

Hope and Joy

2020-2021 Devotional Guide



ELCA Schools and Learning Centers



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illustrate the expansive nature of God.

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WELCOME TO THE 2020-2021 EDITION OF THE ELCA SCHOOLS AND LEARNING CENTERS DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

HOPE AND JOY

*That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out. "I took on the troubles of the troubled," is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it's written for us. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus! ... And Isaiah's word: There's the root of our ancestor Jesse, breaking through the earth and growing tree tall, Tall enough for everyone everywhere to see and take hope! **Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope.** (Romans 15:3-6, 12-13 The Message).*

The words from Paul to the Romans, as written in The Message, DESCRIBE YOU! You have not avoided the challenges presented by COVID-19, but waded right in and helped out. You have been steady, warm and personal, dependable, patient, cheerful and constantly calling parents, kids, and staff. You have kept alert and are doing whatever is necessary to serve and keep serving. The uncertainty and uncharted waters ahead, will require lament, strength and devotion. I believe Paul's words, especially Verses 12-13, gives us a hint... that we focus on the green, signs of life, and the tall trees as signs of hope.

It is my prayer that you will use the 2020-2021 devotions to guide your ministry and that as school and church together you will find 'hope and joy' in each other, in your mission, and in your ministry.

In God's Service,

Cory Newman, Executive Director
Evangelical Lutheran Education Association

AUGUST 2, 2020
NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

ISAIAH 55: 1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! (v. 1a).

In the dog days of August, what is better than a bracing plunge into a pool of cold water. For many of our Lutheran School and Center staffs, students and families, the time has come to enjoy trips to parks and summer cabins, possibly as a day trip or an extended family vacation. Urban families may know the simple joy of the rush of water from an open fire hydrant, as the spray knocks us into the street and the water swirls around us. No matter where, the spray of cool water is a welcome relief on a hot summer day.

Take a moment to listen for God in the stillness of the day. Set aside the worries of enrollment, budget shortfalls and learning plans. By accepting the call to minister to children, know that God makes a covenant with us, just like the one made with David. Like David, our ministry serves as witness to the goodness of God. In your work with teachers, with students and their families, you are raising up leaders in ways that we might never know. Be steadfast in your faith, for it will lead you to overcome the struggles over money and effective methodologies and difficult relationships. Through your faith comes grace that is freely given.

The scripture tells us, "eat what is good and delight yourself in rich food." On a hot August day that may mean ice-cold lemonade and watermelon. But any day of this school year, the rich food of God's word is always present. God's grace satisfies every deep need in you and in those whom you do not yet know.

Reflect: How do I make time to listen carefully to God, and eat nurturing spiritual food?

Pray: All-caring and nurturing God, help us to taste and see all the wonderful things that you have done that bring us joy.

Chris Comella is Principal of Pilgrim Lutheran School in Chicago and currently serves on the Board of the ELEA.

AUGUST 9, 2020
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
MATTHEW 14:27

What strange yet comforting words from Jesus. He comes walking on water only to see his disciples being tossed to and fro in a sea of waves. They were caught in a storm and now they feared a ghost was coming to get them. Our loving Jesus reminds them who He is, “It is I.”

Over the years I have witnessed many parents, who upon arriving late, are greeted by a crying child. “I thought you were never coming to get me!” In fact, I was one of those parents who, after being caught in a snowstorm (a worthy excuse!), arrived late to pick up my son from childcare. Besides the tremendous guilt and then the relief that he was okay, the next thing I wanted to say was, “You know me! I’m your Mom. Do not be afraid.”

When we are afraid, it is good to be reminded of Jesus’ love for his disciples. He wanted to relieve their fears, not scare them further. He understood their emotions and he knew that it was possible for them to move from fear, to hope, to joy.

We too can move on from fear to live in a joyous, hopeful world. It is good that God is with us in our fears, gives us hope as he appears in the storms of our lives, and inspires us to share the joy of his love with others.

Reflect: Name something or someone that gives you joy.

Pray: Lord, our faith grows as we live in the glory of your love. Let us enjoy the peace that passes all human understanding, in hope that others might also experience your hope, joy, peace, and strength. Amen.

Jenny James is an early childhood advocate and Director at First Lutheran Preschool in Ellicott City, MD.

AUGUST 23, 2020
TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
ROMANS 12:1-8

This has been a difficult year. The global pandemic has changed so much about how we live our lives. Some days the changes are overwhelming, and it is difficult to think of anything else. Many people live in fear of catching the virus or having a loved one catch the virus. The virus dominates the news. It seems to be ever on the forefront of our minds. How can we move into a new academic year with concerns about the coronavirus ever present in our communities?

We can move forward only through trust in Almighty God. God calls us to take time away from our persistent worries and fears to commune with the Holy Spirit. Through reading the word, quiet meditation, prayer, and worship we are transformed from people who live in persistent fear to people who walk in faith and trust.

God does not promise us that we will not get sick, but God does promise that, through all the trials and troubles of life, God will be with us. God promises to never leave us nor forsake us.

As we move forward in this academic year we desire to renew our minds by seeking out the one who created us and continues to sustain us. There will be more trials and troubles ahead, but we do not face them alone. As we walk on this journey we are led by the one who says to us, "I love you and you are mine."

Reflect: How can you create more time in your life for the renewal of your mind through prayer, reading scripture, and meditation? What keeps you from doing these things?

Pray: Dear God, we pray this week for the renewal of our minds through drawing closer to You. We pray for those who live in fear, that Your love will fill them with peace. Amen.

*Brian Krause is an ELCA pastor and interim chair of the ELCA
Disability Ministries working group.*

AUGUST 30, 2020
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

2 EXODUS 3:13-14A, 15B

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, I AM has sent me to you (vs. 13-14a).

As the school year unfolds, you have many tasks ahead. One of the most important is to reveal who God is to your staff, students and families. Like Moses, your calling as an educator and prophet, is to provide experiences that show the I AM is in every thing.

When I was of preschool age, about 70 years ago, my great-great aunt provided me a multi-sensory experience in the presence of God that left me with a love of reading. She read to me (hearing) while holding me in her lap (touch) in a rose-arbor (smell), showing me the pictures (sight) and occasionally slipping me a sweet treat (taste).

The classroom also serves as a multi-sensory setting to introduce children to all that God is. The images on the walls provide a visual witness; the snacks with prayers are a taste and smelling witness; a tender hand, a touch witness; and stories a hearing witness.

God is in all that you do – what a great boost to your calling. Just as Moses was assured "This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations," you are part of the present generation in revealing God to the next generation.

Reflect: What are the opportunities and ways you can integrate the I AM into your educational planning and setting?

Pray: Lord God, the Great I AM, help me to reveal who you are and what you do as I carry out my calling as a living and present witness to all whom I touch. Amen.

Hugh Kress has served Lutheran Schools and Early Childhood Centers for five decades in multiple capacities.

SEPTEMBER 6, 2020
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
EXODUS 12:1-14

Repetition is good. We all need it. We all crave it. God knows this about us. In our story from the book of Exodus God wants us to repeat giving thanks. Year after year there are specifics about how to repeat giving thanks for God helping people who hurt.

One of the repetitive parts of the Passover story was eating fast while standing up. Although I would not recommend eating like this today or your tummy might hurt, the idea was to remember to be ready at any moment to follow God quickly to safety.

At school we go through drills like fire drills to repeat being ready to follow our teachers and quickly move to safety. We do it over and over again so if there is a fire we don't have to think about what to do, our bodies already know how to follow our teachers outside. God wants us to give thanks so often that we don't have to think about it, it just becomes part of our lives. We give thanks, we give thanks some more and next thing you know we find ways all around us to give thanks. Not a bad way to live!

Reflect: What's something you like to repeat? Could you add a little prayer of thanks to God every time you do it?

Pray: God there are so many ways to give thanks. Standing up, sitting down or spinning around teach us to remember to give thanks again and again. Amen!

Rev. Janelle Rozek Hooper serves as Program Director for Ministry with Children for the ELCA. She loves to play outside with her husband, two kids and fluffy dog Louis.

SEPTEMBER 13, 2020
FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

ROMANS 14:1,8B

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions... so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

Have you ever had one of those days where you felt everyone around you seems to be unpleasant? You wake at home to hearing disgruntledness about being out of milk. When you arrive at school you encounter a student sitting in time-out; and three other children non-verbally, claiming their floor space near the teacher's seat, so to be chosen as class helper for circle time. There are days that will not be peaceful nor suitable for harmonic togetherness.

This week's lectionary readings illustrate the historical and ongoing human dilemma of conflict, discord, disagreement or dissatisfaction in our life together. What is good for one person is not always what is good for community; even when there are some who are deserving, there may be another who demonstrates greater need, and still others who have been disadvantaged in ways that require tipping the scale of justice.

We do this imperfectly. Perhaps, we sometimes try to resolve disputes when we should simply create safe space for their working out the differences between them. Maybe if we allow our self-interests to die, for what God calls for in the moment, there might be an awakened awareness and appreciation for our differences and the others' contribution to the well-being it brings to the community. While we seek joy in learning, we find hope in, and following, the journey.

Reflect: How do you respond when someone acts like they don't like you? Is God okay with our being different?

Pray: Good and gracious God, grant us spaces and times for being your beloved people, practicing the teachings of Christ, and relinquishing all things that belong to you and you alone. Amen.

Carol A. Johnson is the ELCA Coordinator for Disability Ministries, Grants and Schools.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2020
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
JONAH 3: 10-4; 1 1

Can you hear the pouting in Jonah's voice? He's upset because he can't understand why God would show Ninevah mercy. Yes, God is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, but come on! Ninevah deserves to be punished. It's not fair! Jonah cannot see the truth right before him; Ninevah heard his message and changed their ways. It's every prophet's dream, yet Jonah sat pouting.

Children are a lot like Jonah. They don't see beyond themselves and understand the bigger picture. God sees 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left and need a prophet like Jonah to teach them. Children need adults with abundant patience and compassion to see beyond their frustrations and focus on the bigger picture. It's not easy to remain calm when we hear, "It's not fair," and give into frustration and stress.

God tried to teach Jonah a lesson on fairness. God gave Jonah a bush to provide shade. Then, God caused the bush to wither and die and again, Jonah yelled, "That's not fair!" God explained neither is punishing the people of Ninevah. God tried to help Jonah understand the bigger picture; the faith of Ninevah. We never get to hear if Jonah understands God's lesson. That's the end of the book. Perhaps, we don't need to know. Perhaps the point is that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for everyone, especially when they're difficult and pouting.

