the knowledge that the one who conquers death has given you His peace to share. Amen.

Pastor Jason Asselstine, Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod

Monday, April 12, 2021

1 John 2:3-11

Hatred is a complex thing. In its true form it is such an intense dislike of another person that one wishes for the end of their existence, and then possibly acts upon that wish. As we experience division and polarization, hatred becomes more evident each day. Sometimes it feels like the voices encouraging hatred are louder than all others.

This passage's discussion on hate is rather surprising, and maybe we feel accused by it. But the reality is that the community of the church can be an incredible solution to hate. I believe that the person who hates has deep problems with how they view their own self. They are blinded to the image of God they possess. Perhaps they hate the self and those intense feelings are then projected on to others.

The church community, following the risen and victorious Jesus, lives values that are the antidote to hate: forgiveness, inclusion, empathy, listening, seeing the image of God in everyone. Hate crucified Jesus. God freed him from its death-grip. United to Christ, we follow him into that freedom and light.

May our church communities be so loving and gracious that all our people understand themselves as valued and cherished. Love will be the only possibility. Resurrection light will guide our way!

Pastor Peter Erickson, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Columbia Falls

Tuesday, April 13, 2021

1 John 2:12-17

*¹²I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven on account of his name.*

*¹³I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.*

*I am writing to you, young people,
because you have conquered the evil one.*

*¹⁴I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.*

*I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young people,
because you are strong
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.*

¹⁵Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶for all that is in the world — the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches — comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.

Recently I was going through a stack of papers and I found an old list of instructions for a babysitter. It had the basic information of telephone numbers, the length of time my wife and I planned to be out, but I laughed out loud when I read the next section. Apparently, I had decided to try and anticipate every possible scenario that might occur in the 150 minutes this young person would be caring for my kids. It was ridiculous. There was even a map of the house highlighting where first aid and cleaning supplies were kept. (I'm not a helicopter parent. You're a helicopter parent.)

These days my kids are old enough to watch themselves and my parting words to them are much more like the words written to the community that received this letter. *"Remember who you are. Remember whose you are. Remember you are loved. Remember to love each other. I'm not that far away."* We need reminders that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we are capable, and that we are not alone. We need these words.

Pastor Will Sappington, Peace Lutheran Church, Billings

Wednesday, April 14, 2021

I John 2:26,28

"I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you..."

...And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming."

In the Small Catechism (I like the older translation) Luther asks about baptism: *"What does Baptism mean for daily living?"*

What an interesting thing to consider; that your baptism into Christ has ramifications for each and every day of your life.

You are called to live in Christ always, and this calling is good and right and true.

Do not be deceived. Do not let yourself be defined by anything you have or do or think. It is Christ who makes you God's own child and abiding in him shapes your entire life.

You abide in Christ; God has made this happen by the water and the word. This gift is given, and the life you live now, is a faithful response to this amazing generosity of God.

Pastor Phil Wold, Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, WY

Thursday, April 15, 2021

Acts 3:1-11

Astonishment at the Beautiful Gate

No one seems to know anymore what the Beautiful Gate of the temple was that is referenced in this story. A beautiful happening, however, once transpired there. Feet and ankles that were unsupportive were made strong. A body that for a lifetime had been carried by others suddenly jumped up and walked on its own. Peter and John, who had neither silver nor gold to gift, in the name of Jesus offered so much more. A man who asked for alms received instead the richness of healing. People who were accustomed to walking past the lame man sitting at the Beautiful Gate, suddenly ran together toward him. The narrator tells that the people were utterly astonished by the beautiful happening they had witnessed. Readers of the story may suspect that the lame man was astonished also. In joining his hand to Peter's, the lame man was raised. With or without a Beautiful Gate, life still works this way. Whenever and wherever human hands join together in Jesus' name, people are raised up. Beautiful. Thanks be to God!

Invite our hands and lives, O God, to be instruments of your grace and peace. Amen.

Pastor Tom Schlotterback, VP of Mission Advancement, St. John's United, Billings

Friday, April 16, 2021

A reading from Acts 3:12-19

That is quite a charge! As the people have gathered to marvel at the healing of the man who was lame from birth, Peter, no doubt with finger pointing at them, declares, “You killed the Author of Life!” Killed the Author of Life? How do you even do that?

The truth is that they really couldn’t. They couldn’t kill the Author of Life. Yes, they rejected the Holy and Righteous One. Yes, they consented to having Jesus hung on a cross to die. Yes, his lifeless body was laid in a tomb. But the Author of Life wouldn’t stay dead. God raised Jesus from the dead.

For the Israelites, and for us, there yet remains hope. The Author of Life did not stay dead, and we need not either. God can raise us. God can wipe out our sins. God can even forgive us of killing the Author of Life, because the Author of Life still lives and it is through his life, his death, and his resurrection that we can live also.

O Jesus, Author of Life, breathe your breath of forgiveness into us that we may live. Amen

Pastor Scott Hedegaard, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Great Falls

Saturday, April 17, 2021

1 John 1:1-7

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

“Lavished” with love.

The definition of the verb lavish is: “To bestow something in generous or extravagant quantities on; spend, expend, heap, shower, pour, deluge, give generously, give unstintingly, bestow freely.”

I love the picture I have in my mind of being lavished with God’s love. I think of our dog Cincinnati—she lavishes us with her love. She is always there for us, and she seems to even know when we are feeling low, or when, at times, we are feeling unloved, or unworthy. Often, at these times, she will snuggle a little closer to us lavishing us with her love.

Emmy Kegler, in her book, [One Coin Found: How God’s Love Stretches to the Margins](#), writes, “Love does not leave me. Love is new every morning, like a faithful dog laid across the bottom of my bed, ready again for a fresh day and a clean start.”

