

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS:

The Christmas and Epiphany Season

Devotions for the Seasons of Christmas and Epiphany
written by rostered and lay leaders in the Montana Synod

~2021~



Introduction:

Last year for the Advent and Christmas seasons and again during the Easter season, rostered leaders in the Montana Synod provided daily devotional reflections for all of us.

I have asked leaders again to provide daily devotional reflections for those of us in the Synod for the Christmas and the Epiphany seasons.

Thank you to all who have shared their thoughts and ponderings. As we as a Synod, move through the dark days of winter, may these words and reflections be a source of light. During the season of Christmas, we often reflect on the light of Christ, the light who enters our darkness. The season of Epiphany is also a time when we reflect on the light of Christ revealed to the world. In the darkness of the winter, here in the Northern Hemisphere, the darkness begins to give way, slowly to more daylight. The light does shine in the darkness! Look for the light! As we move from The Nativity of our Lord on December 25th to Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, with these reflections, I hope that you are encouraged, comforted, and uplifted by the voices of leaders here in the Montana Synod. May the light of our Lord Jesus Christ be revealed to us all through these devotions!

I would like to especially thank the Stewardship Task Force and the staff of the Synod for their participation and efforts. And again, thank you to those who have generously shared their thoughts in these reflections!

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger,

Director for Evangelical Mission,

Montana Synod

The Nativity of Our Lord, Saturday, December 25, 2021

John 1:1-10

Intersections are places where two or more roads meet. They are places we encounter others. It used to be you would find an intersection on every street corner, but have you noticed how our world is changing?

The street corners are going the way of the Dodo bird. Intersections seem to be a thing of the past. Now we have roundabouts. Rather than a place for stopping and encountering others, roundabouts are places you merge through. It is almost as if the two roads no longer meet, but simply run by one another.

Life can feel like a roundabout. Rather than encountering others, we simply run by them. We pass like ships in the night. Thankfully, the season of Christmas reminds us that God intersects our life. God encounters us. God does not simply pass by.

John's Gospel puts it so beautifully – that light shines into the darkness. It does not go around it. It does not merge next to it. The light goes into the darkness.

The light of Christ intersects the darkness as it shines in our world. The season of Christmas is an intersection. An intersection of God wanting nothing less than a relationship with you.

Pastor Ken Carrothers

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Billings, Montana

First Sunday of Christmas, December 26, 2021

Luke 2:41-52

Oh No! We lost the Son of God!

The only story about Jesus growing up as a boy is Luke's story about Joseph and Mary, who blow it, and leave Jesus behind in the big city of Jerusalem. So, what was in the mind of Jesus' parents when they discovered they'd left Jesus behind? What did they say to God? "You're never going to believe this God, but we lost your son!"

I am notorious for losing my wallet but when you lose the son of God, the ante is upped a bit. But isn't the boy Jesus partly to blame? How wise is it for him not to tell his parents where he was? It shows that Jesus was truly human, a typical teenager, even kind of an airhead.

When Mary and Joseph found Jesus, he was "home" in the temple, I can see Mary hugging Jesus, scolding him, and saying, "You scared us to death!"

Jesus answers, "Why were you worried, I must be here in my Father's house."

So, parents, if Mary and Joseph made parenting errors, you will too. And Jesus learned his lesson; for Luke tells us, "Jesus was obedient to them ... And it says, "His mother treasured all these things in her heart," which I translate, "Mary got a few gray hairs wondering what was next with this boy of hers."

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you that in the humanity of the holy family, we see both wonder and goof ups, and we too live under the grace of God until we are home with you.

Pastor Brad Ulgenes

St. John's Lutheran Church, Helena, Montana

Monday, December 27, 2021

Isaiah 52:7-10

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” Isaiah 52:7

This Christmas season the world needs some peace and good news. Not the type of peace or news the world offers which seem to be fleeting at best, but the deep running peace that grounds us in God’s hope and mercy. The Good News is that God is with us, no matter the type of chaos and unrest surrounding us. As the world quickly moves past December 25, may we stay just a bit longer at the manger to see the beauty of God at work in the world, and to be open to that deep peace shining brightly for the world to see this Christmas.

Pastor Heidi Hester

Hope Lutheran Church, Bozeman, Montana

Tuesday, December 28, 2021

Holy Innocents - Matthew 2:13-18

*¹⁸"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

As Matthew tells it, the holy family flees in the night, becoming refugees in Egypt for fear of Herod. They are right to be afraid, for Herod out of his own fear and fury has all the little children around Bethlehem killed. The town called "House of Bread" becomes a house of horror.

I recently completed a three-day Critical Incident Stress Management course. The class was full of first responders – EMT's, firefighters, and Sherriff's deputies. We learned to debrief traumatic scenarios, and the worst situations always seemed to involve children.

If we love children who tragically die, we weep. We cannot be consoled.

It is right to have one of the Twelve Days of Christmas turn our hearts to the holy innocents of every time and place. Today reminds us of all who refuse to be consoled, who covet our prayers. Today, the glorious incarnation makes space for sorrow beyond words. The church does well if we always make that space.

Pastor Miriam Schmidt

All Saints Lutheran Church, Big Sky, Montana

Wednesday, December 29, 2021

Stephen, Deacon & Martyr - Matthew 23:34-39

'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Say it with me 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' Now, do you mean it? Do you really mean it? From this passage, saying and living this phrase is key to seeing Jesus.

Do we mean it after Christmas? When we have been filled with too many good things and our waistlines are expanding?

Do we mean it, with Silent Night hanging in the air, when the very air we breathe is clouded with virus and political suspicion?

Do we mean it, with wisemen yet arriving in Bethlehem, as we wait and watch over those coming to our borders who are tired and poor, our modern day "huddled masses"?

Do we mean it, with lights blazing on our homes, in our trees, as we blaze our pathway forward in a world that is getting hotter?

'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord' is not just a refrain to sing or nice words to utter. It is a calling to live and act and be the people of the manger.

Do you mean it? Then live it!

Pastor Andy Wendle

Eidsvold Lutheran Church, Somers, Montana

Thursday, December 30, 2021

Colossians 3:12-17

“Clothe yourselves with compassion.... love, which binds everything together.”

I preached a wedding sermon on this text. The couple chose this text, as laundry was an issue.... who folds t shirts that way? And underwear? These words from Paul are a powerful “how to”. How do we live together in community, in families? As one puts on a shirt or pants, Paul uses the image: put on compassion, humility, forgiveness. Put on “love”. What does love look like when it is worn, as a piece of clothing? Maybe new and clean for a while, but I think that over time, the love starts to show some wear, starts to look a little dirty and well, worn. And the text continues with “and”... and let the peace of Christ.... And be thankful... And with gratitude... Wearing compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, and love, Paul states an ethic of being the body of Christ, together. This love that we have received from Jesus was not new and shiny, but lived in, like a beloved shirt. It is a love that truly engages with the world and with the beloved of God. It’s messy and complicated. But it is the love that transforms, heals, renews. Put on Christ, my friends.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod, ELCA

New Year's Eve, Friday, December 31, 2021

Matthew 25:31-46

As we come to the close of the year, we reflect on our experiences from the year past. The media has reported on the important events of the year – the triumphs and tragedies, the successes and failures, the heroes and villains. We ourselves look back on our own lives – the twists and turns, the new and old, the joys and heartaches. I wonder though if we examine our journey of faith, if we ask ourselves when and where we encountered Christ.

“Where were you?” Those at the right and the left answer the same question. Christ was there for all of them in the hungry, the naked, and the hurting. Christ was there in the least of these. Though they did not know, some served and some did not.

As the new year breaks, we are invited to share Christ's love, especially with those in need. As we do, we share the love of Christ with Christ. And in the least of these, Christ is serving us, even as we are serving him.

*Lord, we seek your face; let us see you in our neighbor in need.
Amen*

Pastor Scott Hedegaard

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Great Falls, Montana

Saturday January 1, 2022

Name of Jesus – Luke 2:15-21

As a child, when I would leave the house, my mother would call out; "Remember who you are..."

I knew the answer... "I am a child of God."