Reflect: How do you stay slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love when you're frustrated at the behavior of children?

Pray: Holy God, you are merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Keep our hearts and minds on you, so we, like Jonah, can bring your message to everyone. Amen.

*Sami Pfalzgraf is Pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church and
Executive Director of St. Paul's Child Development Center and St.
Paul's Preschool, Erie, PA.*

SEPTEMBER 27, 2020
SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4

As we teach, there is a sense that we often need to control what is learned, so that testing can “prove” that a particular learning has happened. In a deeply thoughtful Confessional Theology class, thoughts of the reformers, gathered in the Book of Concord, were read and parsed into reflection papers; then shared aloud in class and dissected by other students and the professor. In the class of eight people there was a woman in a wheelchair; she was slow of speech. As we shared our page-long reflections, this particular student would speak hers, typically in three sentences.

Our professor would balk, asking for a longer reflection. Her words were hitting the target, succinct and pointed. Midway through the class, the professor’s frustration with her brevity was palpable. One classmate said wistfully, “I wish I could write so clearly.” The professor looked at the speaker, looked at the woman, and instructed, “Read it again.” As she finished, the professor sighed, “I expect these to be more...messy. You hit the target – right in the bullseye. I am sorry I missed that; I’m used to more.” His expectations got in the way of receiving the depth of her answers. As teachers, our hopes and expectations often lead us to anticipate responses of a certain length in a given amount of time, testable through a particular lens. How difficult it is in our test-driven world to see the different lumens in the lightbulbs of our varied students.

Reflect: How do I hear my students in their learning journey, where they are today? How might I listen with the heart of Christ to receive them as they are, where they are, in this lesson?

Pray: Holy Creator, each day let me simply reside in each moment, teaching, listening, curious about each lesson and how each student is grasping the information. Let me have stamina and presence, that I might be the teacher you have called me to be, just for today. In your holy name I pray, Amen.

*Amy Truhe serves as Bethany College Chaplain and Pastor of
Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lindsborg, KS.*

OCTOBER 4, 2020
EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14

“I press on.” So says Paul, reflecting on his past and looking toward the future. Perhaps you’re feeling the same way as we seek hope and joy as the world emerges from the pandemic. And there’s a lot we’d like to forget, truth be told. Putting 2020 in the rearview is at the top of my “to-do” list right now – how about you? Except that forgetfulness is dangerous, even deadly. Those who forget the past may be doomed to repeat it, and even those who remember may be doomed to illness or injury by careless or forgetful folks around them.

Remembering and applying life’s lessons is what education is all about, and as faith-centered educators we bear a particular calling to remember and embrace life’s lessons. So what does Paul mean by “forgetting what lies behind?” I think he means not getting stuck in old mistakes, tired platitudes, false delusions and misguided pride. Whatever may be keeping us mired in fear and failure, that we will bid farewell to, so that we can faithfully “press on.” Press on to trust in God’s grace. Press on to inspire God’s children. Press on to embrace the promise of life to the full, in the name of the One who pressed on for the life of the world. Press on!

Reflect: What difficult memories are your families and students facing? What needs to be remembered, and what should be left behind? How can the hope Christ offers sustain us and those in our care?

Pray: Thank you God for placing us in such pivotal roles in the lives of those we serve. May we seek God’s wisdom and peace to activate and motivate a ministry of encouragement and leadership. Amen.

Bill Hurst is the Senior Pastor of First Lutheran Church and School, Torrance, CA.

OCTOBER 11, 2020
NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
ROMANS 15:13

You certainly have witnessed the young child who is full of hope! They are bold, invincible, they know no fear. Do you recall the night before you began your teaching career? You may have doubted your lesson plans or how you would work with a child who bites, but your anticipation and joy came from trusting that God had a purpose for you.

Our schools and centers exist to feed and nurture God's little people. We distinguish ourselves from other quality commercial programs and public pre-Kindergartens because we feed the hope that God has planted in the hearts of every one of our students.

St. Paul's mission was to spread the Good News to gentiles and declare the affirmation that our faith in God brings joy into our lives and provides us with meaning and fulfillment. That message is repeated today for you and for me.

Our calling is to plant that message in the hearts of students, that they might grow, that they may be filled with an understanding of their own worth. Today I encourage you to live a life of joy. Let the world see that you are God's and you teach all nations, one young soul at a time. Trust that the Holy Spirit fills your classroom and goes home with your children every day.

Reflect: What talent did God give you for feeding God's spirit in your students?

Pray: We pray we are able to look into the lives of the student in front of us and see the joy and the peace that is the foundation for their future lives of fellowship and purpose. We pray for energy, insight, and strength to point those who don't know Jesus, to the Savior of the world. We pray for the future of God's church and those who will dedicate their lives to telling God's Story. Amen.

Don Gillingham is Executive Director of Rockford Lutheran School, IL. His career began in 1977. He has served his calling as a speaker and writer to the church and the wider community.

OCTOBER 18, 2020
TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
EXODUS 33:12-23

Even Moses doubted. That great leader, chosen by God, was told by God to lead his people from Mt. Sinai to the promised land. God was disgusted with the Israelites and said "Get out of here before I destroy you." Moses said "I'm not going anywhere with these people without you." In Exodus 33:17, The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight." To which Moses basically says "prove it." Moses doubted. He wanted proof that God meant what he said.

In response, God promises, "I will make all my goodness pass before you...but you cannot see my face." And God does –God shows full glory to Moses and renews the covenant.

There are times when I doubt. I question how God can love a person like me. I doubt that God can use me to accomplish what it is that God has called me to do. But it makes me feel better when giants of the faith, flawed people just like me, show their doubt – yet God used them to accomplish incredible things.

When God makes a promise we know it will be done. Have you ever promised and fallen short? Yeah - me too. But not God. Promise made, promise kept. Every single one of them – especially the first promise in Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." From that very first promise of a Savior to Jesus's words in Matthew 28:20, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Reflect: What doubts of yours does God's promises alleviate?

Pray: Most Awesome God, forgive my doubts, renew my spirit, help me to always believe your promises. May the comfort of God's promises always bring me hope and joy. Amen.

Curtis Wudtke is the Principal of Rockford Lutheran Academy, the PK-5th grade arm of Rockford Lutheran School which serves almost 800 students in grades PK-12 in Rockford, IL.

OCTOBER 25, 2020
TWENTY-SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
MATTHEW 22:34-46

Before writing this devotion, I printed the directions. One sentence reads, "Consider devotions of hope and joy, of peace and strength for the coming school year." I quickly circled words. My two circles intersected, forming a Venn diagram. The area in common is "joy, of peace." In a pandemic where do "joy" and "of peace" come from?

They come from where they always come from—from God, from love, from each other. In Matthew 22:36-40 a lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Because God loves us we can love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. We are all God's children. We know God loves us and we try to love others, but we may not deeply experience this love. We need a commandment as a constant reminder so we can practice love until we experience it more often. When we express our love through service to our neighbors, we experience and know God's love, peace and joy.

Reflect: How have you provided an act of service or caring that made you feel joy or peace? Has someone shown you an act of love or service?

Pray: God who loves us, help us to love you and our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to be your hands and your heart in service and compassion. Amen.

Kristyl Downey is Office Manager at Bethania Lutheran Church, Solvang CA. Kristyl leads singing in chapel at Bethania Preschool and After School.

NOVEMBER 1, 2020
ALL SAINTS DAY
MATTHEW 5:1-12 (THE BEATITUDES)

These texts fit together in a remarkable way for us as educators. The Beatitudes are introduced as Jesus, joined by his disciples, sits on a mountainside. It 's one of those teachable moments beginning with the words, "and he began to teach them." Jesus goes on to describe the blessings given to those who are often overlooked or undervalued in society, e.g. the meek, the peacemakers, those who mourn, etc. They are the ones often not seen, welcomed, or heard by those with authority and power, like children whose interruptions are inconvenient when other things claim our attention. Then in the 1st John text, Jesus tells about the love God has for all of us, so great that we're not only called the "children of God", but we ARE God's children. How different it is to be seen through God's eyes!

Showing what belonging to God 's family looks like is our calling as teachers of the Gospel. We celebrate joys with our coworkers, our students, and their families, and offer hope in the difficult times we all encounter. Our curricula are lessons in love. What a gift we've been given to share!

Reflect: Tell about a time that you felt like you didn't belong? Did it make you uncomfortable or hurt your feelings? What helped you feel better?

Pray: Lord of Love, We give thanks for those who have shown us your love. Help us to remember that we, too, belong to your community of saints. Knowing that nothing can separate us from you, we are empowered to invite those we touch into your family circle with the love you have given us to share. May we grow in your grace. Let it be so. Amen.

*Karen Kress is a Wife, Mother, Grandmother, Teacher, Stephen
Leader and Minister—living, loving and teaching
in Waupaca, WI.*

NOVEMBER 8, 2020,
TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
MATTHEW 25:1-13

The parable of the bridesmaids reminds us of how important it is to be prepared and to be ready. We don't want to be caught sleeping and unprepared. We know that Christ is returning. And sometimes we may become complacent while we wait. But we're reminded that we don't know when Christ is returning, so we must make the most of every opportunity we have. Every day, we have opportunities to impact the children that we serve. And it's very possible to get distracted from that mission. We've had lots of opportunities to be distracted in this past year with the unprecedented challenges we've faced and are still facing, but we cannot lose sight of our mission.

After all, there are five wise bridesmaids and five foolish bridesmaids in this parable. But what made them wise or foolish? Were some just born wiser? I suspect not. I suspect that the wise bridesmaids were taught to be wise. Someone spoke into their lives. Someone encouraged them to prepare for what comes next. Someone cautioned them to be ready at all times.

So as we train the young minds in our care this week, let's remember how critical our job is. We are that someone for them. We teach educational skills and life skills, but we also instill critical eternal life skills. Our intentionality may make the difference on whether those in our care are ready on the day Christ returns or holding an empty lamp.

Reflect: How can we be preparing for Christ's return?

Pray: God, thank you for the privilege it is to inspire and encourage our students to seek you in their lives. Show us ways that we can prepare our students for your return. Help us discern ways that we can make eternal impacts this week. Amen.