As God’s children, because “that is what we are,” God lavishes us with God’s great love that is new every morning and will never ever leave us.

Pastor Paul Anderson, Faith Lutheran Church, Hamilton

Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2021

Luke 24: 36b-48

This text reminds me of the “3-S’s” of raising a girl who is currently a “*threenager*.” When meltdowns start, we try Snuggles, Snacks, and/or Sleep. Recently, I read the wrong book. The one she had handed me to read. I wouldn’t read another, as it was bedtime. While sobbing and saying, “You a bad mom. You bad mom.” She also dramatically hiccupped out, “I. Need. A. Snuggle!” I snuggled her. Then put her into bed for the *s*leep she so desperately needed. Upon reflection, those 3-S’s still work on all of us.

Jesus showed up to a scared group of disciples. They were confused, nervous, and probably pretty close to melting down. Jesus met them in the most basic of places. He was present. Jesus invited touch. He offered peace and modeled having a good healthy snack. This is a moment steeped in the Theology of the Cross. Jesus met them right where they were. It is after those “3-S’s” were sorted that he gave them perspective and theological hope. Jesus understands our humanity. Take it from him, sort the 3-S’s before there is a meltdown or despair. Then look more deeply at what being a witness means. ***Amen.***

Pastor Elisabeth Daniels, Chaplain, St. John’s United, Billings

Monday, April 19, 2021

I John 3:16

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Another John 3:16 with a rich Gospel message for us. I John 3 here.

A professor at Luther Seminary, Dr. Gerhard Forde, liked to warn about words like stewardship and discipleship. He’d say: “Beware of ship words.” These “ship words” can cause us to pay too much attention to ourselves, and not enough attention to God.

This is a constant temptation; the temptation to take our eyes off Jesus.

Yet, at the same time, these “ship words” might do the opposite. They might help us to know that our lives are lived as a response of love for the one who first loved us.

This is how we know love, Jesus, giving himself for us.

Christian discipleship is living the love of God in response to God’s great generosity. This is our calling, to bear a generosity toward all whom God places in our lives to love.

Pastor Phil Wold, Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, WY

Tuesday, April 20, 2021

Psalm 150

While generally not one to wish time away, I'll admit to being thankful we're not back at the start of the Covid pandemic. It's been a really tough year, one that most of us would rather forget. And yet, as I look back on the last 12 months, there were glimpses of grace, reasons even to praise and give thanks to God.

The Psalms are considered scripture's prayer book and song book, and while one can find the whole range of human emotion and experience there, the last five psalms all focus on giving praise and thanks to God. "Hallelujah!" begins and ends each one, and Psalm 150 in particular instructs "everything that has breath" to praise God.

This isn't to say we pretend all is well, all the time. Far from it, in fact. But this last Psalm is invitation to consider all God has blessed us with—relationship, creation, the very gift of life itself. In the last year I found myself going to this Psalm more than once, using it to remind me that there is much to thank God for even in the midst of difficulty and pain. Let every living, breathing creature praise God, indeed.

Hallelujah!

Pastor Mark Donald, Director, Christikon Lutheran Bible Camp, McLeod MT (Billings)

Wednesday, April 21, 2021

Mark 16:9-20

The Longer Ending of Mark

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

Perhaps it's not surprising that the eleven disciples didn't believe the women. Women weren't supposed to speak up in a group of men. Women's accounts are still often discounted, but in this case, even the men who had seen Jesus alive could not convince the others.

We may judge them as stubborn, foolish, for disregarding the news. But could we have believed it? The ramifications of Jesus' resurrection still seem too fantastic to be true.

Maybe your heart gets stuck in dead Saturday from time to time, like mine, doubting the possibility of unfailing love. On darkest days I wonder whether it's true for me. It seems so far away from the part of myself that acknowledges what I'm really like. Can I believe the Easter message?

Luther said the Holy Spirit builds faith in us. Thank God! Come, Holy Spirit!

The final verse tacked onto Mark's gospel says, "they went out...while the Lord worked with them..." The Lord works with and in us, too. We are works in progress. Thanks be to God!

Abide in me, Lord. Saturate me with your Spirit, that I truly know your love for me. Then it will show. It will. Amen.

Meryl Rygg McKenna, LPA, Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown

Thursday, April 22, 2021

Acts 3:12-19

¹² When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶ By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see. ¹⁷ “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,

In our global pandemic world, many things we counted on as consistent and constant are turned upside down: the ways we do school, worship with Holy Communion or Baptism, shopping, visiting, sporting events, celebrations, funerals and so many more. Moving forward, we were forced to be creative and try new things. Some worked well, some not so much. We will keep going. Distancing and restrictions have caused us to feel disconnected over the past year. But one thing that always connects us is God. One thing that remains consistent and constant through the best and worst of our days is God’s love, God’s grace and God’s faithfulness. To those who witnessed the healing, Peter connects the God of their ancestors to Jesus. That same God is at work through his followers, Peter and John, healing and restoring God’s people even though the people’s actions could have resulted in God’s distance. But God raised Jesus as foretold by prophets. God’s love and God’s faithfulness remained. That same God connects with us and is at work today, calling us, refreshing us, and then working through us to bring healing, restoration and reconnection.

Pastor Julie Long, Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Broadus

Friday, April 23, 2021

Psalm 23

I don’t know much about raising sheep, but I’ve noticed a cycle in the spring and summer: rest... shadow... feast. Rest – in lower home pastures where ewes and new lambs recover and gain strength. Shadow – as they follow the shepherd on the journey to higher summer pastures. Feast – eating the rich new grass of mountain meadows and drinking from springs overflowing with clear, cool water.