This became a kind of ritual for our family: "Remember who you are!" With those four words we were reminded that we were God's children, and that our baptism into Christ shaped our lives.

Often, I would joke, "Of course I know, I'm Phil." As the door closed, I would hear my mother scolding, "you know what I mean!" Of course, I did.

"Remember who you are!" This was a reminder of expectations for how we lived, which had roots in our faith. It was a way of saying it makes a difference that you are a Christian. You bear the name of Jesus as you go out with your friends. (This was mostly life-giving; when it degenerated into guilt tripping, well, that's another story...)

Baptized into Christ, you enter this new year as a child of God. May you rejoice in this wonderful responsibility, and may you know God's presence always.

For this new year I have this simple admonition:

"Remember who you are!"

Pastor Phil Wold

Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, Wyoming

Second Sunday of Christmas, January 2, 2022

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

It is a new year. The memory of the recent Christmas is beginning to fade. The presents have been put away or exchanged. The cookies are eaten. It's time to think about taking down all the decorations until the next Christmas. In the stillness of this day, one simple verse reminds me that the Word became flesh and lived among us. Our God loved us so much that Christ came to Earth willingly as a baby to save all people. I think of the grace upon grace that the world has received. On this Second Sunday of Christmas, may the world continue to sing out, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let Earth receive her king!"

Lyrics by Isaac Watts
Public Domain

Pastor Carol Seilthimer

First Lutheran Church, Plains, Montana

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Thompson Falls, Montana

Monday, January 3, 2022

Isaiah 60:1-6

*For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
(Isaiah 60:2)*

Being from the Midwest, I'm still getting used to the beauty of the mountains that I now get to witness daily. Lately, it's been the sunrise and sunset that seizes my attention and brings me to wonder about all the liminal spaces in our world. We are all too aware of the reality of gloom and despair in the world around us. And at the same time, light and reasons to hope exist. Each morning the sun valiantly comes up over the mountains. I can perceive that the sun is coming up even before I'm able to actually see it. The shadows of the night remain even while the sky transforms with vibrant streaks of color. Some mornings it feels like a reminder and an invitation:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
(Isaiah 60:1)*

Even while night will return when the sun slips behind the mountains, the glory of the Lord shines brightly and strongly through each of us.

Pastor Melissa Johansen

American Lutheran Church, Livingston, Montana

Tuesday, January 4, 2022

Ephesians 3:1-12

This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (v.6).

Tracing one's ancestry through online websites and DNA is popular. There is mystery; who or what new truth will we discover? Someone famous and inspiring or something tragic? Paul's letter to the Ephesians explores the mystery of God's will and an expanded family tree.

What is so mysterious is that God has written a whole new group of heirs into God's will, the Gentiles. Traditionally, Gentiles worshiped gods other than the God of Israel. Yet, God was not content to be separated from them. Instead, God has acted to bring them into a new relationship with him. And Christ was the way God did that. This does not shortchange those who were heirs before because there are "boundless riches" in Christ (3:8). There is plenty to go around. So the mystery in this case is the mystery of grace. *(From Ephesians 3 commentary by Craig Koester, workingpreacher.org.)*

God doesn't want to be separated from you or from anyone else. Paul explains that in Christ, our ancestry has expanded. Instead of tragedy and loss, there is joy, opening, and movement beyond what we know or understand. God's plan for the fullness of time is an ever-expanding creation gathered together with everything on earth and in heaven (1:10).

Prayer: Gracious God, expand my grace for others. Amen.

Pastor Molly Sasser-Goehner

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Missoula, Montana

Wednesday, January 5, 2022

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

*“May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
bring tribute to him.*

*May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.*

*May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.*

*For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.*

*He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.*

*He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.” (Psalm 72:10-14)*

It’s pretty clear why the folks who put together the daily lectionary chose this psalm for the day before Epiphany: the kings are on their way to the true King of Kings, the one who cares for the needy and rescues the oppressed. This King of Kings is unlike every earthly ruler who is slowly (or speedily) corrupted by power and ends up creating more injustice and more neediness.

Christ the King rescues us from violence – the violence of war, abuse, poverty, despair, and all the –isms you can think of – for our blood is precious in his sight. The blood right now pumping through your heart, lungs, brain, and elbows...every drop, precious.

Pastor Megan Hoewisch

First Lutheran Church, Havre, Montana

The Epiphany of Our Lord, Thursday, January 6, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12

The magi were overwhelmed with joy. An epiphany through a star led them to a newborn king unlike anyone ever born. And something amazing and life-changing was revealed.

This epiphany has been revealed to us too. So why aren't we as Christians overwhelmed with joy? Christians today seem more overwhelmed with anger, cynicism, and apathy than with joy about God come to live among us. Like Herod and all of Jerusalem, Christians seem trapped in fear, afraid of the transformation this child brings, quick to use violence justified by false devotion to prevent God's kingdom of holy relationship from entering into our lives.

But regardless of Herod's attempt (or ours) to hide and destroy it, the revelation of "God with us" shines through. In the humble servant Christ, God has come to dwell with us, to love us, to bring us into whole and holy relationship with God. In Jesus, God comes to save us, to forgive us, to lead us out of our fear into God's kingdom – a kingdom revealed to be a way of life that no worldly realm or nation can offer, a life saturated with overwhelming joy.

Joy to the world, our God has come!

Bishop Laurie Jungling

Montana Synod, ELCA

Friday, January 7, 2022

1 Corinthians 2:1-10

Through the season of Epiphany, we continue to witness *how* Jesus revealed God to all people. Jesus demonstrates the nature of our God through his humble birth, his radical teaching, and his love for outsiders, though most centrally, through his crucifixion.

We do well when the crux of our actions is, as Paul described to the Corinthian community, “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Yet, how often is that understanding of who Christ is and what Christ did *really* central to what we do? Are we more likely to be followers of “Jesus Christ and him *politicized*”? Or we supporters of “Jesus Christ and him *commercialized*”? Or maybe “Jesus Christ and him *domesticized*”? I’m sure you can think of other ways we interpret Jesus so as to meet our own ends.

In contrast, what does life with “Jesus Christ and him *crucified*” look like? With “Jesus Christ and him crucified” as our guide, we would be led to acts of radical generosity, leadership would be more shared (and the leaders themselves act as servants), and we count acts of love as our greatest work.

Pastor Kendra Wilde

Helena, Montana

Saturday, January 8, 2022

Isaiah 43:1-7

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

It was the spring of 1997. It had been a horrific winter in Minnesota. April brought the floods. The images of Grand Forks, ND underwater as the levy could not hold back the Red River were vivid. And then there were the fires. Downtown Grand Forks was burning, even as the flood waters consumed the town. I cannot hear these words from Isaiah without the image of fires and floods. Do not fear! These words from Isaiah were comforting, even in the midst of disaster and chaos. “Do not fear!” In the last year throughout the territory of the Montana Synod, there have been disasters – fires and floods, drought and blizzards.

These words from Isaiah speak to our hearts: do not fear! We have been redeemed, swept from the midst of disaster to a place of safety and hope. Henri Nouwen stated that “hope is not optimism.” In the midst of fears and circumstances that are overwhelming, my prayer is that we may live and witness to the hope that is ours through Jesus Christ.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod, ELCA

Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 9, 2022

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptisms are one of my favorite tasks as a pastor. You never know what is going to happen. If the baptized is a baby, we hope it either sleeps through the whole thing or smiles at just the right time. Toddlers – that’s a different story. Do we help them lay back to be baptized or help them onto a chair, so they are tall enough to get their heads over the font without tipping everything over? Young children sometimes are so shy in front of the congregation they cry or chicken out. Youth don’t want the water to mess up their hair for the pictures. Adults tend to campaign for private baptisms.

Of course, all this is generalizing. The point is that we have hopes for what happens during the baptism, so it goes smoothly. I remember once holding the baby afterwards, while I did the prayers, and no one could hear the prayers because the baby screamed the whole time and it was close to my microphone. I, of course, could hardly stop laughing in order to finish the prayers before walking with her into the congregation during the passing of the peace.