*Amanda Norman serves as Curriculum Coach at Rockford
Lutheran Academy in Rockford, IL. She has taught in Lutheran
schools for the last 14 years.*

NOVEMBER 15, 2020
TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

One of the initiatives in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is the "Life of Faith Initiative." This initiative encourages believers to recognize that they are living out their faith, not only on the day (usually Sunday) that they worship with fellow believers. We live out our faith in the various roles that we have in life. For example, when I was a pastor in a congregation, I obviously shared my faith with the congregation in a variety of ways. I also shared my faith in my role as a daughter, sister, aunt, friend, neighbor, etc. My faith offers me guidance as I live my life. As I live out the various roles that I have, my faith teaches me and challenges me to show everyone love and respect.

The initiative suggests that our vocation is to be children of God in the world and then we live out our faith in the various roles we have such as teacher or nurse or cousin or bus driver. I was blessed to visit Westwood Lutheran Church in Minneapolis that uses vocation and faith as a framework for its ministry. There was a panel of members from the church who talked about how they live out their faith in different ways. One participant was a fifth grade teacher who got teary-eyed talking about how her faith encourages her to lift up the self-esteem of some of her students. Today's lesson says, "encourage one another and build up each other." I am in awe when I think of the teachers and students who encouraged me and built me up. Imagine how many students YOU have done that for. Thank you for living out your faith in daily life!

Reflect: Name some people that you have encouraged if they were sad or were not feeling good about themselves.

Pray: Loving God, you ask us to love and encourage our neighbor. Please open my eyes to situations where I can reach out to someone with support and care. Thank you God. Amen.

Rev. Brenda K. Smith is the Program Director for Faith Practices and Book of Faith at the ELCA Churchwide Office in Chicago, IL.

NOVEMBER 22, 2020
TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
MATTHEW 25: 35-36

This is the season for Thanksgiving. It is a wonderful time to invite children to think of others who are in need. Even the youngest of children feel empathy when someone else is crying. Older children can begin to understand caring for “the least of these” as a way to show love for Jesus.

For Christians, we care for others not because it's nice and not because it makes us good people. We care for other people as if we are caring for Jesus himself. Jesus loved us first!

Are there ways your learning center can care for “the least of these?” Is there a local food pantry needing donations—can this become a game or competition for a class to gather the most cans of food? Or is there a clothes closet needing coats for the coming winter? Even hand-drawn pictures can be precious gifts for a senior ministry or nursing care center.

Even in a year full of challenges, as 2020 has already been, there are many reasons to give thanks. God has blessed us with community and resources, and God will continue to show us opportunities to care for one another. Let your students voice their gratitude, and teachers and educators: don't forget to count your blessings as well!

Reflect: For what are you most grateful? What is your favorite way to share your gifts with others?

Pray: Thank you, God, for your unending love and your grace in Jesus Christ. Help us to love you by loving and caring for our neighbors. Show us the way, in your mercy. Amen.

*Cheryl Walenta Gorvie, Pastor at Bethany Lutheran Church and
Bethany Lutheran Child Development Center in Dallas, TX.*

NOVEMBER 26, 2020
THANKSGIVING DAY, USA
LUKE 17:11-19

Taking Time to Give Thanks

Jesus heard ten persons, who were social distancing because they had an incurable skin disease, call out to him for mercy. In response, Jesus instructs the ten lepers to show themselves to the religious authorities, who were the only people with the power to declare an infected person eligible to leave quarantine. On their way to see the religious authorities, all ten lepers became healed, but only one took a detour to return and thank Jesus. We are told that the one who took time to say thank you was an outsider. He gave thanks while the other nine lepers, who were members of Jesus' community, did not.

We often hear that we should take the time to say, "I love you," to the persons we love. They need to hear it, and we need the experience of expressing our love verbally. It helps to make us whole. We also need to remember to say "thank you" to those in our lives, including our students and co-workers at school. Taking the time to say "thank you" is not just for the big occasions, but for every day. Along with St. Paul (I Corinthians 1:4), give thanks always for everyone in your life, and to God for giving you your school and community, even on the days when you feel like an outsider. In taking time to say thank you, you will be living your faith, which indeed makes you—like the leper—well.

Reflect: Do you ever find it difficult to say "thank you," even though you know that you should? What holds you back?

Prayer Prompt: What has happened in your classroom or school this week that makes you thankful? Remember in prayer the persons to whom you expressed "thank you" last week.

*Mark Wilhelm is Executive Director for the Network of ELCA
Colleges and Universities and a former adviser to
ELEA's Board of Directors.*

NOVEMBER 29, 2020
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus (3-4).

The word Advent means *coming*. Advent calls us to prepare, but also to wait, hope, and long for the world to be made right in Jesus. The color is blue – the color of HOPE. We add the Advent wreath to our worship center and light one new candle each week, as we anticipate with hope the coming of the Christ Child.

Paul's greeting to the Corinthians provides HOPE! God's grace is amazing. Paul's words to the Corinthians are the same words to us. *We* have been given knowledge of Christ Jesus and *we* have been given the gift of speech so that *we* will be able to proclaim and give testimony of that knowledge. God's grace is truly amazing! Paul helps the community understand why they have been given these gifts. Yes, it is to help them in the living out of their faith in the here and now. But, more importantly, to help them for the long journey that lies ahead; the journey that will lead them "...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Like the community in Corinth, we too need to be reminded that we continue to live in the time in between. What God is doing is not over and done. There are still more truths to be revealed. We, too, have been given spiritual gifts that will strengthen us for the journey ahead. Take time this week to savor short breaks and to spend time with family, friends, and your faith family. Experience Advent as time that transcends our frenzied human notions of time. Christmas will be here soon enough. Slow down and live.

Reflect: What gives you hope?

Pray: Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Protect us by your strength and save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Robert Federwitz is a lifelong Lutheran educator, retired, living in Dover, DE.

DECEMBER 6, 2020
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
ISAIAH 40:1-11

The scripture reading from Isaiah begins with words of comfort. "Comfort, O Comfort My people says your God." Our world has changed, nothing has avoided the impact of a worldwide contagious virus. There are new safety considerations for students, staff and families. New ways to teach and inspire students. Over the past few months, there have been moments when changes came so rapidly it was hard to keep up. Finding comfort and routine is welcomed.

Certainly, as professionals in education, we are called to not only teach, but also to offer words of encouragement and comfort. Words are the only way to offer support at times. There is hope and joy in the words of this scripture, in the coming of Jesus.

There is nothing too great that cannot be met with God's strength. Sometimes, challenges are great and ripple out for many days. But with these words, we are not alone. We may not know what is yet to come, but we do know God provides all that we need: "feeding the flock like a shepherd; gathering the lambs in loving arms, and carry them close, and gently leading the mother sheep." (Isaiah 40:11). In the midst of change, these words are steadfast. God is with us, now and forever and for this we can give thanks.

Reflect: Where have you seen God's glory stand among you, in spite of the changes we have seen over the past few months? How does God bring you comfort?

Pray: God, show me where comfort is needed at this time. Who are the marginalized, those who are sick or are caring for the sick, those in need of homes and food, peoples needing advocacy. I pray for guidance and strength to "prepare the way of the Lord." Amen.

Amy Cauble is the Preschool Director and teacher for Spirit of Joy Preschool in Sioux Falls, SD. She has served as an educator/director in the ELCA for over fifteen years.

DECEMBER 13, 2020
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11

As we approach Christmas, it is natural to begin to feel weary from the hustle and bustle of stress of the holidays. Our human nature sometimes overtakes us as we begin to realize that another year is coming to a quick close and we wonder if we truly made a difference. It is easy to doubt our God given abilities to approach others who are hurting deep inside.

We must take great assurance in Isaiah 61:1, 2. This scripture has given us confidence to know that the spirit of the Lord God is upon us, because the Lord has anointed us, to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to bring freedom to the captives and release those who have been imprisoned....to comfort all who mourn.

When the Holy Spirit leads us to bring comfort or assistance to someone, we have to rest assured that God has anointed us with the Spirit to do what we are called to do. There are those who are waiting for us to bring them good news, freedom and comfort—today!

Let's take this promise to heart as someone needs you to be confident with your anointing today!

Reflect: Who is the Holy Spirit leading you to help this week? Do you feel the confidence to do so?

Pray: O God, as humans it is easy to become focused on the stress and not on the anointing that is placed on our lives to help others. Remind us today, that you have called us to represent you to all whom we meet. Thank you for choosing us. Amen.

Melanie Bicket, Membership Director of ELEA.

DECEMBER 20, 2020
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
LUKE 1:26-38

As I put pen to paper to write this devotion I realize that today is the beginning of the seventh week of home seclusion due to the coronavirus. I have been working alongside my family to finish the school year. Every day is spent trying to figure out how to live in a new normal. Looking back I vividly remember the fear and panic I felt when I heard those first reports of a “new” virus that would eventually force me to shelter in place. How will this pandemic change my life? Like that day long ago when the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, she too was confused and scared about the unknown, about her new normal. Her thoughts were filled with fear. My thoughts can become filled with fear. Mary and I have both asked the same question, “How can this be?” The angel Gabriel has reassured, “The Lord is with you.”

I continue my work each day trying to make a difference in this new time. I am reminded that long ago Mary was chosen to bear a child, a child to be called the Son of God. In my way, in my doubt, in my questioning the whys of today, I simply say out loud once again, “Here am I, a servant of the Lord.” For truly, “nothing will be impossible with God.”

Reflect: How have you chosen to live in this world of change? Have you included the hope and joy of the coming birth of Jesus? When you face new challenges, do you ask God for help?

Pray: Thank you God for the birth of Jesus; the gift of world peace. Thank you God for the reassurance that I am not alone in your unknown. Through your love, help me find strength. Amen.

Doug Boots is a speech-language pathologist with Central Rivers Area Education Agency. He has served at St. Paul’s Lutheran School in Waverly, IA, for the past 21 years.

**DECEMBER 24 & 25,
2020 CHRISTMAS DAY**
LUKE 2:1-14 (15-20)

Christmas is all about joy. We sing of joy. We read of joy. We hear the angels proclaim, "Joy to the world!" But that first Christmas came in the midst of darkness. Imagine how scared Mary must have been; how Joseph must have worried.

Isaiah 9:2 reminds us that, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined."