Our life together in the church follows that same cycle: rest... shadow... feast. We rest for a time in comfortable spaces and traditions that give us strength and confidence. We listen and feel the wind of the Holy Spirit prodding us as we follow Jesus on new adventures along difficult, uncertain paths. We reach a new “pasture” of ministry and mission where Jesus comes to us anew in the overflowing waters of baptism and the rich food of bread and wine. Then the cycle repeats.

Gracious Lord Jesus, you relentlessly pursue us with goodness and mercy. Continue to bless us with rest, shadow, and feast. Strengthen and equip us to build up the body of Christ for the work of ministry in your name! Amen.

Pastor Tammy Bull, New Hope Lutheran Church, Great Falls

Saturday, April 24, 2021

1 John 3:16, 23

“¹⁶This is how we come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves.”

“Did you take a chance and lose it all
Do you fear there’s no collateral left for trying
Friend I know your heart is raw
But love is still a worthy cause

Picking up and pressing on
Oh love is still a worthy cause
It’s the touch that starts the thaw
Love is still a worthy cause”

When I read this verse in 1 John, I was reminded of Sara Groves’ song, *“Love is Still A Worthy Cause”*. There are so many times we try to love someone, and it just doesn’t work the way we want it to. She goes on in the song:

“I love because He loved me when I had nothing,
I had nothing
When you count the cost and all seems lost
Love is still a worthy cause
When you’re pressing on, though your strength is gone
Love is still a worthy cause”

To believe in Jesus Christ as God’s Son, means to give God the control and to give our hearts, our time, our efforts, our failures, our successes, our love.

“²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

Marilyn Hall, Montana Synod Coaching Coordinator, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Missoula

Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2021

John 10:11-18

During high school I took Market Lamb as a 4-H project, and one thing I learned is that being compared to sheep is not a complement. In my experience, sheep are both stubborn and stupid. Young lambs may be cute and cuddly but let me tell you they soon become a lot more work and a lot more trouble than they are worth. Now I was willing at least for a limited time to take care of these creatures, but I can’t imagine even having the smallest desire to lay down my life for them. I guess I’m just not “good shepherd” material. In fact, I’m barely hired hand material.

What makes this scripture so full of grace is the realization that like a market lamb, I am also both stubborn and stupid, and yet what I cannot imagine, the Good Shepherd has done. God has taken more trouble than I’m worth, but in so doing has increased my worth. And God in Christ as done the same for us all. So, whatever you feel you might be worth, to Christ, you are worth laying down his life for.

Pastor Tim Trippel, Grace Lutheran Church, Worland, WY and Peace Lutheran Church, Greybull, WY

Monday, April 26, 2021

St. Mark, Evangelist Mark 1:1-15 *“Walking Wet in the Kingdom”*

Today we remember the Evangelist, St. Mark who, tradition believes is John, the writer of the Gospel of Mark. Scholars agree Mark is the oldest of the Gospels found in the New Testament. It is also the shortest of the Gospels. No birth narrative and, some would say, no resurrection witness either! Perhaps the writers of Matthew and Luke were also concerned with this bare bone approach and decided to fill out more details of the story of Jesus, his history, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection.

Mark begins with John the Baptist, who proclaims a need to be baptized. Jesus appears for the first time when he is baptized, recorded in just three verses! The Spirit then compels him into the wilderness of temptation and by verse 14 he is already calling his first disciples.

Jesus' ministry begins with baptism and so does ours. Whether you are baptized as an infant, adolescent, or adult, baptism is, as Martin Luther says, our entrance into the Kingdom. It is our ordination into the continuing ministry of Jesus to proclaim the Kingdom of God is near!

I remember a song from my high school days “Walking Wet” which was a call for us to always walk in our baptismal waters, claiming them daily. Walking wet means, we are to remember our baptism, how God in the waters of baptism announces, “You are Mine.” So, the next time you begin your day with a shower or a bath or just drink the first glass of water, remember you are called to walk wet in your baptismal water. You too are an evangelist, one called to proclaim that God loves everyone and invites you into the abundant life. Walk wet into the Kingdom of God!

Pastor Stephen Schmidt, Hope Lutheran Church, Bozeman

Tuesday, April 27, 2021

Psalm 95

These first verses of Psalm 95 greet me

O come, let us sing to the Lord!

though I come with bleary eyes and sleepy mind
and croaky voice since I'm just 15 minutes out of bed.

Let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation!

The morning is cool, and damp;
the sun still not above the mountains that surround.
I shiver, wishing I'd put on one more layer.

*Let us come before God's presence with thanksgiving
and raise a loud shout to the Lord with psalms!*

There are just a few of us gathered,
and we find our places on the stumps that form a semi-circle,
a band of old, strong pines at our back.

*For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.*

We sing the ancient words,
joining with centuries of the faithful
who have greeted the morning this same way.
We do this cradled in the very heart of God's creation.

*In his hand are the caverns of the earth;
the heights of the hills are also his.*

This is the way that life at Christikon begins each morning,
with the option of getting up early and joining in the ancient words of Matins.

In this way we join in the wave of prayer that encircles the earth each day.

Seven offices of daily prayer offered by communities of faith globally.

In convents, in monasteries, in seminaries, in congregations,
at camp, on an early morning, voiced by the croaky faithful.

The holy words are raised day in and day out, over and over again,
shaping the people into what God would have them be.

