



The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Ephesians 11:14

TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Letter from the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin Prayer Team
Suggestions for Enhancing Your Devotional Experience**

Devotions by the Month

January – Gratitude and Stewardship – Walter Baires

February – Trusting in God – Pr. Ken Smith

March – Faithful Leaders in the Church – Rev. Paulette Creswell

April – Renewed by Creation – Deacon Meg Nielsen

May – The Church in the World – Pr. Robb Kosky

June – Sharing our Lutheran Faith – Pr. Lisa Nelson

July – Mystical and Contemplative Wonder – Deacon Judy Nolde

August – On Discernment for Councils – Pr. Amy Waelchli

September – Christ Present – Diane Padrutt

October – Mysteries of Faith – Pr. Nancy Raabe

November – Gratitude – Deacon Meg Nielsen

December – Christ's Body Church Incarnate – Pr. Nancy Raabe

Dear Friends in Christ,

As a person who has been invited into a position of leadership in the church, you have been set apart for a special purpose of leading God's people in this time and place. It is as if you are clothed with the spirit of God.



We on the synod's prayer team pray that you notice this spirit wherever you walk as a leader so that your walk is faith forming and life giving. If you consider each time you meet with your council or with members of your congregation to be an opportunity to reflect the teachings of Jesus, you will be leading. If you consider your work to be more than tasks to check off a list and instead, a time to use your God-given gifts to further the mission of the church and expand God's kingdom, you will bless God and each other.

It is our hope and prayer that this devotional book will help you to reflect on the ways in which Jesus has already informed our way of thinking what it means to be a leader in God's church. It is also our intention that the use of the experiential practices and time in prayer will enrich your prayer life while keeping God at the center of the decisions you make as leaders of God's church.

We lift you to God and hold you in our prayers,

South-Central Synod of Wisconsin Prayer Team

Deacon Judy Nolde, Co-Convener, members of Midvale Community Lutheran, Madison
Diane Padrutt, Co-Convener, member of Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Sun Prairie
Rev. Ken Smith, Visitation Pastor and member of Midvale Lutheran Church, Madison
Deacon Vicki Hanrahan, member of Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Sun Prairie
Rev. Lisa Nelson, Pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Madison
Rev. Nancy Raabe, Former Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall
Rev. Amy Waelchli, Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Fort Atkinson
Deacon Meg Nielsen, retired and member of St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, Monona

About the cover: Thank you to Cyndi Jordan, member of Messiah Lutheran Church of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod for allowing us to use a rendition of her artwork for this devotional. We are grateful.



Adapted from “Unbinding the Gospel” by Martha Grace Reese.

Devotions for councils

Consider doing one or more of the following during your council meetings:

- Light a candle at the beginning of the meeting.
- Invite people to share highs and lows.
- Practice Lectio Divina, even with just a couple of verses of the Bible or a poem.
- Lift people, challenges, hopes and fears to the light (of Christ) Words become unnecessary as we imagine lifting them to the light.
- Dyads or triads in which people share a prayer concern with the commitment to pray for one another’s concerns.
- Dyads or triads in which people share a prayer request for themselves with the commitment to pray for each other.
- Pray as a group in a different part of the church building or a different location altogether.
- Briefly tell a story from the Bible to the rest of council. Please, don’t read it. Tell it.

Consider inviting council members to engage in these prayer practices on their own, with the intention of sharing their experience with the rest of council:

- Prayer walk in your own or the congregational neighborhood or a part of town that is different than your own. What did you notice? What did you pray for? What might God already be up to in this neighborhood?
- Pay attention to what God is doing around you throughout your day. Write down some notes on index cards to share with the rest of council.
- Fast from something specific like chocolate or soda or the news or Facebook for one day. Every time you feel the urge to eat or drink or do what you are fasting from, ask God to be with you and fill you with God’s grace.
- Pray using icons or one phrase or sentence from the Bible or something tangible like a cross or prayer beads.

January - Living a Life of Gratitude

Text: Ephesian 1:15-20

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit[s] of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

INTERACTION

“I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” Paul made a pause in the midst of his own suffering to express his gratitude for the witness of the church in Ephesus. Cultivating the culture of gratitude helps us to celebrate the positive things in life even when it is hard to see them. In our busy life sometimes, we tend to forget to give thanks for the rain, the food at the table, our family, our friends, the roof over our heads, the gift of life itself, etc. ***As you gather for this meeting, think about a blessing you might have received this week. Briefly go around the room and share in a word or two that blessing.***

REFLECTION

In 1985 I was serving as a catechist at Fe y Esperanza (a refugee camp run by the Salvadoran Lutheran Church). One night I went to visit Rosenda, she was one of the leaders in the camp. Rosenda used to lead the prayer service every night and was well respected by the whole community. Every night she gave thanks to God for being alive and be able to denounce the military atrocities against the civilian population. She also prayed for the end of the civil war and for the day that everyone could return to their village.