As we near the end of 2020, it indeed has been a year of darkness and light. And yet, we are people of hope. We are Christmas people. Our hope begins in a manger bed – the light that shines in the darkness is born this day.

And we are Easter people. Our hope, that began in a manger bed, was fulfilled on the cross. We know the rest of the story. We know the one true light. We know whose we are.

So today we celebrate with hope and joy. Today we celebrate the birth of our Savior. And "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13).

May your Christmas be blessed as the light shines in the darkness.

Reflect: Where do you see light and hope in the world today? How can you be light and hope for others?

Pray: In our culture of "getting," help me focus on giving thanks for blessings great and small. God, show me how to be light in my part of the world today. Amen.

Juli Lejman-Guy is Pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church and St. Peter's Faith & Family Daycare in Holgate, OH. She also serves as President of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA.

DECEMBER 27, 2020
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY
GALATIANS 4:4-5

How blessed and grateful I am when I see our families dropping off their children each morning. The children are loved, nurtured and cherished...wanted. Their parents chose to have a family and God blessed them with children.

But what about those parents that didn't have an opportunity to biologically have children? The parents who instead, adopted? Parents who chose children with whom they had no blood connection, no family history, and in many cases, didn't have the opportunity of growing into the relationships, before becoming instant Moms and Dads? Consider the aunts, uncles, grandparents and extended relatives who have become instant caregivers as well!

These families, especially, glorify God's love for us! These parents and caregivers deliberately chose, just as we were chosen, to embrace and love. God sent his son to bring us into the fold, to be embraced and loved. Chosen, "so that we might receive adoption as children." What hope and joy we have received!

As educators we have chosen our profession—deliberately. We have chosen to not only teach in our respective specialties, but to teach in a faith-based environment which gives us the opportunity to share that same love, that hope and joy!

Reflect: How will you share God's hope and joy today, with a child in your life?

Pray: Dear God, help us to open our hearts and minds to the hope and joy you give to us every second of every day. Help us to remember we were chosen to be part of a family unlike no other. Remind us that the children we have chosen to serve are God's chosen too. Amen.

Angela Camp is the Director of Operations at Christ Lutheran Preschool in Dallas, TX, where she has served for 12 years.

JANUARY 3, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY
JOHN 1:5-6

Time after Christmas can be a let-down. You might not be back in school – due to your “normal” schedule or due to the pandemic. Fear, anxiety and loneliness are hallmarks of the time in which I’m writing (May 2020). I pray that things are better for you in January of 2021.

Christ’s love and abundance were part of our Christmas celebrations. Christ – the light that shines in the darkness of the world’s trials – that Christ light is not overcome. You are blessed by it; it shines in you and through you as you interact with students, co-workers and the families who entrust their sons and daughters to you.

Maybe keep the manger scenes up (or put them back up!) and teach the joy of the festival of the Three Kings (Jan. 6). Make a star and have a socially distanced procession. Help your students remember the light and the joy of the holidays as they and you live into the new year with all its hopes and challenges. Bless the doors of your classrooms with the initials of the Magi: 20 + C + M + B + 21.

May Christ’s light shine in and through you – for your own joy and abundant life – and in and through you via internet, or phone, or via personal interaction, through your mask if that’s still part of your daily routine, and for the sake of the world which God created and loves and fills with light.

Reflect: How do you identify with the "person" sent by God to witness to God's light?

Pray: Give us the hope that comes from the peace and trust that the light is not overcome by the world's trials. Amen.

Beth Orling has long been connected with Lutheran Christian education –first as a student, then as a teacher and later as pastor of churches which had early childhood education centers.

JANUARY 6, 2021
EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

MATTHEW 2:10

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

The journey was long, they traveled perhaps for months. It was fraught with confusion even as though it might have been well planned. But the journey was also guided by hope in the form of a star.

The journey of learning is a lifetime. There are times of success and times of failure and each, if we allow it, is a learning experience. Who is our guide, our star of hope? As all preschoolers know, the number one answer, of course, is Jesus! Jesus sent to us, to the whole world, to bring us to the place where we are overwhelmed by joy.

Do you realize the word "overwhelmed" has a much more negative connotation than positive? But the word also means amazed, astounded, astonished. When the star stopped over the place where our Savior and Lord was, the Magi were amazed by joy, astounded by joy, astonished by joy.

In your personal life, with your friends, and in your classroom, allow Jesus, our guiding star to overwhelm, to amaze, to astound and to astonish you with his Joy.

Reflect: When have you experienced overwhelming joy?

Pray: Jesus, guiding Star of Hope, fill me today and everyday with your overwhelming Joy. Amen

Gaye Rodriguey is a retired Early Childhood Educator, who stays connected to education by volunteering at her grandchildren's schools and subbing at His Kids Preschool at Oak Harbor Lutheran Church. She lives in Coupeville, Whidbey Island, WA.

JANUARY 10, 2021
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
GENESIS 1:3-4

The First Sunday after Epiphany is also the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus. Too often we think of baptism as a one-time event, rather than a way of living one's life. Baptism is a lifelong journey of following Jesus and shining light in dark places. To be baptized is to be changed from the inside out.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was a year of immense challenge and change. Everything was turned upside down, inside out, and nothing stayed the same –in our households or our ELCA schools and early learning centers. You, the staff of our Lutheran schools and early learning centers, are the light that shine in dark places. You are the hope and joy in the lives of the children, youth and households you serve each and every day.

When Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, the sky split open and a voice from heaven spoke, “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love; you are the pride of my life.” Mark your forehead or hand with the sign of the cross and say out loud, “I am a child of God marked with the sign of the cross forever. God loves me. I will let my light shine.”

Reflect: Where do you witness the light of Christ shining? Where do you experience hope and joy?

Pray: Sing the following words to the tune “Rock-a-bye Baby” 

This is my call-ing, let my light shine!
Help me spread joy, and hope to all kind.
God said, “You’re my child and I love you.
You're wrapped in God's arms, your whole life through.”

Linda Staats is the Founder of HomeGrown Faith. She serves on the ELEA Board and was the recipient of the 2018 Donald A. Vetter Educational Service Award.

JANUARY 17, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
1 SAMUEL 3:1-10, (11-20)

Would you ever imagine that as a Lutheran School staff member or volunteer you would have a vital opportunity to help nurture the next generation of prophets? Perhaps Eli, Israel's high priest, is just as surprised when God calls young Samuel, who is in Eli's charge, to serve as God's prophet/truth teller/whistle blower to Israel. Samuel is to tell the truth when the Israelites wrong God and each other so they might turn back to God's loving, just ways.

Complications arise in verses 11-20, when God reveals that Samuel's first truth to tell is that Eli's priestly family will be removed because Eli's sons steal offerings and abuse worshippers! Samuel understandably fears telling Eli. To his credit, Eli teaches Samuel and all of us the importance of faithful prophesying: "Do not hide it [the truth] from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me..." (v.17). Samuel tells the truth and Eli responds, "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good..." (v.18). Samuel grows into a trustworthy prophet for the Lord, including as a plain-speaking check and balance upon the soon-to-be-infamous King Saul. How does Samuel's truth-telling to Eli compare to today's younger generations speaking truths about our current generation's (me included) life-and-death choices regarding politics, economics, health, justice, and the environment in this pandemic world?

Reflect: Recall a time when it was difficult for you to tell the truth, but God brought good from the situation. Consider your feelings at the time and compare and contrast them with the relief and resolve that comes with saying, "It is the Lord, let him [the Lord] do what seems good to him [the Lord]" (v. 18b).

Pray: God calls Samuel, each of us, and those whom we educate to tell the truth. Let us find hope, joy, peace, and strength in trusting that God, whose Son Jesus is revealed at Epiphany, will do good with that truth. Amen.

*Rev. Karl Biermann is Assistant to the Bishop for the
Northeastern Ohio Synod. He served as a parish pastor for 10
years--including a vibrant daycare ministry.*

JANUARY 24, 2021
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

PSALM 62:5-6

*For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from God.
God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not
be shaken.*

The sound of school buses, cars, sirens, school bells, and talking loudly are part of the typical day for teachers. Noise can have a negative effect on our health and safety. It can lead to stress, high blood pressure, sleep loss, and a loss of productivity. Silence, on the other hand, relieves stress, is good for the heart, provides better sleep, and improves memory. Finding time during the day to be centered in silence is important. The psalmist in today's reading, "waits in silence." Through a relationship with God, the psalmist finds hope. Founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), George Fox, once said, "Carry some quiet around inside you. Be still and cool in mind and spirit... and then you will feel the principle of God to turn your mind to the Lord from whence cometh life; whereby you may receive the strength and power to allay all storms and tempests."

Although it may be difficult to find quiet during the school day, finding time either in the morning before school or after a long day to be in silence can have benefits. Be intentional about setting a time apart each day to read a daily devotion and sit in silence. Even though routine tasks tend to dominate our day, let's not let our lives be measured by the demands of the school day. Embrace the hope and joy that is ours through God and gives us hope and faith in the future.

Reflect: Have you ever taken time to sit in silence and listen for God? How could doing this make a difference in your life?

Pray: Sit silently. Breathe in deeply and hold your breath. As you exhale, imagine all your stress leaving your body. Repeat. End by saying, "Thank you God for filling my life with hope and joy."

Debbie Streicher is Co-Director at Milestones Ministry, former president of the Christian Education network of the ELCA, a certified coach for the ELCA. She has coached and consulted for congregations across the country.

JANUARY 31, 2021
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPHIANY
MARK 1:21-28

Most of us believe that Jesus' first miracle was to change water into wine. The first miracle of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Mark tells of Jesus "casting out an evilspirit." Many Biblical scholars believe that when the New Testament refers to people possessed by demons it actually refers to people who are mentally ill.

As a Lutheran educator I like that interpretation. It gives me hope as I deal with an increasing number of children suffering with psychological problems. I see way too many children suffering from unreasonable fear, severe dementia, ongoing Asperger's syndrome. I work with their parents. I give them all the help I can. Sometimes we seek professional therapy.

In the midst of all this I fervently pray, "Lord, cast out that evil demon wich is keeping this child from achieving his/her potential for wholeness and joy." And Christ can still cast out that demon. This I believe.

Reflect: What is the evidence that there seems to be an increasing number of children with "mental problems?" What is the role of prayer in helping hurting students? Do we pray with them? For them? Do we tell them or their parents of our prayers? Do we urge the children to pray? Can you think of a case where you have confessed, "Jesus help this child improve?"