Pastor Trina Johnsten, Interim, Bethel Lutheran Church, Great Falls

Wednesday, April 28, 2021

Isaiah 30:18-21

¹⁸But God's not finished. He's waiting around to be gracious to you. He's gathering strength to show mercy to you. God takes the time to do everything right - everything. Those who wait around for him are the lucky ones. ¹⁹Oh yes, people of Zion, citizens of Jerusalem, your time of tears is over. Cry for help and you'll find it's grace and more grace. The moment he hears, he'll answer. ²⁰Just as the Master kept you alive during the hard times, he'll keep your teacher alive and present among you. Your teacher will be right there, local and on the job, ²¹urging you on whenever you wander left or right: "This is the right road. Walk down this road." (The Message)

Eugene Peterson's translations sometimes open the scripture so that I hear something with new ears. Here this good news: God is not finished! God is waiting around to be gracious to you! I know that when I hear that proclaimed – that God is at work, that God is up to something, that the Holy Spirit is active and present, then I see and hear and notice with a renewed hope. One of the things that I love (and have missed this last year) is the chance to drive across our beautiful territory of the Montana Synod. I am always on the lookout. What can I see: eagles, moose, bear, elk, snow geese? These words remind me to have the same eagerness and watchful spirit to notice God-sightings, too!

What have you noticed recently that reminds you that God is close by? Where have you seen God's gentle and loving spirit at work in your life or in your community? God is waiting!

Amen.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger, Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod

Thursday, April 29, 2021

Acts 8:26-39

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.)

This past year we have all been on our own wilderness road. We are navigating a whole new world where we are all in more isolation than ever before. We are unable to gather with our family and friends in person as we would like to gather. We long for the company of fellow human beings.

We are told in this passage the road the eunuch was on was a wilderness road and he was in need of some guidance. Philip was just told to meet him there. He didn't know why he was going, nevertheless, on the Spirit's bidding, he got up and went. He ended up being right where he was needed.

We can learn a couple of lessons from this passage. First, we should listen for the Holy Spirit to send us to someone in need. We shouldn't worry about what we will do, just meet them on their wilderness road with a phone call or a text. Second, if someone ends up in our wilderness road with us, we should invite them to stay a while. Then let the Holy Spirit direct your conversation and see what happens next.

Pastor Tammy Craker, Plentywood Lutheran Church, Plentywood

Friday, April 30, 2021

1 John 4:7-21

“There is no fear in love, perfect love casts out fear...” (1 John 4:18a)

What would you do if you were not afraid? This question haunts me. The risk-management officer in my brain is forever measuring the cost of potentially risky actions. The risk of losing esteem. The risk of making people angry. The risk of rejection. The problem, of course, with measuring these costs is not that they aren't real risks, rather the problem is they are sourced from a human economy. Human love is precious and transformative, yet it can also be capricious and conditional.

The divine economy, in contrast, is based on a currency that is unchanging in value. I can do nothing to risk losing God's agape love, nor can I improve myself to be more worthy of it. It does not cease based on my ability to reciprocate. It is steady and unchanging.

When I ground myself in God's enduring love, my fear recedes. Like the heart flower that opens to receive the sun of God's love in the hymn “Joyful, joyful we adore thee,” may we bask in God's love and let our fears melt away.

Pastor Kendra Wilde, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Helena

Saturday, May 1, 2021

John 14:8-14

While going through some old pictures of my grandfather, I found one of him as a young man. I was stunned at our resemblance. His hair and his strong chin were just like mine. His piercing, soft eyes, just like mine. But what struck me even more was not his appearance, but how much we were alike in other ways. He loved to use his hands and saw the value of hard work, honesty and integrity. Even though I hardly knew him, I could see his influence (and genes) in my life and in the mirror, almost like he was living on through me. I think this is akin to what Jesus was saying to Phillip in our passage from John 14. Jesus is highlighting the ways that he and the Father are one. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (v.9).”

As followers of Christ, we, too, have been created in the image of Christ and are witnesses to God's goodness and love. We have seen and heard about the countless ways that God, through Jesus, changed, and continues to change, the world. Jesus tells Phillip (and us) that we will be able to do amazing things in God's name if we only ask. It is as if God lives on and changes the world through us...we are doing God's work...with our hands.

Amen.

Pastor Jason Asselstine, Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod

Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2021

John 15:1-11

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)

We tend to use the word joy to refer to superficial feelings that come and go depending on how we're doing at the time. The joy that Christ brings runs deeper. It is not on the surface, but it runs deep. It is a bedrock quality of our lives that's built on the steadfast love of Jesus Christ. It's a joy that's spoken of in this reading in the gospel of John that speaks of us as the branches and Jesus as the vine. The joy that's spoken of is not just a temporary emotion, not just what we refer to as happiness. It's a joy that runs deep, that flows from Christ to us no matter what the circumstances of our lives. Just as the nutrients flow continually from the vine to the branches, the joy that Christ gives flows into each one of us. Amidst the joys and sorrows of life, for that ever-flowing joy that Christ brings, we give thanks.

Pastor Tim Tostengard, American Lutheran Church, Billings

Monday, May 3, 2021

Isaiah 5:1-7

My beloved had a vineyard - he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

Every Country Western aficionado knows how sad a love song can be. The love song in Isaiah is heart breaking. A vine was brought out of Egypt. Planted to thrive and produce, to bear sweet fruit for the good of all. Lovingly tended with hopes and dreams of a fruitful harvest, only wild grapes grew.

The vine, the children of Israel, turned from God to self, using their sweetness to fulfill their own dreams and desires. Called, blessed, and gifted for good works, God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard only the cries of victims.

We are equipped by God for good works. Created to seek justice, to love God and one another, instead we turned from God to self. Instead of sweet grapes we produced wild grapes.

This song does not have a Hallmark movie ending. We want to know the guy gets the girl and they live happily ever after. But this song leaves us – nowhere. Maybe we can take this abrupt ending and write a different conclusion. Knowing for what it was created and gifted, can this vineyard produce a fruitful harvest?