But what is a baptism supposed to look like? Who cares? The important thing is that, just as when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit is there calling us by name. We become children of God (and isn’t Jesus the Son of God). We join in the family of God, beloved, cherished and forgiven. Washed clean. And we continue to be washed clean every day, through this one act of baptism, whether it was as a baby, a child or an adult. There is always a right time for baptism.

Pastor Brenda Frelsi

Zion Lutheran Church, Glendive, Montana

Monday, January 10, 2022

Acts 8:14-17

As we look at the New Year, we remember: God moves in ways we can not anticipate.

The Samaritans and Jews were enemies for centuries. Samaritans accepted what Philip had to say!? Is it really true?

Gerhard Krodel describes this moment as a breakdown of barriers. “The anomaly of a separation of Baptism from the gift of the Holy Spirit occurred (verse 16) so that the representatives of the apostles would experience the breakdown of the barrier between believing Jews and believing Samaritans.”¹

What barriers need to be broken this year? Where might God surprise us?

The love of God, the desire of God to make every single one of us God’s child is beyond the scope of what we have in mind for the extent of God’s love. God moves in ways we can not anticipate.

¹Gerhard Krodel, Acts, 164 also Karoline Lewis, January 2010

Marilyn Hall

Montana Synod Coaching Coordinator, Missoula, Montana

Tuesday, January 11, 2022

Psalm 106:1-12

While not the longest in the Bible, Psalm 106 is lengthy. It's a great summary of the many and varied sins of Israel during their time in exile. Included are multiple confessions of their mistrust of the Lord and their failure to follow the leadership of Moses. Verse 12 wraps up with how God led them out of captivity and saved them by the parting of the Red Sea and then how "*the waters covered their adversaries*". For even more summarizing of the depth of human sin, one can also read Psalm 105 (or all of the Old Testament for that matter), but let's focus on verses 4-5:

*⁴ Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people;
help me when you deliver them;*

*⁵ that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage.*

The only thing greater than the amount and variety of sin that humans are capable of is the grace and forgiveness of God. Returning to the Lord for forgiveness and redemption will allow us never-ending rejoicing and basking in the glory of God.

Pastor Tim Tharp

First Lutheran Church, Savage, Montana
Grace Lutheran Church, Skaar, Montana

Wednesday, January 12, 2022

Luke 11:33-36

There is darkness in every one of us. Skeletons in the closet we wish to remain hidden, selfish desires and hurtful things we have done. There are decisions we wish we would have made differently...wrongs we have committed...Things that we try to fix by making better choices or reading books on ways of acting and being healthier. But the truth is there is only one way to get rid of darkness...with light! During the season of Epiphany, we invite the light of the world to direct our path... I am reminded of the lyrics of one of my favorite Hymns:

*I want to walk as a child of the light
I want to follow Jesus
God sent the stars to give light to the world
The star of my life is Jesus*

*Refrain: In Him, there is no darkness at all
The night and the day are both alike
The Lamb is the light of the city of God
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus*

*I want to see the brightness of God
I want to look at Jesus
Clear sun of righteousness, shine on my path
And show me the way to the Father Refrain*

*I'm looking for the coming of Christ
I want to be with Jesus
When we have run with patience the race
We shall know the joy of Jesus Refrain*

Songwriter: Kathleen Thomerson
ELW # 815

Pastor Jason Asselstine

Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod, ELCA

Thursday, January 13, 2022

Isaiah 62:1-5

Persistence is not always welcome, and indeed can be exhausting: a parent seeking services for their child with special needs, a woman advocating to not be judged or legislated for her gender, a lover seeking to lift a beloved one from despair.

People have returned from exile in this portion of Isaiah. They were promised an abundant and beautiful image of restoration, and outside intervention and funding may well have lifted their spirits. But the reality they faced was in stark contrast. The experience of return discordant with what was expected.

They struggled to re-establish homesteads and grow food for the season, much less rebuild the Temple that matched what they remembered. What is it we have returned to? Where's the restoration we were told about?

Where are the people in worship? Where are the kids, volunteers, fellowship, discipling, and giving?

The prophet is standing before God and the people, not simply proclaiming what God has promised but calling on God to remember and keep that promise. The revelation of God in the midst of our forsaken-ness and desolation can be a communal act of remembering, proclaiming, and interceding.

God, you aren't done yet. Be here with us. Amen.

Pastor Daniel Disch

Atonement Lutheran Church, Missoula, Montana

Friday, January 14, 2022

Psalm 36:5-10

How exquisite your love, O God!

How eager we are to run under your wings (Ps 36:9)

David begins Psalm 36 by naming wickedness and follows it with words of praise for the God who keeps wickedness at bay. As we wander through the darkness, we wonder just who is this God we worship, we pray to, we hear of, who is this God in whom we trust.

David succinctly describes for us this God to whom we sing praises.

God is exquisite love. In Him there is cause for hope; even in our sinfulness God shows His faithfulness and amazing grace. Not just to those who make it to church every Sunday, but to those who are homeless, brokenhearted, in prison, those for whom there is no justice, those without hope.

God's love extends to all people. God is righteous, saving humans and animals alike, showing justice to all His precious creation. God calls us to seek protection under His wings. Here God feeds us at His table. Here is life-giving water. Here His light shines in the darkness, so all will know that God's steadfast, unfailing, continuous love is theirs.

This is the God in whom we trust.

Pastor Tonia Fisher

St. James Lutheran Church, Columbus, Montana

Saturday, January 15, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Do you wake up each day and thank God for the gifts the Holy Spirit has given to you? Do you get out of bed excited to see how you will get to use those gifts? I'm guessing you don't.

You have probably heard this passage from 1 Corinthians at the installation of Sunday School teachers or Church Council members. *"Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord...."*

God gives to all God's children a variety of gifts, even you. Even if you have trouble naming them.

If you can walk up to a stranger and say, "Hi", that is a gift. If you can bake a cake and give it to a new neighbor, that is a gift.

In the season of Epiphany, Jesus Christ is revealed to the world as God made human and coming to dwell with us. In this season we can gain new understandings of ourselves and how we reveal God in our words and actions. Let's start today.

Dear Lord, today show me my gifts and how I can use them to reveal your love in the world. Amen.

Pastor Tammy Craker

Plentywood Lutheran Church, Plentywood, Montana

Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 16, 2022

John 2:1-11

Mary, mother of our Lord, only appears twice in the Gospel of John, at the wedding in Cana and at Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' action of changing water into wine breaks the local custom of serving the good wine first and then the inferior wine. Jesus' action reverses this expectation and the good wine is served last. But in John this act is not to be taken at face value. This, the first of Jesus' seven signs in the Gospel is a visible manifestation of God's presence and a symbolic revelation of Jesus' glory, his divine origin.

Likewise, the crucifixion, which in the ancient world represented humiliation and defeat, is in John's Gospel the victory and final manifestation of Jesus' glory. At the wedding, the disciples seeing with the eyes of faith, believe in Jesus. At the crucifixion, the one who bears witness to the events does so, John writes, so that those who hear may believe.

Prayer: Gracious and generous God, open our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts to see your abundant goodness in the world and people around us and give thanks. May our hearts be filled with joy and peace. Amen

Pastor Timothy Spring

Staff Chaplain, Bozeman Health, Bozeman, Montana

Monday, January 17, 2022

Romans, 12:9-21

My desk is covered in post-it notes. I love post-it notes and have them in the prettiest colors possible. My favorite part of my post-it notes is when I get to cross items off the to-do list they hold. Or even better when they get taken off my desk entirely and sent to the recycling bin. That sense of accomplishment gives me such a positive rush and propels me on to the next thing.

The text from Romans 12 can feel like another to-do list. Daunting when looked at as a whole. Overwhelming when added to the other to-do lists of life like groceries, laundry, paying bills, but the rush we get when we get one of these actions takes place is a rush like no other.

God knows the gift of loving genuinely, of serving the Lord, showing hospitality, and weeping with those who weep. God knows that in these acts of care and service, we are fed for the next thing that is coming. We give thanks that this to-do list is constantly in front of us as a task and gift in living the Christian life.

Dear God. Let us never lag in zeal. Amen.