Pray: Lord, I thank you for helping me. I deal with different children. Send Your Sprit into their troubled souls. Bring healing and wholeness. In Jesus name, Amen.

Melvin Kieschnick is now retired after decades of service in Lutheran schools nationally and internationally.

FEBRUARY 7, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
ISAIAH 40:31

Have you ever been asked “why” you teach young children? “Why teach in a church-related school or center? Aren’t salaries there low?” And the questions go on. And on. And on. The answers many of us give to questions like these lift up our love of the children we teach. We sense a call to make the world a better place, a more faithful place.

Love has a way of doing that, especially, love that has its source in God’s love for you, for all people, for all creation. This ancient passage from the opening of Deutero-Isaiah’s oracle to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon connects the people’s hope with the divine love of the Almighty. It is God’s love that rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and which will rescue them from Exile.

Isaiah uses a stunningly beautiful image, that of the Golden Eagle of the Sinai desert whose remarkable characteristic is its tenderness toward its young. With nests built in crevices and on the ledges of cliffs, both parents bring food to their eaglets. As the eaglet launches itself from its perch and attempts to follow its parent in flight, if the fledgling is unable to sustain flight, a parent eagle swoops beneath the eaglet and catches it on its mantle, its back, bearing it back to the nest. Our ancient Hebrew ancestors saw in this a parable of God’s tender love and assurance of rescue. The prophet lifts up this parable for his people in turmoil and distress (as are we now in this covid-world, like never before). Hear the prophet and be strengthened in hope. As an educator you know what that tenderness and assurance feels like. You know the fulfillment it brings to your call. Praise God.

Reflect: In what ways has our hope of divine rescue sustained you this past week?

Pray: Almighty and eternal God, carry us to safety with your tender love and enduring promise of rescue. Amen.

Donna Braband is the former Director for Schools and Early Childhood Education Programs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

FEBRUARY 14, 2021
THE TRANSFIGURATION
MARK 9:1-2

When I was a young man I went to parties on Friday nights, I played softball on Sunday mornings, and I listened to the popular music of the time. Then one day it all came to a halt. Day after day I just went to work and came home. I didn't need to run to this place or that place to occupy myself. It was a time of waiting and preparation; a time of letting go and purification. Then the call to ministry came, God revealed God's glory to me.

Jesus tells the disciples that they will see the kingdom of God come with power. Then six days later it happened. They experienced six days of waiting, of preparation, of purification. Sometimes God will retrieve us from the world before the glory is made manifest, just as Moses sat on the cloud covered mountain for six days before God spoke to him. (Exodus 24:16)

I still attend the occasional party, and although I am too old to play, I still enjoy watching sports. Secular music is okay, but I don't think of it in the same way that I once did. All of these worldly things shrink in comparison to the kingdom of God and its power.

Reflect: The season of Lent is upon us. How could repentance simply be an exercise of letting go and waiting for the glory of God to be revealed?

Pray: Lord show us the places where we have become so invested in the world that we have left no room to hear you or to know you. Lord help us to slow down, and show us peace and contentment in the simple things of life. Amen.

Gary E. Costa is Pastor of Cross of Glory Lutheran Church, Aberdeen, NJ. Ministries include an accredited nursery school along with several other teaching and learning opportunities.

FEBRUARY 17, 2021
ASH WEDNESDAY
II COR. 5:20B-6:10

Greetings fellow ambassadors! Paul's term immediately preceding our text addresses who we really are as Christians. We usually think of ambassadors as high-ranking officials representing their home countries, but an ambassador can be any authorized messenger, usually with a specific mission. As Christians, that's us! Paul describes our "ambassador" job description and it isn't pretty. Our mission is to be one of suffering. And yet it becomes a paradox. Our suffering is great but our burden is light?!

Today we mark upon our foreheads a cross of ashes, our "Christ" brand. NOW is the day of salvation. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but right now. We live and have our being in the present. Along with our children and colleagues we live as both sinner and saint, suffering yet relieved of our burdens by Christ.

We enter this Lenten season considering our sufferings in light of Christ's sufferings for us. We consider our burdens in light of Christ carrying them for us. It is a time to search our souls, to remind ourselves that our burdens, our failures, our rejections can become joy and bring us hope. We step into Lent with our individual tasks and responsibilities, with the mission to bring that joy and hope to our children so that, just as Lent is self-reflection, we also see ourselves as reflections of the image of Christ, forgiven, loved and abounding in hope.

Reflect: What personal burden or source of suffering are you carrying that you would like Christ to carry to the cross, relieving you of guilt and opening your heart to hope and peace and joy?

Pray: Dear God, help me to search deeply within myself for contrition and repentance that I may freely embrace the joy, the peace and the hope that are mine through Christ as he lifts me up, my burdens, my guilt, upon his shoulders. In his name and in the sure promise of the resurrection, Amen

Alan Feddersen is a retired Lutheran teacher, administrator and director of schools who has served in Illinois, Cleveland, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento and Hong Kong.

FEBRUARY 21, 2021
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
JEREMIAH 31:31-34

Is Jeremiah trying to put you out of a job? According to the prophet, the days are surely coming when God's people will no longer teach one another! They'll no longer say, "Know the Lord," because everyone – down to the very least of these – will already know the Lord. God's ways will just be written on their hearts. Even preschoolers?

There are times when I could easily say we are living in the 'new covenant' that Jeremiah tells us about, "When God is our God, and we are God's people." But at least as often, I could say we must be stuck in the 'old covenant.' A covenant God's people broke, as Jeremiah reminds us. Actually, I find plenty of reminders each day of failing to live up to God's ways.

I guess that's the point – God's ways are written on our hearts not because we finally nailed it, but because God forgives our broken promises again and again until God's love is all we have. And for the youngest of God's people, who are entrusted to our care, we are called to show – not just tell of – God's love and God's ways. Our young folks need to see God's ways in action, which means less of our perfectly worded statements about God, and more of our mistakes forgiven. More of our hearts being renewed.

Reflect: In what way can you model forgiveness to children around you – or, even better, in what ways can you help them model forgiveness to you? Hint: you'll have to admit to your mistakes!

Prayer Prompt: Pray for the places in your life that need the renewal of God's grace and forgiveness – from the least of these to the greatest.

Keith Walbolt is Pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd and Little Lambs Christian Preschool in Seminole, FL, where the children have named him Mr. Chapel.

FEBRUARY 28, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
MARK 8:33-34

Lent is a time to give up something. Do you know of anyone who has given up something for Lent? We give of ourselves and go without, so that we are reminded of something far more important than sweets, or money, or anything else. By giving things up, we remind ourselves of all that we have because of Jesus.

Many of us give up something during Lent, but Jesus invites us also to take up something in Lent. Jesus invites us to take up the cross. This is an important message for us Christians to remember. We should not only remember it, but share it with others. What are you willing to give up for Christ? Although a tough question, when you look at what Christ gave up for you, it should be easy to find something to give up. The children we educate everyday are fortunate to be able to discuss openly what Christ did for them, as well as what Christ means for them.

As we walk through this Lenten season do not forget the importance of it – look to yourself to see what you can give up. Also, look at what we can give to others, that being the wonderful message of our risen Savior. We should rejoice in the fact that Jesus died for us, so that by defeating death we could receive something that would have never been attainable by ourselves – Eternal Life. It is great to know this and to share this everyday with God’s children.

Reflect: What are you willing to give up to follow Jesus? What can your students give up this week to see what it means to sacrifice? What do your families give up, and receive, by sending their children to your center or school?

Pray: Lord, help me become more simplistic in what I have and to look to things I can give away in doing so. Lord, also give me patience and strength as I show others what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus. Through my example, may others see what it means to follow Jesus and live a life accordingly. Amen.

Michael Rottmann is Principal at Grace Lutheran School, Winter Haven, FL and President of the ELEA Board of Directors.

MARCH 7, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
PSALM 147:1-11, 20C

Teaching is a profession that is full of emotional ups and downs, seasonally, daily, and sometimes even hourly! There's the excitement of the new school year each fall, then the disillusionment when the newness wears off. There's excitement at Christmastime, and then comes January when the weeks and the workload stretches out and piles up. Within our offices or classrooms we may be excited about a new lesson, nervous about an upcoming meeting, and sad for a situation with a student.

Psalm 147 is a wonderful Psalm for us. The verses provide words and images for prayer no matter our emotional state. When we are happy or celebrating, verse 1 echoes our mood, "Praise the LORD! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting." When we are troubled or sad, verses 3-6 provide hope. God "heals the brokenhearted" and "lifts up the downtrodden." God's "understanding is beyond measure."

Less than a year ago many of our schools faced the biggest challenge any of us could remember. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school shutdowns were a time of enormous uncertainty. Many of our schools and churches are still dealing with the repercussions of those events. Psalm 147 contains the words we need to hear. God knows the number of the stars. God takes care of the animals. God delights "in those who hope in his steadfast love" (verse 11). Let us all continue to hope in God's steadfast love.

Reflect: Which verses of Psalm 147 speak to you most right now? How can we share God's steadfast love with others?

Pray: Let us praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God! God, you are gracious. You heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds. Lord, you determine the number of the stars. You are abundant in power, and your understanding is beyond measure. We sing to you with thanksgiving. We hope in your steadfast love. We praise you, O Lord. Amen.

Melissa Roselle is a lifelong Lutheran serving as the Director of Education at St. John's Lutheran Preschool in Springfield, IL.

MARCH 14, 2021
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
EPHESIANS 2:8

Those of us who work in education are in this field because we love to work with children or yearn to support their learning in a meaningful way. It is often full of ups, downs, and everything in between.

Many of us have worked with students who have had challenging behavior issues: tantrums, biting, aggression, fighting, etc. We do our best to work with parents on redirecting challenging behaviors and hope the children outgrow them or eventually get assessed and receive the tools they need to progress. However, as time goes on, it can become frustrating. As teachers we tend to exhaust all our options. We get stressed, confused, and often feel defeated because it is our job to help children learn and grow and it feels like we simply cannot do it.

On one of those tough days, I randomly came across a Facebook post that said, “God gives you grace every day!” It was right then I realized that if God gives us grace every day and forgives us of our transgressions, we should forgive the children for their behavior (as they could not control it anyway), and start fresh daily!