Created to reflect the light of God, which is needed to produce sweet fruit. Sent to share the cleansing and nourishing water of life with our neighbors. Fed on the life-giving words of God. This vineyard is to seek justice, to feed the hungry, and to care for those in need.

God has blessed us to be fruitful for the good of the world.

Pastor Tonia Fisher, St. James Lutheran Church, Columbus

Tuesday, May 4, 2021

Psalm 98

After over 50 years of church going and almost 25 years of rostered ministry, I was recently made aware of the fact that Psalm 98 is the basis for the beloved Christmas carol, *Joy to the World*. If I squint, I can see it... but it seems to me that the good Isaac Watts took quite a bit of literary license.

This revelation has compelled me, however, to hear the carol differently. While I always thought it right and proper to sing of the world receiving Jesus as her King with joyful preparation and the acclaim of heav'n and nature, the insight that these themes are of a Psalm rooted in a people recently freed of captivity in Babylon widens my scope of view. Like Handel's *Hallelujah*, often performed at Christmas but actually a song illuminative of the Easter portion of *Messiah*, *Joy to the World* will never again be for me just a Christmas song.

God once reached into the oppression wrought by an imperialistic Babylon to free those covenant-bound to God. The Lord has reached into the oppression of death wrought by sin to free those same - and more. By all means, *make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises, and let the sea roar, let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD*. Joy to the world, for the Lord is risen, he is risen indeed!

Pastor Scott Thompson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Kalispell

Wednesday, May 5, 2021

Acts 10:34-43

It was a short sermon, really. Unless there was a significant redaction, Peter's sermon couldn't have lasted longer than 2 minutes, even including pauses for dramatic effect. This may have been the inspiration for my homiletics professor Sheldon Tostengard who wryly said, "Nobody gets saved after 7 minutes. Keep it brief." (Why can I never remember this when I'm in the pulpit?!)

But we know that it wasn't the length of the sermon, or Peter's loquaciousness, or the relevant illustrations, or a winning three-point formula.

It was the Good News.

In these days, it is difficult to find good news. People are scared. We have lost loved ones. Our politics is fractured, to say the least. The future sometimes looks unbearable. Yet, this is not a new phenomenon. There were those in Peter's audience who were in our same shoes. Despite the absence of good news, in Peter's sermon, they heard Good News. I mean THE Good News!

Peter declared that God is not only with us, but, through Jesus, God walks alongside us and will carry us through. This, too, shall end — things will get better. But things will also be getting worse. The end will come, though, and the one waiting for us at the other side is the one who has been walking alongside of us the whole time.

Pastor Darren Paulson, Atonement Lutheran Church, Billings

Thursday, May 6, 2021

Isaiah 65:17

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

Christ is risen. God is creating a new world, a new way. But many would rather go back to the old way. We want to go back to Egypt. Enslaved - but well fed. God tells us we are not to remember the old way, not to bring it to mind, but to look forward.

We long for how it used to be. With bare faces we hugged, we crowded around the table, we sang. Then 2020 hit, a rogue virus, chaos, and mandates. Things changed, we were not ready for this chaos. Something was happening to our perfect world, our perfect church. But was it really perfect? Weren't we wondering why people didn't attend like they used to? Would God be able to create anything new out of this unimaginable mess? It's amazing to watch as people use their God given gifts to master technology, to stretch themselves, and to find new ways to minister in a new world. We are reaching people who were unchurched. People who had left our congregations years ago are tuning in to worship with us. We've been pushed to hone our gifts, to write letters, to record said missives, Bible Studies, children's sermons. We now reach more people than we can seat in our pews. God has created, is creating, and will continue to create a new world, a new way. God gifted us to be His instruments in this new creation. We step up into new situations, seeking wisdom on how we can be used to proclaim - Christ is risen.

Pastor Tonia Fisher, St. James Lutheran Church, Columbus

Friday, May 7, 2021

My father loves football and baseball and fishing and is tone deaf. So naturally he was blessed with a daughter who has zero athletic ability but is musical. Despite my father's lack of interest in music and high school band in particular, I remember him being at every concert and recital—and there were lots of them—throughout my childhood.

My dad didn't love band or orchestra, but he did love me. So he invested his time in being there for me, building relationship, and at least attempting to love what I love.

The truth is, we don't always love following God's commandments. Loving one another, in particular, can be a challenge for us. And yet this reading from 1 John tells us that that love of God is to obey God's commandments...and that God's commandments are NOT burdensome!

If my father had sat at my band concerts with his arms crossed, slouched down and acting grumpy, if he had rolled his eyes and told me he didn't want to be there, I would not have experienced his love and presence in the same way. Instead of acting as though my concerts were a begrudging duty, my father saw them as an opportunity to show how much he loved and valued me, and tried to love them because I loved them. In the same way, we are called to view God's commandments not as a burden, not as something we HAVE to do out of fear or obligation, but a way that we can show God how very much we love God. And by following God's law, even when it's hard, we show our neighbors how much we love God as well. What a wonderful witness to our relationship with our Risen Savior and testimony to what God has done for us!