Pastor Elizabeth Sillerud

American Lutheran Church, Billings, Montana

Tuesday, January 18, 2022

The Confession of Peter – Matthew 16:13-19

Today we get Peter's big revelation, "You are the Messiah, Son of the Living God." Was Peter thinking of a military overthrow? Certainly, there were calls for revolution and many hoped that Jesus was the one. However, Jesus and the disciples had been healing the sick, casting out demons, forgiving sins, giving dignity, and feeding thousands of people, including all Jewish and non-Jewish people alike. Jesus levels the hierarchy of privilege and reframes power to come through compassion, relationships, caring for the least, and lifting up the lowly.

Following Jesus in self-giving love and confronting the powers of tyranny is always dangerous. What does it mean to claim Jesus as Messiah today? What does self-giving love and confrontation look like when the occupied peoples still go missing and get murdered, when the creation cries for relief, and when the homeless and hungry fill the streets amidst unprecedented wealth? Are we willing to confront our own history, power, and privileges? Are we ready to risk, speak out, and follow Jesus on the narrow path of deep love for all people?

May Jesus' salving power of compassion, courage, and action fill us for our time and place that we may be his people in the world.

Pastor John Lund

Emmaus Campus Ministry, Missoula, Montana

Wednesday, January 19, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The omitted verses from today's devotional text (verses 4 and 7) contain long lists of names and are easy enough to pass over with our eyes and our minds as we read along in Nehemiah. I invite you, however, not to skip those names, but to go back and look at them.

These two verses are important because they remind us that Ezra and Nehemiah were not alone in the task of sharing, interpreting, and teaching about the law. In this emotional return from exile and reunion with the possibility of holy living, it is significant that the weighty role of leadership did not rest on just one or two people.

Many other people, in fact too many to name, were also equipped by God's Spirit to lead the people. This is a reminder, in a couple skipped verses, that the work of spiritual leadership never rests on just one or two, but all of us are equipped in various way to help one another in the work of living in according to God's good will.

Pastor Julia Seymour

Big Timber Lutheran Church, Big Timber, Montana

Thursday, January 20, 2022

Psalm 19-7-14

Money and sugar are incredibly addictive. Maybe you can relate to spending too much energy thinking about and wanting more of each. Oftentimes we can never get enough. We expect satisfaction from such things as wealth and sweets but does it ever arrive?

Psalm 19:7-14 lists off how God's law benefits us. It revives, gives wisdom, fills with joy, enlightens, and endures. God's law that brings order to creation and our lives, while also pointing us to Christ for graceful forgiveness, is so good that, ideally, we desire it more than gold and honey, money and sweets.

Jesus says that all of God's law hangs on two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40). Remembering that the law, at its core, is about love is music to our ears and sweetness to our hearts.

Thank you, God, for your law that not only brings order, keeps the world moving, protects the vulnerable, and pushes us toward your grace, but that also is thoroughly loving and deeply satisfying. Amen.

Pastor Peter Erickson

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Columbia Falls, Montana

Friday, January 21, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

I'm not sure which came first, my amazement of the workings of the human body or my love of medical TV shows. From Medical Center as a child, to Grey's Anatomy in my adult years I have always been fascinated with the medical field.

I marvel at the inter connectiveness of the human system. For instance, how limping because of a sore toe can make your back ache. God made the human body to operate way beyond our understanding. That is why doctors "practice" medicine because no one fully knows the intricate workings of our systems.

In general, we get it. We need different organs to do different tasks. Eyes to see, kidneys to flush waste; everything has a purpose.

As Christ's body, we need people with different gifts to accomplish the calling of the church: to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, serve people in need, and strive for justice and peace in all the world.

We may not fully understand the body of Christ any more than we understand our own bodies, but like the body, we need one another to make it work.

Healer God, help us to work together as the body of Christ. Amen.

Pastor Tammy Craker

Plentywood Lutheran Church, Plentywood, Montana

Saturday, January 22, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:20-31

As a working adult, I returned to college. My least favorite assignments were team presentation projects. The group would decide by consensus the various aspects of the presentation from meeting times to communication and more.

Often there was a person who missed every meeting and did not communicate with the team. Another team member was always late and the work was incomplete. It was if they were saying, “I have no need for you.” While they did not mean to make the rest of us suffer, they did.

The church is like one big class project. Each person on the team has unique gifts, which, combined with the others, makes the experience rewarding. There will be times we disagree but walking away is not the answer. As Paul points out, we all have different gifts, and the body only functions if all the parts work together.

Gracious Lord, you have blessed us with many gifts. Help us in using these gifts for the great good for our hurting world. Make us one body to serve you and each other. Amen.

Pastor Carol Seilthimer

First Lutheran Church, Plains MT

Our Savior’s Lutheran Church, Thompson Falls, Montana

Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 23, 2022

Luke 4:14-21

This is, already in Luke, the 12th time that the Holy Spirit is identified as the one influencing people or initiating the action in the story. It seems the Spirit is in control – even of Jesus. He’s been “led by the Spirit” in the wilderness and tempted by the devil. Now, Jesus is “filled with the Holy Spirit” returning to his hometown. It’s hard to tell which was the bigger challenge for Jesus to face: the devil, or his hometown “friends.”

Indeed, the Spirit leads us into challenging situations. Mary had been challenged to bear God’s promised one and to contemplate the challenge her son would be to systems of entrenched power. Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, and the Baptizer similarly faced the challenges of the world’s established systems as they responded to the Spirit’s nudge. Jesus will challenge his hometown neighbors to hear a word of good news: release to captives, sight to the blind, freedom for anyone oppressed. But it’s a good news they will be able to hear only if they can perceive their own captivity, blindness, oppression. As he says, the Spirit has led him to those who are poor (vs.18).

Are we ready to accept the challenge?

Pastor Scott Thompson

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Kalispell, Montana

Monday, January 24, 2022

Luke 21:10-19

Is endurance akin to resilience?

An endurance sport demands training many more hours than are spent participating in the event itself. The practice and building of endurance – mental and physical – become habitual to include times of trial. Do we pray in the Lord’s Prayer to be preserved from facing times of trial or for God to be present and centered in such times?

The apocalyptic vision in Luke of the Temple’s destruction is cause for alarm: if the symbol and “home” of God’s presence isn’t permanent, what about God? If Jesus dies, or the community of Jesus unravels, what about those things he was teaching, and doing, and calling into being?

Following Jesus is costly and contrary to the powers that be in Luke, yet Luke upholds a vision of a community that isn’t dictated by structures and systems, rather the contrary. The angel comes to a young woman whose engagement and sustainable life is threatened by her divine pregnancy. Angels come to shepherds in the fields, not to kings and priests. The Holy Spirit in Acts leads to Samaritans, foreign eunuchs, and Roman soldiers...oh my.

“Practice” in us the Word himself, our wisdom, as You did in Luke’s community. Amen.

Pastor Daniel Disch

Atonement Lutheran Church, Missoula, Montana

Tuesday, January 25, 2022

Conversion of Paul – Acts 9:1-22

He stood behind his supervisor lightly tapping him on the shoulder. Our five-foot-ten intern was trying to get the attention of our six-foot-four pastor and it was not working. Eventually someone said to him, you will have to make it more obvious you need him. Get in front of him, tap him harder, or call his name loudly.

This memory came to mind as I thought about what it took for Jesus to get Saul's attention. A blinding light that knocked him to the ground and a voice that spoke directly to him. What are you doing, Saul? Why are you persecuting me?

Saul finally heard Jesus' message and repented. He became humble enough to not only listen but allow his companions to help him. He even went for a time without food or drink. The encounter turned him completely around. He went from persecutor to fervent supporter and apostle.

Similar to our intern years ago, is God lightly tapping on your shoulder? Perhaps it is because God has a task or call for you. Will it take a blinding light, or a moment of quiet, to hear God's voice and respond?