Regardless of what capacity we work with children, their families, or staff – we all need to start each day fresh and new. We cannot hold on to what happened yesterday and take it into the new day. The children, the parents, and even ourselves deserve grace for yesterday and every day.

Reflect: How can I make today feel like a new day?

Pray: Lord, I know I may not always behave in the best of ways, but you forgive me and allow me a chance to start fresh every single day. I ask that you guide my steps in allowing me to do the same in my life and for all those around me – children, coworkers, families, and more... Amen.

Ashlei Snead, M.A. is a Preschool Director at Bethel Encino Church and Preschool, Encino, CA. She has served the school and been part of the ELCA since 2014.

MARCH 21, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
JEREMIAH 31:31-34

As I sit on my patio admiring and thanking the Lord for the tremendous old tree just a short distance from me, I realize how blessed I am! It is so impressive and truly reminds me of the saying, “only God can make a tree.” I know that I’m like that tree for I too am “old.” (I’ll be 85 in July). God has been making me and leading me all my life. God has been in my heart and mind!

Jeremiah lets the children of Israel know that God will establish a new covenant with them. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

I have lived a long time under the new covenant that Jeremiah speaks about. It is pure joy to share with God’s little ones and many others about the Savior’s love for them and that God is truly in their hearts and minds. It gives them great hope for the years to come to know that they are God’s and God is theirs. You can rest assured that God has given you the love and hope to be with him forever.

Reflect: What opportunity has God given you to share God’s love and hope this week? How has someone shared God’s love and hope with you?

Pray: Thank you Lord for giving us the privilege of sharing and learning of God’s love that you have placed in our hearts and minds. Help us to always remember that you have promised to make us your very own. Give us the assurance that we will always be with you, here and in eternity. Amen.

Marge Robison is a retired lifelong Lutheran educator, former ELEA Board Member, and the 2010 recipient of the Donald A. Vetter Educational Service Award.

MARCH 29, 2021
SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER LENT
MARK 15:12-20

“It’s not fair!” As a teacher looking out for the individual needs of your students, have you ever been accused of your fairness? As a director, have you had to make a decision regarding your teachers that seemed unfair, but you could not disclose the reason for it? Did you say to yourself, “It’s not fair, but necessary”?

The year 2020 was a year that left our country shattered. We witnessed a virus which took us down. We experienced schools and churches placed in serious financial situations and some that could not recover. Schools, business, lives and incomes were all put on hold. Social distancing became a new expression and almost everything closed. Not fair, but necessary.

In Mark 15 we are told the people banded together and shouted “Crucify Him!” They flogged and beat Jesus. They mocked him. They crowned Jesus with thorns. They spit on him. Why did Jesus have to experience so much hatred? They nailed Jesus on a cross and pierced his side. Jesus died there for you and me. Not fair, but sacrificed for us and necessary. Jesus understood it, but was distressed in anticipation. In Mark 14:35 we read, “Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that, if it were possible the hour might pass from him.” Even at his death Jesus cries out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Because of Jesus sacrificial death, he gave each one of us and our students Hope and Joy for the future. Hope that no matter what adversity challenges us, we would overcome it with Joy to live with Him eternally. A decision of a death that was not fair, but necessary.

Reflect: Are there times in your career when you have had to make decisions that did not seem fair to all? Did you have the best intentions for your students?

Pray: Dear God, we are thankful for the gift of Your Son, the sacrifice Jesus made for each one of us. Help us to put our students needs first in the decisions we make each day. Amen.

APRIL 2, 2021
GOOD FRIDAY
JOHN 18:1-19:42

As a kid, I sat in the pew during worship on this day every year and wondered, “What’s so good about Good Friday?” After all, it’s the day when we recall Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, death and burial. Young or old, sometimes we are pretty literal, simplistic, superficial and even creative in our perceptions and thinking. As it turns out, “Good” is simply an adjective describing an important and holy day in the church year. Good Friday is ... good! It’s a special and pivotal day for our faith and theology, and the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is filled with good news and grace for us – a source of hope and joy.

Because God is loving and powerful, we are not held captive by death, the fear of death or the darkness of our weaknesses and mistakes. As human beings we experience these things and the emotions that come with them, but it is not our whole identity and life experience – we are people of God shaped by love and forgiveness given to us through the sacrifice Jesus made. Ultimately, we are people of hope and joy. The symbol of the cross reminds us of this good gift that changes our lives and the world. It reminds us that in the midst of challenges, disappointments, trauma and the work of daily life, there is also hope and joy. Getting to the hope and joy may take prayerful reflection, time and gentle encouragement from the people around us, but God’s promise is real on this good day and every day.

Reflect: What or who helps you find hope and joy when you are worried, sad or overwhelmed?

Prayer Prompt: Pray a personal responsive prayer. Pray about challenges, fears or difficulties that are weighing heavily on you. After each petition, respond with, “God’s grace is greater than this and will sustain me and give me hope.” Include petitions for your students and your school.

Rod Boriack has served in youth and family ministry, outdoor ministry and communications on the ELCA churchwide staff. He currently serves as an independent writer for the ELCA and other ELCA-related organizations. Des Plaines, IL.

APRIL 4, 2021
RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

ISAIAH 25:6-9

This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation (v. 9b).

Say it with me: Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! This Easter proclamation oozes hope and joy doesn't it!? Easter is filled with the promise of God that offers the hope of new life beyond all that would seem to be death.

Like my partners writing these devotions, we are living in the reality of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Many of us have been scrambling to finish the year with distance education and worship online. Some of us have had to close and await a future that none of us know exactly what it will look like in the fall let alone next Easter. This time of global pandemic (I sure hope we're mostly remembering it at this point!) brings into sharp focus the challenge of waiting.

Those of us who work with young kids know another clear example of the challenge of waiting. Patience is truly a spiritual gift that is taught and grown through parents, teachers, mentors and others along the journey. God's word from Isaiah this Easter proclaims the good news of God's feast for all, God's power of death, and God's comfort for the weary. This is the promise of God and the hope and joy of Easter is that God's promise is here, the feast is set, comfort is being given, and salvation has come! Jesus is the one we have been waiting for and indeed he is risen! Neighbors, be glad and rejoice!

Reflect: What are you waiting for? How do you see and know God near in your waiting? What hope sustains you in your waiting? For what do you rejoice and give thanks for today?

Pray: God of hope and joy, fill us today with the hope of your resurrection joy so that we may both see with new eyes and proclaim with new voice your love and life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

R. Adam Berndt is mostly failing to teach patience to his 4 and 7 year old while serving as Pastor at Cross of Hope Lutheran Church and School in Albuquerque, NM.

APRIL 11, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
JOHN 20:19

The greeting, “Peace be with you” is a familiar one. It is a greeting that we share when we gather together for worship. Yet, in the context of John’s account of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to frightened followers, notice how the greeting, “Peace be with you” functions as both a blessing and a promise – extending peace, comfort, assurance, and hope in the midst of the disciples’ despair and doubt.

During the encounter recounted in John 20:19-31, Jesus penetrates locked doors, closed minds, and fearful hearts simply by showing up and saying, “Peace be with you.” Extending words of greeting, blessing, and promise to people consumed by fear and doubt. Sharing words that reinforce and strengthen existing relationships. Words that enable frightened disciples of all ages, then and now, to see and experience the glorious light of resurrection reality in the midst of the world’s darkness and disappointments. Helping us to trust once again in the reality that death has been swallowed up in Jesus’ triumphant resurrection.

To trust, as we go about our lives in the shadow of the cross and darkness of the empty tomb this Easter Season, that God calls and empowers people of every time and place with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Offering peace in the midst of life’s fiercest storms. Transforming lives, enlightening minds, and equipping us for the work of ministry together. “Peace be with you.”

Reflect: How might the Holy Spirit be calling you to share how you see Jesus active and alive in our world today?

Prayer Prompt: As you reflect upon the greeting, "Peace be with you," write down names of people or groups of people in need of peace. Add the names to a bowl and pray that all of those named may experience the peace and healing of the risen Christ.

Jon Brudvig serves as Co-Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Great Bend, KS. The congregation sponsors Little Blessings Pre-School and TLC Discoveries after-school program.

APRIL 18, 2021
THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
PSALM 4

The Psalmist speaks boldly to God to hear his or her prayer, and then the psalmist speaks confidently that God will heed this prayer so that he or she can lie down and sleep in peace (v. 8). Such bold language is frequently found in the Psalms. Scholars classify the psalms into various types, and the most commonly found type is the “Lament Hymn.” These are songs or prayers meant to be sung by people who suffer physically, experience oppression, or live in emotional or psychological pain. In these prayers the individual or a group can boldly pray to God for help, comfort, or forgiveness.

Too often people are afraid to pray to God, perhaps because they feel God won’t listen, or perhaps because they feel too guilty. Sometimes when people pray, they are afraid to make God mad by their words. The psalms teach us otherwise. When you hurt, speak to God in pain. When you are enraged, speak to God in anger. When you sorrow, speak to God in anguish.

Don’t be afraid, God has been around a long time, and God has heard a lot worse than what you have to say. Remember that the God to whom you pray, knows what it is like to be human, knows what physical and emotional pain feels like, and knows better than you what is going on inside your mind. We worship a God who hung on a cross for us. This God loves us. We can sleep peacefully.

Reflect: Do I sometimes feel that God is too distant to hear me? Do I sometimes feel like God is not really interested in what I have to say because there are so many people in the world praying? Do I sometimes feel that God does not really care for me?

Pray: Oh God, let me feel your presence in my life. Let me know know that you truly care for me. Let me feel the peace that comes when I realize that I am wrapped up the power of your loving presence in my life. Amen.

Robert Gnuse is a Full Professor of Old Testament and the History of Christian Thought at Loyola University, New Orleans, and he is the part-time pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Marrero, LA.

APRIL 25, 2021
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
JOHN 3:16-24

Newsflash! Humans are not perfect! Newsflash #2, God is! Those two statements releases everyone from the burden to perform. Jesus's death on the cross fixes everything the world gets wrong. If that does not make your heart smile with joy nothing will. Repeat the statements again if you have to but do not breathe another breath until it's understood that perfection is not ours to gain. Mistakes will happen, blunders are coming and inadequacies sit on the horizon; however, we serve a God that fills the gaps, fixes the issues and supplies all our needs.