Pastor Kimberly Peterson, Trinity Lutheran Church, Choteau

Saturday, May 8, 2021

Acts 10:42-48

The Ephesians 4 “Equipping the Saints” reading has been a message that I try to pattern my ministry after. It was exactly two years ago today that I had a highlight in my ministry. I was gone for my Brother’s funeral, but before I left, we arranged for Don, one of our Lay Pastoral Associates (LPAs) to baptize one of our confirmation students before the Affirmation of Baptism Service on the upcoming Sunday. Because of our situation with LPAs and a three-point parish, we had previously received permission for Don to do the baptism. On the same day of the baptism Don did a funeral for a non-member at our church. We had conversations over the phone and I emailed some resources but Don and the staff stepped in and did ministry in a really big way. The details, faith growth and ministry that day were remarkable. Don and everyone involved got to experience how ministry and the Word of God takes us from Death to life. They experienced death and life twice that day. From physical death to life through the proclamation of the resurrection and of one being put to death and raised to new life through the waters of baptism.

Pastor Scott Kiehn, United Trinity Parish of American Lutheran Church, Baker, Peace Lutheran Church, Plevna and St. Elizabeth Lutheran Church, Ekalaka

Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021

John 15:9-17

This text is part of Jesus’ farewell greeting to his disciples, gathered in the upper room. It’s time to sum up the past 3 years of public ministry, time to share advice and words of wisdom. The main word is “love”. This is not mushy soap-opera love that is here today and gone tomorrow. This is agape love: deep, abiding, self-sacrificing love. Jesus is our source of agape love: “love for someone or something based on sincere appreciation and high regard; to love and to regard with affection and loving concern.” It doesn’t say we have to like everyone. We can still wish someone well; support them in loving and caring ways, work for justice on their behalf, without particularly liking them. That’s agape love. This love is for all people, for all time. We are called to live that love. Understanding love is easy. Living love is the hard part. Thankfully, we have the ultimate example to follow and we don’t do it alone. We have each other. We are in this together. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we can do even greater things in the name of Christ so that our joy may be complete.

Pastor Julie Long, Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Broadus MT

Monday, May 10, 2021

1 Timothy 6:11-16

“¹² Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made^[a] the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

The Good Fight of Faith

When I was a child my siblings and I fought all the time. My poor mom was constantly telling us not to fight. I was a sickly child, but I was a scrapper. I always defended myself and I stood up for what I felt was right. I also defended my siblings because of the love I have for them. Paul tells us in our text today to fight the good fight of faith. We as Christians are called to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. God gives us these abilities to be able to fight the good fight of our faith in our baptism. We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit which equips us as a body of Christ to love our neighbors, and to do what is right. It is the King of kings, the Lord of lords who gives us the ability alone. As you journey through a hard day or hard season, remember to fight the good fight. Be the scrapper and lean on Christ to find your strength. God has placed us exactly where we are to fight the good fight of the faith.

Amen.

Wendy McAlpine, TEEM Ministry Candidate, Lutheran Church of Sunburst, Sunburst

Tuesday, May 11, 2021

93 *GOD is King, robed and ruling, GOD is robed and surging with strength.*

And yes, the world is firm, immovable, Your throne ever firm—you're Eternal!

*Sea storms are up, GOD, Sea storms wild and roaring,
Sea storms with thunderous breakers. Stronger than wild sea storms,
Mightier than sea-storm breakers, Mighty GOD rules from High Heaven.*

*What you say goes—it always has. “Beauty” and “Holy” mark your palace rule,
GOD, to the very end of time. From The Message*

Our God reigns in beauty and Holiness. Yesterday, today and always.

Yes, the storms in our world and in our own personal lives seem to be more savage than ever before. They threaten to knock us out and scour the ground where we have pitched our tents. As a parent of grown children, I can't help but wonder how in the world they and their children will stand up to the blasting winds and waves of nasty politics, a struggling economy, the attacks on familiar institutions: our schools, our police, our communities and yes, our churches. What will they face in the coming years? We don't have the answer to what's around the corner any more than our parents did when we were born. We can't bury our heads in the sand though as trouble happens all around us, but instead we need to be in the habit of looking to God who controls everything and strive to live according to His plan. Our hope, our faith must be rooted in the knowledge that God stands firm, immovable against any of these tides of time. Knowing that God rules with Holiness and in beauty gives us peace of mind to follow Him, not the world. Because in the end – our end – or this world's end, God is in charge to the very end of time.

Pastor Judy Lamb, Hope Lutheran Church, Anaconda

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

Acts 1:11

Can you imagine it? You are among the disciples. You have seen Jesus do some marvelous things – heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, calm the seas, and walk on water. You have even witnessed him rise from the dead. But now this? As you watch Jesus lifted up on a cloud into the heavens, you would have to be amazed. Then two men in white show up and ask you, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” “What?” you say, pointing to the sky, “didn’t you see that?”

Of course, the men in white offer a promise. Just as Jesus left, so he shall return. In the meantime, you will have work to do. Your task is not to gaze into heaven; it is to bear witness to the transforming power of Jesus. Soon the gift of the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon them.

Their task is ours for we are among them. As the old saying goes, “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good.” We are sent to the ends of the earth to proclaim God’s good news in the living Christ.

Here I am, Lord; send me. Amen.

Pastor Scott Hedegaard, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Great Falls

Ascension Thursday, May 13, 2021

Luke 24:44-53

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” Luke 24:45-48

Because Ascension Day is always on a Thursday, congregations often do not mark the event of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. In a congregation I served, there was a large painting in the fellowship hall at the end of the room, of Jesus ascending into heaven. I always wondered why that depiction and why it was placed there. As I reflect on that picture and where it was placed, I am thinking that some in the congregation had it right. It is good to know that Jesus’ ascended (we recite the Creed regularly to remember, after all.) But the point of the ascension of Jesus is that as he left, the Holy Spirit came. The Ascension is part of the story, but it is not the point of the story!

In the Luke/Acts two-part book, Jesus’ ascension here at the end of Luke flows into Chapter 1 of Acts. The disciples and all the others who engaged with Jesus at the end of Luke and who witnessed the ascension also waited in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus’ ascension was an ending, but a new beginning was on the horizon. And as Jesus was about to leave, he reminded them, “You are witnesses of these things” (of his life, death and resurrection.)