Pastor Anna Merritt

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Great Falls, Montana

Wednesday, January 26, 2022

Galatians 1:11-14

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul proclaims the Good News -again- to the churches throughout the region of Galatia. He writes with assurance that the Gospel he received was not given to him by any other human being. Rather, he received the “Word of God” directly from Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

This rings true to our Reformed Theology that “Christ alone, through grace alone, by faith alone” offers to us the gift of salvation. We cannot earn. We cannot buy it. We cannot give it to anyone. We can only receive this incredible gift.

Yet with any gift, leaving it in the wrapping does no good. The time has come for us to open it up and use it! Like Paul, let us proclaim the Good News and let God do the work of gifting others with grace and faith in Jesus.

Holy God, let us proclaim your love with the boldness of Paul – Amen.

Pastor Jamie Schmeling

Hope Lutheran Church, Fallon, Montana

Thursday, January 27, 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10

I'm not Jeremiah, Lord. I'm not a prophet.

And still you ask me to speak, through the means you've given. I think I know what you want me to speak. Love. The kind of love that will change me, crack me open.

Well, I'm not really up for that. I'm just a human and you realize how inept I am. I mean, you knew me before I was formed in my mother's womb, which means you know my small judging mind, my fears that no one will like me, my ignorance. You know every weakness and still you ask me to speak?

I have to tell you, how you ask us to speak, it's not like people around here talk. If I speak with love, they'll laugh, or worse. People get angry at anything you say these days. You know, they killed Martin Luther King Jr. for speaking like that. Speaking about love. Which means justice too.

Yet still you want me to speak. Want all of us to speak with your love. You put the words into the mouth of Jeremiah, your prophet. Will you put words of love into my mouth as well? When I want to speak anything but love, will you help me, Lord? To speak love.

Jenny Kunka

Director, Northern Rockies Institute of Theology, Montana Synod

Friday, January 28, 2022

Psalm 71:1-6

Fear and shame are powerful motivators. Many of the decisions we make are based in some way on these negative influencers. The writer of the 71st Psalm is no exception. Grounded in the fear of being shamed before their peers, the writer asks for God to be a place of refuge. We still seek refuge under God's care as the world shifts and moves beneath us. God is still present in times of trouble. We have not made much progress over the millennia in dealing with the same old shameful accusations. Many of our own motivations are born from shame or fear. However, one thing we can learn from the psalmist is to place our trust in God... To recognize that *God's love is greater than our fear and shame...* let me say that again so that it does not get lost...God's love is greater than our fear and shame. This is something that we can repeat often...even daily. It is our human nature to dwell on our shortcomings, but God and this psalm reminds us to live in right relationship with God through trust in God's forgiveness and grace.

Pastor Jason Asselstine

Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod, ELCA

Saturday, January 29, 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The Way of Love

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

*⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking,
it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*

⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

(1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NIV)

Howard Thurman wrote a poem: “*The Work of Christmas*”

(The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations, By Howard Thurman, published by Friends United Press.)

When the song of angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flock

The work of Christmas begins
To find the lost, to heal the broken
To feed the hungry, free the prisoners
To rebuild nations, to bring peace among brothers
To make music in the heart

How do we do this!?! In a pandemic world where we are tired and becoming empty? We remember: “...Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” *Romans 8:38-39 NIV*

We remember, and we pour out our gratitude to God that this is so!

Marilyn Hall

Montana Synod Coaching Coordinator, Missoula, Montana

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 30, 2022

Luke 4:21-30

When Jesus uses the word *poor*, he means, *the marginal* – those systematically (read: not by accident) cut off from social engagement because of poverty, yes, but also age, gender, physical defect, religious impurity, and more. In today’s world, these exclusions remain, and more specifically: people of color, (some) foreigners, LGBTQ+, and the (perceived) unpatriotic.

Jesus’ hometown “friends” praise him because, in their estimation, they, themselves, are *the poor* of whom their favored boy speaks when he quotes Isaiah (vs. 18). They perceive that his (very short!) sermon, “*Today this scripture is fulfilled...*” (vs. 21) means that *good news, release, recovery, and freedom*, is for them, which is true, but not exclusively. Jesus clarifies to remind them of the times when God extended grace to outsiders, namely, a widow and her son in Sidon (1st Kings 17) and Naaman, a Syrian (2nd Kings 5) – all non-Jews.

Praise turns to rage because outsiders are included. Such that they intend to throw Jesus off a nearby cliff.

Preachers today are often criticized when they talk about God’s grace extended to the poor (see first paragraph). There’s a tension in proclaiming the gospel and keeping the congregation happy. The moral: don’t preach near cliffs.

Pastor Scott Thompson

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Kalispell, Montana

Monday, January 31, 2022

Hebrews 2:14-18

¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters^[a] in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

I have been an archer my whole life. It has taken me a lifetime to learn to draw, aim and release a bow in a constant way to get the results I want. I enjoy the sport and love to teach others so that they can enjoy shooting as much as I do. Sometimes I forget what it is like for those new to the sport to learn the basics...in order to be effective in teaching others what I know, I have to start where they are. This was God's plan of action, too. Jesus had to become one of us to be an effective atonement for our sins. He had to start where we are. He had to be tested in the same way we are. The power of the resurrection from the dead is grounded in the knowledge that Jesus first became one of us and was subject to death as we are...and then overcame death and the grave, not for his sake but for ours.

Pastor Jason Asselstine

Associate to the Bishop, Montana Synod, ELCA

Tuesday, February 1, 2022

Psalm 84

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

The joy of singing God's praise, gathered with siblings in Christ, is hard to beat. As a young person growing up in church, I thought this psalm meant that I needed to be excited about the building the congregation gathered in – but it's not about the building (lovely though it may be). As a not-so-young person today, this psalm inspires the orientation of my heart and the use of my time. Gathering with others on the Lord's Day, or any day, is like finding a home in a palace of time.

All the psalms about pilgrimage to Zion/Jerusalem/the temple remind me that we keep moving toward the day when God will make all things new.

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

Wednesday, February 2, 2022

Presentation of our Lord - Luke 2:22-40

I wonder, will Punxsutawney Phil see his shadow today? I know, this is Presentation of our Lord, but I can't help but wonder about that furry rodent. Does he ever get tired of this whole bit? Does she ever want something new? Does he/she ever wonder, how did I get here ...?

The early readers/hearers of this passage were not people like us. They were Israelites. People who had a messiah or two before this. People who had known what it was like to be disappointed. People who had learned, through painful trial and error, what it was like to just come back to the same place you were before after an endless, repetitive time.

So, what was different for them about this One named Jesus? What was different that made Simeon sit up and praise God? That made Anna reach out to those looking for Israel's redemption? That makes you and I sit up, praise God and reach out today?

What was different about this one named Jesus that made all the tomorrows different? Something new? A gift? Rather than the same old drama played out again and again, what does Jesus make new in you?

Pastor Andy Wendle

Eidsvold Lutheran Church, Somers, Montana

Thursday, February 3, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8

I'm always amazed at the speed in which Isaiah changes his mind from "Woe is me! I am lost..." to "Here am I; send me!" Both come with exclamation points. He is emphatic about each stance. And what does it take to change his way of thinking? Only an angel flying up to him with a live coal in a pair of tongs with which he gets touched on the lips. That doesn't make sense at all!

Did you ever notice that the angel can't even touch the coal but Isaiah gets it on his lips? And it takes away his fear??? What does the Bible think we are; gullible?

Oh, that's right – we aren't gullible; we're faithful. Isaiah is a wonderful example to us of growing faith. The Holy Spirit works within us to nurture our faith in such a way that we grow from hopeless sinners to forgiven and empowered saints. When we are open to the Holy Spirit working in our lives, just look at what we are capable of! After all, why would Isaiah be any more capable than we are? He started out his journey of prophet thinking he was hopeless. We too, are able to move from "Woe is me" to "Here am I."

Yes, we will never leave our 'sinnerhood' behind as long as we are here. But with God's forgiveness, made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can do the work of saints! What an exciting journey of sainthood, in the midst of sinnerhood.

Here am I; send me!