Schools look different and learning has changed but our great God has not. The greatest honor for Christians is serving a God that carries our burdens and only asks in return for us to love God and others. How wonderful that the God we serve knows all that we aren't and becomes all we need to be. Knowing this timeless truth gives everyday hope and joy on our walk with God. "And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." 1 John 3:19-20

Reflect: Do past mistakes steal your joy? Do you have an attitude of hope and anticipation for the future? If not why? Are you focused on the perfect God or your imperfect self? Commit today to stay focused on who God is and what God has done for the world.

Pray: Thank you God for being perfect and not expecting me to be. This means I no longer live in condemnation when I mess up but in constant joy. Because of your son Jesus dying on the cross I have a future full of hope. Thank you God for knowing everything about me and choosing to create me anyway. May I share this gift of love with others! Amen.

Page Walwik is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary. Page currently lives in Palatka, FL with her husband and two boys.

MAY 2, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
JOHN 15:1-8

Today as I sat down at my kitchen table to write this devotion for this years ELCA Schools and Learning Centers Devotional Guide, I heard a familiar song playing on my TV, “Holy Spirit Come and Fill This Place.” This song has meant so much to me since I heard it for the very first time. It is the one I’ve clung to during my unexpected journey this past year. It has filled my heart and given me peace – I truly feel “HOPE & JOY” when I hear and sing it. If you don’t know the song, please listen to it and let it speak to you.

The scripture from John talks about pruning away the dead branches so that the tree can grow and bear fruit. Our lives as educators, administrators, spouses, parents and friends are much the same as this tree. How often do we not rid ourselves of the “stuff” (be it people, possessions, thoughts, habits etc.) that hold us back from being all God wants us to be. I think maybe the Lutheran word for this is “CHANGE?!” So many of us are afraid of change or are just plain too stubborn to see the need for it right in front of our face.

Be brave and see what and where you might need to do some pruning at your school or center in order to grow and become what God has planned for it. Blessings, peace & joy in your ministry with the children.

Reflect: What would you like to see changed in your school or center and why?

Pray: Lord, give me the trust and faith to be able to change what needs to change and to accept that it does not “always” have to be done “the way it always has been done.” Amen.

Patricia R. Garrett (Pat) is a retired Administrator of Trinity Lutheran Preschool in Enumclaw, WA, past member of the ELEA Board, and the 2019 Recipient of the Don Vetter Lifetime Achievement Award.

MAY 9, 2021
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

PSALM 98:4

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

There is a plaque hanging in my home that says, "Every day there is joy waiting to be discovered."

We, as educators are blessed to be surrounded by children as we do our daily work. An abundance of joyful moments is there for us to discover. Children are naturally inquisitive explorers, and when they come upon a new discovery their joy is apparent. Throughout my work day I often have the experience of hearing the children when they are outdoors. Even when I am in the building, upstairs, I can hear the joyful shouts, shrieks and laughter of the children as they play outside. Clearly, they find the joy that is waiting to be discovered. They naturally break forth into joyous song and exultant praise.

In the busy-ness of our days, we need to remember to follow the lead of the children and discover the moments of joy that God provides to us each day. While my own singing talents are limited, I can still find a way to make a joyful noise to the Lord and sing praises – through a smile or even laughter. As we make a joyful noise to the Lord, others are sure to hear and be inspired and that increases all of our JOY! If you've ever smiled at a stranger, or heard the belly laugh of an infant, you know that joy is contagious.

Jesus clearly says in John 15:11, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Let us share with others the joy we have been blessed with – the joy that is within us that comes from our Lord, Jesus.

Reflect: What brings you joy in your day? When you experience joy, how do you make a joyful noise and sing praises?

Pray: Thank you, Lord, for the gift of joy Let us always remember to sing praises for the many ways you allow us to experience joy in the ordinary events of our day. Amen.

Joanne Osterland is blessed to serve as the Executive Director at Christ Lutheran Preschool in Dallas, TX.

MAY 16, 2021
SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
1 JOHN 17:6-19 NIV

As I read 1 John 17, I am struck by how in his final moments on earth, Jesus was worrying about his disciples, not wanting to leave them unprotected. Jesus asks God for protection of his disciples, for joy in their lives and to cover them in God's truth. Jesus prays for their safety and their joy! What a dear friend to worry and plead for his followers.

I think of the children in our care each day as our little disciples. It is our job to keep them safe and teach them God's truth, providing them some joy in their lives. That is our prayer and our work each day!

God sent us these small children to watch over and guide, to keep them safe "from the evil one." This is our blessing to them but the return is great – the joy they provide us, filling us, making us smile and teaching us. How grateful I am for them daily! These children are the next disciples. We are to protect them and send them out – safe and joyful.

Reflect: Think of a time when you were leaving, perhaps on a trip, and took time to plan for your loved ones (food, schedule planning, etc.). How is this a reflection of God's care for us?

Pray: As Jesus prayed over his disciples, we lift up the staff, children and families in our care. Please blanket them in your steadfast love and protection. Shield us as we go out into the world proclaiming your truth! Amen.

Laura Mumme is the Director of the Child Development Center at Triumphant Love in Austin, TX and a member of ELEA.

MAY 23, 2021
DAY OF PENTECOST
ROMANS 8:22-27

Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (vs. 24-25).

I wonder if Paul, as he was writing to the Romans, was feeling a bit like I am at this time. As I am writing, we are in the midst of the pandemic with all restaurants, schools and public places closed, and the world is functioning day by day on hope. Some people have the patience and the faith to rely on God and know that the Holy Spirit has been sent to comfort and guide us; and yet there are reports of murders, suicides, and increased gun sales as others struggle with social isolation and loss of income and support systems, leaving them to wonder where God is in the midst of it all. For some, even their stock of toilet paper and paper towels isn't providing much security right now. We just hope for life to get back to normal, or for a "new" normal to appear.

It is impossible for me to predict what your lives will be like as you read this in May of 2021. For sure, I know that the world and our schools and early childhood centers will have changed, along with the children and families you serve. I pray that the Holy Spirit has been with you all throughout the change as you have struggled with not knowing how to "pray as we ought." But Paul goes on to say, "that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." What an image!

Pray for wisdom and patience in accepting the intercession of the Holy Spirit, an amazing gift from God. Pray that you may find ways to share the good news of Pentecost with children and families.

Reflect: Give an example of how you felt (or didn't feel) the presence of the Holy Spirit during a trying time in your life.

Pray: May God's grace and love, through the Holy Spirit, be with me now and always. Amen.

Gayle Denny is a retired educator who served as the former Executive Director of ELEA and is a lifelong learner.

MAY 30, 2021
TRINITY SUNDAY
ISAIAH 6:1-8

Isaiah, the prophet, wrote of a rebellious people who continued to live in sin and forsake the laws given to them by Moses. In the midst of this sinful nation, Isaiah had a vision of hope for the world to come.

This description could apply to the world that exists today. Thousands of years later, we still live in a world marred by sin and lawlessness. It is tempting to lose heart. We wonder if the promises of God, through the Messiah, can actually be fulfilled. Hopelessness can invade our consciousness. Sometimes, the call goes unheard if we listen to the louder voices of despair and evil.

Isaiah said, "Here I am! Send me!" Daily, these words come to mind for me, too. Often the words come in times of darkness, pain, crisis or tragedy. Through the ages, God's children discerned their calls and took action to answer. They act through faith and belief that God is with them even when it seems that evil prevails.

Children are the most precious gifts given to us for a short time. Whatever our roles may be, we must provide models of the Godly life. We must sow seeds of love, so children learn to love rather than to hate. We must pray to cease doing evil and learn to do good. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are given strength and courage to continue our pursuit of truth. Our vision is inspired by God's love for us.

Reflect: In what way do you discern God's call and how do you carry that out?

Pray: Dear Lord, like Isaiah, I hear the call. Help me to answer it as he did. Help me to discern your will and send me where I am most needed. Give me the strength and courage to carry out your call. This I ask through your son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Janet is a former teacher at Trinity Nursery School in Rocky Point, NY. She is also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Psychotherapist for Lutheran Counseling Center, Mineola, NY.

JUNE 6, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

It's been a tough year for many reasons as you well know. Sometimes courage and patience has been in short supply for me and possibly for you as well. It can become easy to doubt the importance of our ministries at times like this. And then someone comes knocking, before we even realize we may need this reminder.

A man appeared at our school entrance a couple of months before we unknowingly would have to close school due to CoVid-19. He reintroduced himself as a past preschool parent of twin girls now in college. He explained the girls had excelled all though school and both had received academic scholarships to the colleges of their choice! This father went on to thank our preschool because his daughters first learned to love school here and they fondly still consider us part of their family. He shared he is an artist and wanted to gift our preschool one of his pieces of art. He handed me a beautiful picture of Jesus he had painted just for us. Jesus is smiling, almost laughing in this painting. This father then pierced my heart with his next words, "the most important thing my girls learned at your school is that God and Jesus loves them and that, they have never forgotten."

In one short, unexpected visit, God reminded me to not lose heart in our difficulties...but to remember the hope of Jesus' resurrection will keep renewing us each day with courage and patience.

Reflect: How have you been reminded to not lose hope this past year?

Pray: Loving Creator, please remind us to not lose hope in our difficulties but to trust that you are renewing us with courage and patience daily. Help us to experience the hope and joy that comes from remembering Jesus' resurrection.

Kris Dudak has been the Director of Trinity Lutheran Preschool, Linwood, WA for thirty-three years, former ELEA Board President, and ELEA Region 1 Board member.

JUNE 13, 2021
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

PSALMS 20; MARK 4: 26-36

The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seeds on the ground.

In 2019, I participated in a Bible distribution in Piura Peru where over 106,000 copies of the Bible were given to school children. Each member of our group had the honor of speaking to classes about the love of God. Standing in front of the classrooms, I could see that the seeds of the Word of God were being scattered. Tiny mustard like seeds were being planted in the fertile ground of these young children's minds.

Oh, to see the eyes of boys and girls light up when they understood that they were being given a free copy of God's Word to keep for themselves. After leaving Peru, I often wondered what God would do with the seeds planted in the daily lives of these children as well as the lives of their families. "It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

Each of you have been given the privilege of sharing God's love (seeds) with the children in your class rooms. Like me, you may not fully witness all that God does with those seeds that you have scattered. But it's not up to us to produce the harvest, it's up to us to trust God to fulfill God's word. When we scatter the seeds of God's love whether in speech or action into the lives of those around us, God's word will succeed and not return void.