What do you witness to? How does a living Savior empower you to witness?

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger, Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod

Friday, May 14, 2021

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

¹⁵*In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, ¹⁶'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.'*

Judas ranks among the most loathed in history... Jack the Ripper, Pol Pot, Vlad the Impaler, they're all up there with Judas. But the likes of Sauron, Lord Voldemort, and Cruella de Vil also make that list. Oh, how we love our villains.

It's interesting though, that while the newly minted apostles seek to procure a replacement for Judas, they refrain from over vilifying him. "He was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." Peter declares, as if to commend the work Judas had done. "Judas turned aside..." not, *Judas was an [expletive] backstabber.*

The early followers of Jesus seek to find a replacement for Judas not because they believe their former co-worker should be written off and forgotten, but because they trust in the will of God that has been working through all of them; in the one "who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus;" in that very one they followed to the cross and beyond. Peter himself knows all too well the perils of that journey.

"It was necessary that the scripture be fulfilled..." Peter says regarding the effort to select a replacement apostle. Because this is the scripture that gave us Jesus... the scripture that brings hope to all sinners... the scripture that reaches into the depths of hell to save even the most loathsome villain. **Thanks be to God.**

Pastor Scott Thompson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Kalispell

Saturday, May 15, 2021

1 John 5:9-13

⁹ *If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰ Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God[a] have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. Epilogue ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

The old adage is that 'words are cheap', when comparing merely saying we are going to do something, as opposed to actually doing it. But in reality, words are important. They direct, educate, comfort, entertain, and can hurt. How the words are delivered is also important. Do they come to us, directly from another person; are they guised in some type of social media; or do they have legal standing as from a court of law?

In the reading from 1 John 5, John uses the word testimony, as in a solemn statement made under oath; so we are talking about important words. John says there are levels of testimony; that of humans and that of God, of which God's is greater. God has testified through His Son, and this testimony of eternal life is transcribed on our very hearts. And whoever has this testimony of God's Son, has life. Period.

A few weeks ago, we commemorated, celebrated the event which gave final testimony for all of God's covenants. God in the form of Jesus, the man, the prophet, the teacher, conquered death for all humankind, gave us a transcript for life, and bade us to follow him. As I follow Jesus the Christ forth from the cross, I do feel more alive, more able to deal with the challenges of life. I have come to believe that God the Trinity is with me, and you, each step of the way. So, as we go forth from our Easter joy, we can move with confidence that nothing can separate us from God's love; that love shown through in the gift of his Son, truly is life, here and now. **Believe it! It is written on your heart.**

Dick Deschamps, LPA, Synod Council Vice President, Hope Lutheran Church, Bozeman

Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 16, 2021

John 17:6-19

Have you ever overheard someone's prayer for you? Or perhaps someone has said, in response to your need, "I'll pray for you," and then done so, right there on the spot? How did it feel? Awkward, comforting, encouraging?

In these 14 verses, the disciples overhear Jesus praying for them (and in verse 20, not just for them, but for "those who will believe in me through their word." That would include you and me!). Jesus prays for their – for your - protection, joy, and sanctification in the truth. Jesus also tells God that just as Jesus was sent into the world, he has sent the disciples into the world. It's a bit like Matthew's Great Commission. Where is Jesus sending you this week?

O Christ, as you send us into the world you love, empower us by your Spirit, to share your word, your joy and your peace with all in need. Amen.

Pastor Lindean Barnett Christenson, Christ the King Lutheran Church, Bozeman

Monday, May 17, 2021

Philippians 1:3-11

Paul begins his letter to the Philippians simply with, "I thank my God every time I remember you." The first few verses demonstrate a bond between Paul and the congregation built on mutual affection, love, and support. The gratitude he expresses is more than just a feeling but is a practice. Gratitude is distinguishing the amazing things that we have, we are, or we experience. It is looking and seeing the many ways the joys and challenges in life bless us.

What could it look like to practice gratitude in your life? In daily prayers, lift up the people you work with, play with, and live with by asking God to strengthen them in the good and challenges of their lives. Or begin a letter or conversation to a close friend with words that you give thanks to God for their friendship and support every time you think of them. Maybe the church council begins with a prayer and then sending a card to someone, letting them know they are a beloved child of God.

After beginning the practice, you may find new joys and blessings in life. Together our relationships may deepen in Christian love as Jesus commanded us to do.

Pastor Carol Seilhymer, First Lutheran Church, Plains and Our Saviors Lutheran Church, Thompson Falls

Tuesday, May 18, 2021

Psalm 104:24-34

Oh Lord,

I praise you for your worms, tilling the soil.

I praise you for the slow turning from green to gold of the wheat.

I praise you for the rain, when it comes, and the farmer who yearns for it.

I praise you for the trout flashing in Montana waters,

The eagle watching from above.

The wind that lifts the eagle's wings.

I even praise you for Leviathan; those monsters of the sea who scare and fill us with awe.

These behemoths who bow to you, Lord, for you made them.

I praise you for the humans.

Bewildering and stubborn and generous and searching and lost.

I praise you for the humans and all that they love more these days:

Family and friends and hugging and deep breaths of air.

I praise you for peace among neighbors.

I praise you Creator of all things,

Lover of the giant squid and the worm, the redwood and the crocus.

Healer of humanity.

Hearer of our prayers.

Amen.

Jenny Kunka, Executive Director, NRIT, Montana Synod

Wednesday, May 19, 2021

Ezekiel 37:1-14

In the valley of dry bones, can there be life again?