Pastor Brenda Frelsi

Zion Lutheran Church, Glendive, Montana

Friday, February 4, 2022

Psalm 138

*I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart...
for your steadfast love and your faithfulness...
On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.
The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
(Psalm 138:1-3, 8)*

At Thanksgiving, our congregation made a “Thanksgiving Tree.” People wrote down what they were thankful for on leaf cut-outs and hung them on a tree branch in our worship space. “I am thankful for my family” made up 62% of the responses. Other items of gratitude named more than once included, my health and health care (7), our church (5) and God’s grace (3).

The psalmist is thankful for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness which endure forever. He asks that God’s purposes for him be fulfilled. God’s purposes for us does indeed include care and concern for our family members. Yet, I wonder how the responses might differ if I would have asked, “For what do you thank God with your *whole heart*?”

The psalmist thanks God for God’s deliverance from any number of trials or tribulations. Examples could be rescue from danger, healing from sickness, recovery from depression, or deliverance from enemies. Take some time to write down what you are thankful to God for. Then, go deeper. Be specific. Put your whole heart into it. What unexpected gratitude lies deep within you?

Prayer: Gracious God, inspire in me a wider sense of gratitude.

Pastor Molly Sasser-Goehner

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Missoula, Montana

Saturday, February 5, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

*“Last of all, as to one untimely born, [Jesus] appeared also to me”
(1 Cor. 15:8 NRSV).*

The Apostle Paul used these words to say that he was unlucky since he was unable to see Jesus before he was resurrected and ascended into heaven. I often gravitate towards these words as my encounters with Christ often seem “untimely” and not of my choosing. Whether it be moments of longing, despair, anxiety, or frustration when I long for God to show up but still feel God’s absence, or moments of contentment, ease, relaxation, or joy when I feel the Gospel compels me to pause and re-orient my own will toward the well-being of others and the will of God in the world, Jesus’ appearances in my life often make me feel like Paul saying, “as to one untimely born...” Then, when I am finally able to get over myself, I am reassured by the fact that God has shown up in my life at all, as one who died and was buried, but rose again and ascended into heaven.

There is much hope and joy in this proclamation - enough to be content for all eternity.

Pastor Seth Nelson

Faith Lutheran Church, Ronan, Montana

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 6, 2022

Luke 5:1-11

...they left everything and followed him.

A small group of people were talking about how to live faith on a daily basis. A man who was seen as one of the finest middle school teachers told the group, “This is an easy question for me. I can’t live my faith on a daily basis, because I am a public school teacher. I am not allowed to talk about Jesus.”

Here is a man who has influenced thousands of young people. He has shown care and love in his teaching. He has mentored countless young people and he sees no connection between that work and his life of discipleship.

How many of us fall into the same trap? How many of us see what we do on a daily basis as holy work?

The passage begins by Jesus inviting Simon to do his daily work – row the boat and fish. When Jesus invites him to follow, he uses language of this daily work – catch people.

I wonder, could leaving everything and following be lived with the understanding that every interaction, conversation, and decision we have is an opportunity to leave our own plans, ideas and motivations behind to follow Jesus?

Pastor Ken Carrothers

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Billings, Montana

Monday, February 7, 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10

*“The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?
I the LORD test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.”
Jeremiah 17:9-10*

Quite interesting words to read, just one week before Valentine’s Day. Many will make claims about the desires of their hearts next week and will not imagine that the light they bear casts any shadow.

We want to see a purity of heart in ourselves in all we do. Yet Jeremiah calls us to note the complexities of the human heart. I recall a line that suggests that while we might look at others with a Godlike justice, we want to be evaluated with a Godlike compassion.

Yes. Jeremiah reminds us of the limitations of our hearts. He also calls us to see the faithfulness of God, who restores us from our devious paths. To note our brokenness can be a negative journey, I suspect. Or it can be an honest appraisal of our own selves and set us free for relationship with the God who restores us and sends us to serve.

Thanks be to God.

Pastor Phil Wold

Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, Wyoming

Tuesday, February 8, 2022

Luke 5:27-32

It was a lonely place, sitting at the tax booth. Sure, plenty of people would come and go, but they weren't exactly thrilled to see him. In fact, Levi counted himself lucky if a day went by when he wasn't spit upon...or worse. Then the stranger came, a man named Jesus, and invited him, "Follow me."

It was less lonely at the banquet. Levi held a feast in Jesus' honor and many like Levi were invited. They too were people considered less than acceptable, tax collectors like him, ne'er-do-wells, the ones Levi considered his community. Jesus sat among them.

The religious objected. "Why do you eat with such rabble?" they demanded. Jesus softly responded, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. God's grace is sufficient for them too."

We sometimes come from lonely places. Yet at the table of Jesus we are welcomed, welcomed to sit among the proud and the lowly, welcomed to be part of the community who taste the goodness of his forgiving love, welcomed to receive God's sufficient grace for all.

Open your arms to welcome us, Lord, just as we are. Amen

Pastor Scott Hedegaard

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Great Falls, Montana

Wednesday, February 9, 2022

Psalm 115

“You are to have no other gods besides me.” -First Commandment

“What does it mean to have a god?” Martin Luther asks in the explanation to the first commandment in his Large Catechism. He answers, “god is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”

We can trust in many things: money, property, education, job, prestige, privilege, or power. All of these are false gods.

For reflection: Who or what is your god? What do you trust in the most?

Pastor Timothy Spring

Staff Chaplain, Bozeman Health, Bozeman, Montana

Thursday, February 10, 2022

Psalm 1

“God charts the road you take.” The Message

Have you ever sat by a river and wondered about the path it takes? Taking the path of least resistance, it meanders, sometimes slow and gentle; other times rushing and angry. Dashing its fullness over rocks, thru narrow canyons, flooding the unexpected plains with its vengeance, eventually reaching its destination.

What or who is there to greet it? God has known where it would lead since the beginning of time. Our lives mirror that meandering, angry, wrathful, sometimes gentle river. Sometimes we are compassionate, at others angry and unjust. The blessing is that while we might wander, God is in control. He charts our life, keeps us from taking the path of least resistance and shepherds us into a life of the faithful.

We have the assurance that when we get to the end of our road, God is the one who will be there to greet us, with love and compassion and forgiveness. The reservoir of our life will be filled, and with joy we are blessed.

LPA Jannie Hartman

Bethany Lutheran Church, Dutton

Friday, February 11, 2022

1 Peter 1:17-2:1

All things in our world will perish given time; some soon like bread or milk, and some a mite longer like granite mountains. Peter talks about imperishable seed, as opposed to perishable seed that gives rise to grass. He says we have been born anew of imperishable seed, “through the living and enduring word of God.”

That is our epiphany, our revelation, that through God’s incarnation, through Jesus the Christ, we are freed, born anew of imperishable seed. Born for what? To have, “genuine mutual love for one another, deeply from the heart.”

Now go, love each other as Christ has first loved us.

LPA Dick Deschamps

Hope Lutheran Church, Bozeman, Montana
Vice President, Montana Synod

Saturday, February 12, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Paul wrote early on in his letter to the Corinthians that the *“message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”* (1 Cor. 1:18), a *“stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”* (1 Cor. 1:23).

Doubts about the resurrection of Jesus Christ are as old as when the message of his return from the dead was first proclaimed in the ancient world. These days, many people talk about doubting the message of the resurrection as some sort of new, enlightened idea, but Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reminds us that people chose to reject the Good News of Christ’s resurrection in the same moments when many were receiving and believing it for the first time. So, Paul reminds them and us again this week, *“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied”* (1 Cor. 15:19). We need not be pitied, sisters and brothers, for Christ has in fact been risen from the dead as the first fruits from the dead. Instead, we who have been baptized into Christ’s resurrection can rejoice in the full, beautiful, bountiful reality of it all.

Pastor Seth Nelson

Faith Lutheran Church, Ronan, Montana

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 13, 2022

Luke 6:17-26

*“Blessed are you who are poor,
For yours in the kingdom of God.” Luke 6:20b*

When Oscar Romero was selected as archbishop of San Salvador there was nothing in his background to suggest he would challenge the status quo. El Salvador’s oligarchy was pleased. But within a few short years the once timid and conventional bishop became a champion for justice. He advocated for the poor and voiceless in his country.