Reflect: Are you doing what God has called you to do? Do children under your leadership see God at work in your life? What can you do to scatter the seeds of the truth of God's word?

Pray: Dear God, I admit I don't always put my trust totally in you. Forgive me where I have fallen short of your love in spoken word or deed. Illuminate my heart and open my eyes to where I may scatter the seeds of your love. Use me as a blessing to others and as a living example of your word. Amen.

Doug Bicket, Illinois State Gideon International President.

JUNE 20, 2021
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
MARK 4:35-41

The month of June is spent in many different ways across our Lutheran schools and centers. Some of us are closed, and summer is a time for renewal. Some of us are open, and summer means extra events, extra students, and extra work. Your summer might look somewhere in between. Wherever we happen to be this summer, we will probably experience storms - both literally and figuratively. We all have our own storms, our own chaos.

Think of the ancient time in which Jesus lived - surely there was a common fear of storms and the sea. Jesus took his friends, the disciples, onto the sea in the dark of night and a storm blew in. They were sailing across dark waters to the other side. Dark water represented the unknown, dark stormy water was chaos. Reading the text, you get a sense that the disciples were terrified – I would be too. They wake up Jesus, crying, "Don't you care?!" Jesus woke up, rebuked the wind, and calmed the storm.

Storms happen to all of us. Maybe we've all asked that question from time to time – Lord, don't you care? God doesn't cause the storms in our lives, and doesn't prevent them. Faith is not cause and effect, faith is knowing who we belong to and who is always with us. You have Jesus in your boat, right there with you – all the time, through all the storms. Jesus is the one who has the power to face the wind and waves of our chaos and say, “Peace, be still.”

Reflect: What storms, chaos, or dark water are you experiencing this week? What helps you remember that Jesus is always with you?

Pray: Thank you Lord for always being with me; for no matter how strong my boat is, or how good I am at sailing – you are the one who saves me, and will never leave me. Amen.

Linda Chambers is Director of Memorial Lutheran Chapel School in St. Augustine, FL and the Director of Family Ministry at Memorial Lutheran Church. Linda is a former Secretary of the ELEA Board and an ELCA Early Childhood Director of the Year.

JUNE 27, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PSALM 130:6

There are many Bible verses about “waiting” for God. My mental picture for “my soul waits for the Lord” is peacefulness, hope, faith, joy, and expectation. God is “I AM.” God is strength. Waiting for the Lord should be our priority. However, as watchman for my life’s responsibilities, more time is spent on the watching for worries. In “watching” we may see complications, fear or even danger.

“Watching for the morning” may imply that the watchfulness is taking place at night. Notice how that phrase is repeated within the verse. Do you ever spend sleepless hours worrying in the night? “My soul waits for the Lord” should supersede this watchfulness. Hearing “give it to God” is often overused and not easy to do. Many people have prayer journals where they put their prayers and worries. The physical act of giving it to God strengthens the mental act.

We have a hanging cross near our sanctuary altar that is built like a box and open in the front. Once, when my worries were taking over my life, I actually wrote my worries on paper, folded the paper and hid it in that cross. I physically gave it to Jesus. Being human, the worry stayed in my mind, but as it came back, I would remind myself of the physical process of giving it to God.

May you find peace, hope and joy as our souls wait for the Lord. Whatever your trial, worries or concern, may our waiting for the Lord be more than the watching for the morning!

Reflect: Do you have a place within your school or center where students and families may put prayer petitions? If yes, how well is it used?

Pray: Dear God, thank you for the peace, joy and hope we have in you. Help us, Lord, to rest in these gifts amidst our life's worries. Amen.

Beth Coburn is an ELEA Board Member, retired Preschool Director and member of Christ Lutheran Church, Valparaiso, IN.

JULY 4, 2020
SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PSALM 123

When things head "south" in life, to whom do you look for help? How would you deal with the situations we've seen on the news: children with Covid-19, children and adults not able to embrace grandparents, a friend who was injured or jailed for peacefully demonstrating for Black Lives Matter, or schools being closed due to the pandemic? To whom do you turn when life is "in your face?" On a more personal level, to whom do you turn when you're not included or feel abandoned by your friends, when you reach an impasse in a relationship, or struggle to make ends meet? Unexpected things happen. When they do, to whom do you turn?

This idea lies at the heart of Psalm 123. When the Psalmist asks God "to have mercy," he is asking God to act lovingly and provide what is needed. It's okay to ask God for what you need. God is kindly disposed toward us. We look to God because we know that God will show up. We just don't know when, where or how. We trust that God has our back. This is what gives us confidence to move forward. Our experience reveals that God works to bring something good out of our losses. So, we look, wait and anticipate the surprise that is yet to come: the volunteers who help, a vaccine developed, laws and attitudes changed, a meal delivered. As we pray with and for each other, God may use us to become part of the answer to that for which we pray. God makes use of our generosity, kindness, and willingness to serve as we partner with God in helping others. Prayer not only connects us with God but also with each other. To whom do you look for help? The Psalmist says people of faith look to God, who is gracious and works through the hearts and hands of his people as God provides what is needed and brings new life out of our losses.

Reflect: To whom do you look for help when life is "in your face?"

Pray: Good and gracious God, help me to trust that you are with me and for me in all things. Help me to trust that you are working to restore and heal all that is broken and shattered in life. Amen.

*Charlie Zimmerman, retired ELCA pastor, ELCA Coach/Coach
Trainer/Mentor Coach, who has worked with ELEA.*

JULY 11, 2021
SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
EPHESIANS 1:3-14

In my study Bible this section is titled Spiritual Blessings in Christ. I am writing this in the mist of Corona-19 – this pandemic has changes our lives in many ways. We have a new norm as we go forward, just as all of the saint that have gone before us that survived pandemics and wars. This isn't really any thing new, it is just happening to us and change is hard. We are unable to worship with our church families, we are unable to socialize as we are use to doing.

In this passage hope and joy is ours, God gave us Jesus Christ that sacrificed himself so we my live with him forever. We can take comfort in what God has given us. God has given us so much and before the pandemic some of use may have lost track of all the blessings God has given us.

With the staying at home, it gave me time, time that I had placed too many extra activities that I felt were important, only to find out that they were not as important to me as I thought. I have spent more time making prayer shawls for our Prayer Shawl Ministry, I help with Saturday Drive-Thru free meals in my community, and I help with the Facebook live broadcast our church provides on Sunday mornings. These are all things that bring me joy, but there is also hope that comes from all of this. The hope that the little things we do bring hope to those that are feeling hopeless.

Reflect: How will you bring Hope and Joy to someone this week?

Pray: Dear God, thank you for sending us your Son Jesus Christ to teach us there is hope in the mist of disasters. Thank you for all the blessings you have given us – our homes, our health and our possessions. Help us to share these hopes and joys with those that feel hopeless. In your name we pray. Amen

*Michelle Schaffer is Christian Day Nursery School Director, St.
Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church in Norwalk, OH.*

JULY 18, 2021
EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
MARK 6:30-34, 53-56

As I am writing this devotion, we are still in quarantine and practicing social distancing. How different from the scene described in this passage from Mark. Jesus had no time to himself, even to eat. We, on the other hand, find more time on our hands than we did in the past. God works in mysterious ways. Families are not rushing from activity to activity. Instead, they are enjoying time together playing games, reading, and eating meals together.

In Mark 6:34 the crowd was described as sheep without a shepherd. That continues to be true today. Yet, because of COVID19, people are being drawn back to the church. They want to know there is a God who loves them. During the pandemic our church and school offered online opportunities every day. Our organist had Music on Monday. Tuesday our youth director read from the Spark Bible and gave a message. Wednesday was the beautiful Holden Evening Prayer service. Our Principal offered hope and encouragement each Thursday with “Principally Speaking.” Friday a prayer service and essential workers were included in the prayer each week. Saturday was Holy Communion with our pastor in his home. On Sunday the worship service was broadcast, and through technology we could be “in our sanctuary” enjoying the worship service. Living in the country, being “empty nesters,” and having a husband who was an essential worker, I found these daily messages uplifting and a great source of comfort. Just like the people in Mark 6:54, we recognize Jesus and we come to him, bringing our problems and concerns.

Reflect: Do you ever feel like you are a sheep without a shepherd? Where do you go to “get away from the crowds” and allow yourself time to be with Jesus?

Pray: Dear Lord, Thank you for all the ways you shepherd us. We know you are there to lead and guide us. Help us find the quiet time we need to be with you. Fill us with the peace that only you can give. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Jo Groth taught at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church and School in Waverly, IA for 23 years. She has taught 4th grade for 21 years.

JULY 25, 2021
NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PSALM 145:10-18

Verse 18 is one of my favorites! “The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call on him in truth.”

As a child the Lord always provided neighbors who invited me to go to Sunday School with their children. I began to believe in God. I liked school and I would pray to God to help me get good grades. The Lord showed me that I needed to do my part, do homework and to pay attention in class. When I was in high school, my mom signed up for night classes at the new junior college. She said that if she learned new skills she could get out of the factory. I prayed that she would be succeed and she did!

I knew God was always with me. I went through confirmation and learned more about church and God. I was to be baptized and join the church. I asked my mom to come church for that service. She said no. I worked on persuading her. She reluctantly agreed to go. I had never seen my mom so nervous as that day in church. My wish for her was to know God as I did. That wish became a prayer. God gave me hope.

Romans 15:13 ... so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Fifty year later my mom asked Jesus into her heart!

Reflect: How will my my school impact a young student and their family this week?

Prayer Prompt: Pray for a student and their family to be uplifted by school and the church!

John Petticrew is a member and past president of Grace Lutheran, Loves Park, IL. He is also a supporter of Grace Preschool, Loves Park.

MY PRAYER NOTES

CHALLENGING TIMES CAN LEAVE US FEELING ALONE AND EMPTY. IT IS OUR HOPE THAT THESE DEVOTIONS BRING YOU JOY AND WRAP YOU IN THE LOVE AND GRACE OF GOD AND THE SUPPORT OF OUR COMMUNITY OF LUTHERAN EDUCATORS. THANK YOU TO ALL OUR WRITERS FOR THE DEEPLY MEANINGFUL WORDS AND MESSAGES YOU HAVE SHARED. WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER AS CHURCH, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY.

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