During my visit with Rosenda she told me her tragic story: She lost four of her children, they were detained, tortured and killed by the military. Her house was destroyed, and the surviving members of the family were forced to flee for their life. They lost everything.

On that night of my visit, I asked her, after everything that has happened to you and your family, how are you still able to thank God and continue to pray? I will never forget her answer. She responded, “My faith is the only thing that I have left and I won't allow them to take it away from me.” Even after all her suffering Rosenda taught me the importance of living a life of gratitude focusing on God's blessings that sometimes we overlooked or tend to ignore. Rosenda dedicated the last years of her life serving her fellow disciples at the refugee camp. Her pain probably never went away, but she lived a life full of love, joy, faith, hope and peace.

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for all the blessings you pour out upon your people. Thank you for all those small things that we tend to ignore or take for granted. Help us to live a life of gratitude by serving one another and guide us to become better stewards of your blessings. Amen.

Pastor Walter Baires serves as Director for Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop. He is married to Pastor Elizabeth Baires and lives in Madison.

February - Sharing Hope, Building Community

TEXT: Psalm 33:22

*Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.*

INTERACTION

Break into groups of two or three and briefly share a time when hope helped you make it through a difficult time. Then invite someone to read the following reflection.

REFLECTION

Hope. What is it? It is a condition of the human spirit, a longing that we hold within, a sense that things will work out, a confidence that the present difficulties will end, a decision that we make to continue toward a goal.

Hope is often something that wells up naturally within us. But sometimes hope can be tested. Perhaps the recent pandemic has tested our sense of hope. Difficulties, sorrows, loss, illness, loneliness, anxiety, fear, emotional and economic stress have all taken their toll on our inborn capacity to be hopeful people. Sometimes we are more fearful than hopeful. Hope becomes something we may need to work on.

And it is worth it to work on hope. Hope is what keeps us going. Hope gives us strength to continue, especially when things are not going well. Hope sustains us when we are suffering. Hope renews us when we are exhausted with struggles. So, hope is a valuable thing. It is worth working for.

How do we make our hope strong? How do we build our confidence that our future will be better in some way? We might consider several things:

When our fear, worries, and anxiety are very high, we need to express them, let them out of us, share them with another person, or work our way through them so there is room for hope to grow in their place. If we keep fears bottled within, they tend to grow greater, and our souls become darker. Exhale your fear.

It is important then not only to share our fears, but our hopes and dreams as well. Unlike fears which grow smaller when shared, hope increases when it is shared. Community is built when hope is shared, and each person's hope actually helps others to feel hopeful in their own ways.

Hope is kindled when we remember. When we recall the times we have made it through past difficulties, when we recall how we have overcome our fears, when we look back at how we have grown stronger in adversity; then we feel more confident about how things will turn out this time. Remembering also brings the wisdom we need to shape our actions and emotions for what we are facing now. Remembering together is especially helpful for growing hope.

Hope is generated in prayer, in reflection and conversation with God. Prayer provides an opportunity to reflect on the path of our life, and the vision of God walking that path with us. In prayer we sense again the presence of a loving God, sustaining us. And that generates hope in our hearts.

Hope is kindled in our hearts when we sing. Sometimes the songs are laments as we exhale our fears. Sometimes the songs are thanksgivings for life's blessings. Sometimes the songs are hymns of courage, reminding us of our inner strength sustained by God's presence. Sometimes the songs are old friends that resonate in our hearts, renewing us for what lies ahead.

And hope is born when we talk with others about how God has been active in our lives: giving us blessings, and standing with us in challenges, shaping us along the way, calling us to be better than we are, and showing us a pathway into that mysterious hope we share in new life through death.

Address one or more of the following questions in discussion if time allows.

- When has your congregation struggled, and what have you hoped for during those times?
- How do you generate hope in your daily life?
- How does our faith contribute to making us hopeful people?