In Luke the beatitudes expand the message Jesus delivered in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth. Blessed means more than happy. The term “poor” means both those who recognize their dependence on God and the economically poor. It suggests God is for them and not against them.

On March 24, 1980, three years after becoming archbishop, Romero was assassinated while saying Mass. His death became a sign of hope for the church of God and the Salvadoran people.

“A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?” - Oscar Romero

Pastor Timothy Spring

Staff Chaplain, Bozeman Health, Bozeman, Montana

Monday, February 14, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:20-34

“We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” We come across these words every time we recite the Nicene Creed in worship. Like most lines in our creeds, it’s easy to miss. How many of us, while reading the words aloud, robotically breeze through the text without a second thought? Our mouths move and make sounds while our minds drift from to-do lists to football games, to the current state of our bank account.

1 Corinthians 15 is a call to “look for the resurrection of the dead,” and not merely for a resurrection on the Last Day, but resurrection today. It’s a call to wake up to the deathless presence of Christ in the here and now. Yet like a line in an ancient creed, resurrection is easy to miss. The cares and concerns of daily life push our risen Lord into the background.

Nevertheless, resurrection persists. Thankfully, *we look* for One who isn’t as easily distracted as we are. *We look* for One who doesn’t stay in the background. *We look* for One who does not stop looking for us.

Pastor JP Carlson

MSU Campus Ministry, Bozeman, Montana

Tuesday, February 15, 2022

2 Corinthians 1:12-19

*“For the Son of God, Jesus Christ,
whom we proclaimed among you...
was not “Yes and No”;
but in him it is always “Yes.””*
2 Corinthians 1:19

Paul has such a marvelously singular focus. It is the faithfulness of God that bears the Good News and the promise of life and hope and love and grace. Nothing else. We proclaim God’s “Yes.”

The rest of the world may offer a yes, but it will always be a “Yes and No.” Always.

Not here. Not with the God who has sent Jesus Christ to speak God’s loving “Yes” to you, to call you out into the light of God’s love for you.

God’s “Yes” speaks you into being. God’s “Yes” restores you to relationship with God. God’s “Yes” sends you out to serve, bearing this same love with hope and joy wherever you go.

Extending our reading to verse 20:

“For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God.”

“Amen.” We get to respond with our own “yes”; with lives of love and service.

Blessings abound! Thanks be to God!

Pastor Phil Wold

Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, Wyoming

Wednesday, February 16, 2022

Psalm 120

¹ *In my distress I cry to the Lord,
that he may answer me:*

² *“Deliver me, O Lord,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.”*

³ *What shall be given to you?
And what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?*

⁴ *A warrior’s sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree!*

⁵ *Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshech,
that I must live among the tents of Kedar.*

⁶ *Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.*

⁷ *I am for peace;
but when I speak,
they are for war.*

The Rev. Dr. Ray Fowler summarizes this Psalm by taking three points from it: 1) call on the Lord in times of trouble, 2) know that God will punish the wicked, 3) know that you do not belong to the world.

What peace these three bullet points provide to us! We know that we can always call on God, it’s HIS responsibility to deal with the wicked, and while we are part of this world for a short period of time, we do not belong to this world. Our eternity will be elsewhere—a place where deceitful tongues and warrior’s arrows cannot touch us.

Pastor Timothy Tharp

First Lutheran Church, Savage, Montana

Grace Lutheran Church, Skaar, Montana

Thursday, February 17, 2022

Psalm 37:1-11

Do not fret because of the wicked

I think we have been using the word anxiety more frequently in the last decade. A school administrator told me that he noticed an increase in anxiety disorders among students around the time that social media on smart phones became widely used. Adults, too, certainly know about the normal emotion of anxiety and experience how it can become a painful interference in life when it rises to the level of a disorder.

Fretting is the sort of anxiety or worry that gnaws away at you. It takes its toll. It's corrosive. It is not good for our health.

Psalm 37 suggests that we may experience fretting over others who are up to no good. The writer of this psalm calls them evil and wicked.

God understands our tendency to get so angrily fretful over the wicked. Yet God does not want that righteous worry to incapacitate us. This Psalm reminds us that the wicked "will soon fade like the grass."

So, we are encouraged to trust God. Unconsumed by fretting we will be able to do good until we see God's justice.

Pastor Peter Erickson

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Columbia Falls, Montana

Friday, February 18, 2022

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

For insight into Paul's understanding of the resurrection, read the entire 15th chapter of First Corinthians. I recall reading commentary on this chapter that said something to this effect:

“This is difficult for us to understand, because we do not have as sophisticated an understanding of death and resurrection as Paul's audience did.”

What? We're not as sophisticated? They didn't have iPhones!

We regularly confess; “I believe in the resurrection of the body....”

Today we read: “What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” (I Cor 15:50)

This word from Paul does not contradict but sharpens our confession. The resurrection is a gift promised to we who are mortal. (It's complicated!)

In the cross and the resurrection, God grants forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

This season of Epiphany we take note that God has sent Jesus to redeem even us, and that this gift shapes our entire lives, and more.

Jesus' call to love our enemies (Sunday's Gospel reading) is lived out in the cross, and, I believe, made possible in the resurrection.

May the resurrection promise give life to your love for others.

Pastor Phil Wold

Trinity Lutheran Church, Sheridan, Wyoming

Saturday, February 19, 2022

Genesis 43:1-11, 15

Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry them down as a present to the man—a little balm and a little honey, gum, resin, pistachio nuts, and almonds. (Gen. 43:11)

Today’s reading contains poignant anticipation of a reunion between Joseph, his brothers, and his father. The reader knows information that some of the characters do not yet have- that Joseph is alive and that God has helped him to have forgiveness in his heart.

The verse above is an interesting side note: the patriarch, Jacob, is encouraging Judah to bring some small gifts to the mystery man of power in Egypt. Jacob’s sons have gone to Egypt because of a famine in their own land. Yet, they bring gifts of food and healing to the place from which they hope to be fed.

Even people in great need have something to offer to others. Small gifts, efforts at reciprocity, and sharing of wisdom are some of the ways that all people indicate their dignity, their humanity, and their hope.

Pastor Julia Seymour

Big Timber Lutheran Church, Big Timber, Montana

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, February 20, 2022

Luke 6:17-26

Have you ever struggled to forgive someone? Seriously? Is there anyone who has *not* tried to love someone who is almost unlovable?

What might we do to make a difference? Perhaps trying to ignore them? Or soliciting others to be against them? But thinking about turning our other cheek to them? Or blessing them? Or even praying for them? What is Jesus thinking in this teaching?

Yet, when I think about it, the man of relationship knows any of my feeble efforts, like those above, may not result in mending anything, but has the potential to make matters worse. And in the end, I would be the one who ultimately suffered, because unresolved resentment can cause me anguish. As others have said, holding onto to anger is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

It could be, then, that verse 37 holds the key. We are blessed by a God of grace and second chances, who judges fairly, forgives lavishly and loves perfectly. A God who hears our prayers and blesses our human efforts beyond imagining. A God who is perfect in doing what we may find nearly impossible.

Thanks be to God.

Pastor Anna Merritt

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Great Falls, Montana

Monday, February 21, 2022

Exodus 33:1-17

The Lord said, *“I will go with you and give you peace.” (Ex 33:14)*

God tells Moses “It’s time to claim the land I promised your forefathers.” But it is not a totally happy bon voyage, God also tells Moses, Godself will not be going with them. For if He did, He would consume them on the way, for they are a stiff-necked people. They have already turned away from the Lord and established their own god. However, God does promise an angel will go before them, driving out the enemies which stand between them and their destination.

This is an unexpected send off. The people mourned when they heard this. On behalf of the people, Moses went to plead with God and reminded God of His promise to accompany them always.

We, too, turn from God in our actions and reactions. Then we plead for God’s grace, His blessings, His presence in our lives. God sent His Son, Jesus the Christ to show us God’s love, to open up our relationship. The Holy Spirit was sent to accompany us on our path.

God keeps His word and, in His love, promises His people still today, *“I will go with you and give you peace.”*

Pastor Tonia Fisher

St. James Lutheran Church, Columbus, Montana

Tuesday, February 22, 2022

Psalm 38

In the pre-dawn hours: It's three in the morning. The television is off and cell phone plugged into a socket in another room. There are no blessed distractions when the accusations wake me

Shaking me, calling to me. And I face them. The sins.