The prophetic vision begins with a scene of trauma and calamity: bones. The prophet's beginning is not much different. His wife died the day the Babylonian siege began. He was there when Jerusalem fell, and he was among those removed from Judah to live in Babylon.

In the desolation and grief of exile, he is called to be a prophet. Can these bones live, Ezekiel, in the wake of such things? Besides not being God, could anyone blame him for not knowing, or not answering?

There, in the valley where dreams and expectations lay dashed, God didn't raise the dead. God sent the Word to Ezekiel to proclaim 'to the bones' and 'to the breath' the very word of life.

We hear God's breath will open the graves of those who are dried up, lost, and cut off. The spirit of God is put back into bodies – and the community – for the sake of life. Bodies are only animated by the life of God who will act.

What will happen next with the multitude? We may wonder why Ezekiel isn't more afraid in that moment. Perhaps it is this very vision, and experience, that leads him into expectation and hope.

Pastor Daniel Disch, Atonement Lutheran Church, Missoula

Thursday, May 20, 2021

Exodus 19:1-9

Wilderness packs a truckload of meanings. Some negative: fear, abandonment, confusion, scarcity, danger. Others positive: beauty, discovery, interdependence, illumination, endurance. For God's people of the Exodus and for the generations beyond, there were multiple meanings of wilderness, but perhaps the most enduring truth was that it was a place where God abided with them. Regardless their obedience or rebellion – if their words were praise or complaint – when they strayed or followed – not dependent upon their thankfulness or ingratitude – God remained faithful. God was *hesed* (steadfast love). God was grace.

My introduction to wilderness began as a young camper and later as a staff member at Christikon Bible Camp. The director, Bob Quam, had committed to embody such a grace – imperfectly at times, but steadfastly determined to make the camp a place where all guests experienced the welcoming love borne from an unwavering God of grace.

An indispensable part of the ministry of camp was the staff – and great care was taken in shaping us into ministers. It was from Bob that we talked and wrestled and plumbed the depths of God's Word. With humility, we discovered in real-time the Law/Gospel dichotomy. Our nature of *simul justus et peccator* – especially as impetuous young adults – was exposed. We realized the riches of our theological tradition was not simply an academic exercise, but a way of life. Because all of it was anchored in the rhythms and patterns of worship and prayer, play and study, egregious mistakes and unexpected triumphs, fellowship and community, confession and forgiveness, Word and Sacrament. Grace.

But the power of the camp ministry was that we (the staff) – the recipients of such *hesed* and grace – became ministers to the campers who joined us. We received grace that we might multiply grace. As much as Bob will be remembered by the staff (and truth be told, most everyone who ventured up that road), the staff will be remembered by the campers. God's promise to those ancient wanderers in the wilderness continues to take hold today –

“Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”
Exodus 19:5-6

Pastor Darren Paulson, Atonement Lutheran Church, Billings

Friday, May 21, 2021

Romans 8:14-17, 22-27

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who groan inwardly while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:22-23).

In this passage, the apostle Paul offers a corrective to our human tendency to put ourselves at the center of the universe. We generally speak of salvation in human terms: *Have you been saved?* is likely a question you've been asked or about which you've heard. A more biblical question would be, *Has the world been saved?* In this passage, Paul speaks not only of us human beings *groaning, awaiting redemption* but the whole creation doing the same thing. That redemption is promised not only to us but to the whole creation. As John 3:16 reminds us, *For God so loved the world.* That's a promise not only for us human beings, but for the whole world God made, in all its wonder and diversity.

Pastor Tim Tostengard, American Lutheran Church, Billings

Saturday, May 22, 2021

Vigil of Pentecost Acts 2:1

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."

This verse struck me as something we all hope will be true soon. For all of us to be together in one place...in our congregations... in person...worshipping together. How wonderful it will be when that will happen.

Here the people are together, but there is still a barrier. The barrier of language. But when the Holy Spirit came upon them like the wind, the people were able to understand what the other was saying.

To be able to understand is to take away fear. How wonderful it would be to understand the languages of our brothers and sisters in Christ. I pray that we will take more opportunities to worship together no matter what our denomination is, no matter what language we speak. I pray that we can take all the barriers away, that we put in our way, and just be brothers and sisters in Christ, worshipping together, giving praise and thanks to our God... being God's beloved children together.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, be with us as we celebrate the coming of your Spirit among us. Amen.

Pastor Bonnie Novak, First Lutheran Church, Wolf Point and Bethel Lutheran Church, Grain

Day of Pentecost, Sunday, May 23, 2021

The Day of Pentecost

"When the day of Pentecost had come...all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (Acts 2)

What if the people in the room that day had said no? What if they had resisted the Spirit's power, pushing back with a "no, thank you. I'm too busy. I disagree with your mission. I have free will. I'm worried, anxious and scared."

They didn't resist, of course. ALL of them were filled with the Spirit and followed the Spirit's lead, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in other languages. Thank God they ALL followed, for ALL were needed to participate in the birth of Christ's Church.

In Pentecost, we see, hear and feel the fullness of the Holy Spirit's power equipping us ALL for the ministry into which Jesus Christ has called us. We may try to say no or resist the Spirit's call to ministry, but as many know firsthand, resistance is futile. And too often it leads to weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It is so much easier when we open our full selves to what the Spirit is doing in us. For it is the Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, equips and sanctifies us to be the followers of Christ. In Jesus' Resurrection, we ALL are raised to new life (despite still being trapped in the old). And in the Spirit's Pentecost, experienced in our baptisms, we ALL are empowered and equipped to proclaim and live the good news of God's love for us in Christ!

Pastor Laurie Jungling, Bishop, Montana Synod