Hundreds of selfish actions piling up over years of living. Innumerable transgressions both small and large. Hurtful words and uncaring actions, not to mention the damage my very existence has on the earth and God's creatures.

It's three in the morning. Denial, excuses, minimization, and distraction are sleeping. "You have sinned," the shadows whisper. "You care mostly of yourself."

In the silence and the dark, my foolishness is laid before me. My soul is shown to be wasting for lack of love for my neighbor...all my neighbors...every one.

For the next sleepless hour, it's Psalm 38, weighing down the mattress, sitting with me.

In my despair.

Psalm 38 in the darkness

Until, just before dawn, I come to the last verse

And I reach out, grab hold and cling to the words,

"Oh my God, do not be far from me; make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation."

Jenny Kunka

Director, Northern Rockies Institute of Theology, Montana Synod

Wednesday, February 23, 2022

Luke 17:1-4

“Jesus said...And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent’, you must forgive.” (verse 4)

Jesus said we need to forgive so what’s the problem?

Forgiveness, how hard it is, how sweet it is, how unfair it is, how healing it is!

Retired Synod Bishop Jessica Crist wrote about forgiveness in 2016 reflecting on the Mother Emmanuel AME Church shooting in Charleston South Carolina. A cold killing in a sacred space. You might remember a decade before the Amish school in Pennsylvania the students that were killed.

Bishop Crist repeated this statement in her article – “We must learn over and over to ask for forgiveness, to grant forgiveness, and to receive forgiveness.”

In both the above-mentioned tragic events a counterculture proclamation of forgiveness was given to the gunman by the people most affected by the traumatic loss.

Always moving to me are the words of Jesus from the cross,
“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”
(Luke 23:34)

We know and we don’t know....

Jesus help us to forgive as you do. Amen

Pastor Chris Flohr

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Missoula, Montana

Thursday, February 24, 2022

Genesis 43:1-11, 15

Michelangelo's marble sculpture of Moses is incredibly muscular, and bigger than life. His gaze is intense. He exudes power. Though seated, his feet are positioned like a runner prepared to take off. But what's up with the two horns sprouting out of Moses' head? Scholars say the Latin Vulgate Bible contains a mistranslation. Apparently, the Hebrew word for "rays" has similarity to "horns."

Yet, one would hardly confuse the two on sight! Animal 'horns' are bony projections, useful in defending territory or claiming dominance. While 'rays' are an ephemeral experience, a manifestation of sunlight. Rays of light often serve metaphorically for divine presence and hope. One thing is clear: When Moses descended from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites were overwhelmed by the holy glow of Moses' face. It was too much illumination to handle!

Horns or Rays? Regardless of translation error, Michelangelo has given us something to think about. In current socio-political times, our people jostle for dominance and defend the territory of their convictions. Yet, God did not create us with horns upon our heads for this task! God gave us the law through Moses, and the gospel through Jesus. They guide our path like rays of sunlight: Love God with all your heart. Listen, respect, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Pastor Julia Seymour

Big Timber Lutheran Church, Big Timber, Montana

Friday, February 25, 2022

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Freedom is a common preoccupation for U.S. Americans. We still wrestle with the nature of the freedoms outlined in our Constitution and in recent years, freedom seems to be defined as the *maximum* ability to do what I want with a *minimum* of external influence. Don't tell me what to do!

Yet, how do we think about freedom as Christians? Paul returns to the topic frequently, as we hear in today's lesson: "*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom*" (2 Cor 3:17). In a characteristically paradoxical statement, Luther asserts: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." And Jesus said, "*If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed*" (John 8:36).

A Christian understanding of freedom is quite counter-cultural. Instead of being "free" of others, freedom is to be found *in relationship* with God and with others. That is, the more attached to Christ we are, the freer we become. We are free from sin and death and, moreover, freedom for our preoccupation with our own sinfulness in order that we direct our energy to serving our neighbors.

Pastor Kendra Wilde

Helena, Montana

Saturday, February 26, 2022

Psalm 99

*“Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel was among those who called on his name;
they called on the Lord
and he answered them.
He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud;
they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.” (Psalm 99:6-7)*

Sometimes we keep our prayers generic and broad, like, “We pray for all health care workers.” Sometimes we make our prayers very specific, like, “We pray for the nurse who worked the night shift and wore the pink scrubs and held our hands when we were afraid.” The person who wrote Psalm 99 made her prayer specific: she prayed for certain people who have shepherded God’s people when they were afraid. She remembered a very particular moment in her story when God’s presence and protection were tangible and made a world of difference. If you were to pray a specific prayer, like this psalmist, which spiritual guides would you lift up? What moment of God’s provision would you remember? Which statute or decree has kept you safe from harm?

We give thanks for the specific and the general, the known and the unknown, who are always known to God. Amen.

Pastor Megan Hoewisch
First Lutheran Church, Havre, Montana

The Transfiguration of Our Lord, Sunday, February 27, 2022

Luke 9:28-36

Do you ever feel like you're stuck in the cloud? Caught in that moment of uncertainty right before the voice speaks? Luke describes it as a moment of terror for the disciples and it can be that way for us too. The anxieties of life can feel like they are seeping into our bones with a dampness that sucks our energy and makes it hard to ignite any flame. In the midst of those clouds, it's easy to forget God's glory.

Christians often talk about glory as if it's something we give to God. Remember that old Bible school song "Rise and shine, and give God the glory, glory?"

But glory is not something we give to God. Glory is something God gives to us. Glory is the light of the transfigured Christ shining out of the darkness, dazzling our whole selves with good news of new life. Glory is Christ's love, reflecting through the universe, drawing us into the hope of God's new possibilities. Glory is the kingdom of God come near in the incarnate Christ.

Even in the cloud, we are filled with Christ's glory through our baptism.

So let's shine and reflect God's glory into the world.

Bishop Laurie Jungling
Montana Synod, ELCA

Monday, February 28, 2022

Acts 10:9-23

"What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven."

Children in pre-school are encouraged to begin to understand patterns. Developmentally, we humans learn to categorize and organize. In these words, from the book of Acts, we observe that Peter has learned well. He understands that there are categories of "clean" and "unclean". Except, suddenly his thought process is challenged. "What God has made clean; you must not call profane." And we are told that this exchange happened three times, to make clear that this sheet business was real and intended!

Maturing in the Christian faith often means expanding the understanding that one had to come to a new understanding – to see and comprehend a new pattern and intent. In these revolutionary words in Acts, Peter suddenly has his eyes opened, not quite in the same way that the scales fell from Paul's eyes, but in a similar way and to a similarly powerful effect! God's voice and the image of the sheet with the "unclean" animals had the impact to open Peter's eyes and heart to respond to the request to go to Cornelius. The barriers and walls have been burst apart!

To see with different eyes opens us to an understanding that is truly earth shattering and brings transformation and new life. Thanks be to God.

Pastor Peggy Paugh Leuzinger

Director for Evangelical Mission, Montana Synod, ELCA

Tuesday, March 1, 2022

Psalm 35:11-28

I'm not sure I have any enemies. There have been times though.... What I have found in those times is that it often is hard to find anyone who is willing to defend you, even when the attacks are so outrageous that they would defy belief.

There is one enemy however that seems to be after me all the time – myself. That sneaky little voice speaks inside my head, telling me, “You aren’t good enough. You are failing. You can’t measure up.” Then another whispers too, “Oh, you are so much better than others.” No matter which one is speaking, I find myself in danger.

As we prepare to mark Ash Wednesday, we are invited to bring all that we are before God. We are reminded that we are mortal and offer ourselves to the Immortal. We seek vindication and deliverance, not only from those enemies external but those internal as well. We cry out to God gracious and merciful, “I am baptized! I am yours! Save me!”

In the presence of our enemies, O God, welcome us to your table of forgiveness. Amen

Pastor Scott Hedegaard

Redeemer Lutheran Church, Great Falls, Montana