PRAYER

God, in difficult times, give us hope. Fill us with courage rather than fear. Help us to feel your presence with us. Help us to share with others our anxieties and dreams. Bind us together in mutual affection and courage. Help us to sing. Help us to remember how you have been with us, and how you will be with us through all things. Amen.

Pr. Ken Smith serves as visitation pastor and is a member at Midvale Lutheran Church, Madison.

March - Faithful Leaders in the Church

TEXT: Philippians 3:13-14

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

INTERACTION

First: Turn to the person nearest you and discuss together how you understand the difference between a "calling," and a "job." Second: Discuss as a large group what surfaced in your dyads.

REFLECTION

When the late President John F. Kennedy went to visit the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Center (NASA), he stopped to meet an employee in one of the hallways. "What is it you do here?" JFK asked the man, who was part of the custodial staff. The employee responded with, "I am working to put a man on the moon." Clearly this man carried a vision of something much greater than the daily tasks for which he was responsible.

As you look around the room, you can easily identify the various roles your fellow-leaders have in your congregation. One may see to it that the buildings and grounds are properly maintained, another may be working with the Sunday school teachers and catechists; still another may be focusing on managing the funds, and so on.

But finally, none of you are here just to make sure the lawn is mowed, the little kids get into their costumes for the Christmas pageant, or the offerings are properly accounted for, are you? Finally, you are all here because you are working together to proclaim the love and saving power of the Triune God in this particular time and place.

As Paul writes to the Church at Philippi, he reminds them of the true goal of the faith-life: Just like in a race where you push on towards the prize, as fellow Christians, we press on towards the “heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Finally, none of us is just “doing a job”— we are all here because we are called to carry the vision of a world made new through the forgiving and transforming presence of Christ our Lord.

PRAYER

Calling God, in our baptisms you have placed the heavenly call within each of our souls. Help us to keep our eyes on you, as we perform the tasks before us. May we remember the big picture of our purpose—in this moment, and in all the days to come. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Paulette Creswell is a retired ELCA pastor who makes her home in Madison, with her husband, retired ELCA pastor, Dennis. She enjoys supply preaching, writing poetry, walking nature paths, travel, cooking, baking, reading and watching movies that make her laugh.

April - Be Renewed by Creation

TEXT: Psalm 104:30

*You send forth your Spirit,
and they are created
And so you renew
the face of the earth.*

INTERACTION

(If weather permits this devotion could be done outside in a quiet setting.) Begin by taking several deep breaths. Allow your body to relax and soften. Have someone read Psalm 104. (Read only verses 24-30 if time is limited.) Listen with eyes closed and let your mind go to a place where the Spirit renewed you through an experience in God’s created world. With eyes closed, be “in” that space. See what is around you. Notice any fragrances. Feel the breeze. Hear the sounds. Take note of the light. ***After one minute, share briefly with another person how you were renewed by that memory. Ask someone to read the following devotion.***

REFLECTION

Psalm 104 is what theologian Walter Brueggeman calls a psalm of Orientation – a psalm that depicts things as they might be in an ideal world. Creation is in harmony. Lions return peaceably to their dens. Wine gladdens the human heart. The Leviathan sports in the deep. Mountain goats skip along stony cliffs. Trees grow in stately beauty. There are no barriers. The earth and all its creatures rejoice.

When the psalmist first wrote these verses, the people of Israel would have been much more closely connected to the earth and its creatures than we are today. They would have been intimately involved in the process of growing, harvesting and pressing grapes into wine. Trees would have provided essential shade for people and livestock in an arid climate. The seemingly magical process of sprouting seeds would have been a source of wonder and a cause for praise. In many ways we have lost those connections and forgotten that wonder.

But it is important for us to find ways to remain connected to the natural world. We are part of it. And the Spirit of God that is so present in the beauty and balance of the natural world renews us as nothing else can. When we spend time in nature, when we recall images of mountains, streams and crystal-clear lakes, God sends forth the Spirit to restore us. Pause for a moment and recall some of the images from the opening activity. What renewed your spirit? Where did you find instances of resurrection? How were you made aware of the Spirit's restorative action? ***Pause for a moment for silent reflection.***

The observance of Holy Week and the celebration of Easter can be a hectic time in the life of the church. During this time especially we need to be strengthened and renewed by the greening of the earth and the images of resurrection we find in creation. Take the images of renewal from this devotion into the upcoming meeting. Remember the perfect balance found in the Psalm. Rest in the peace of knowing God's love for you and for all creation. Be renewed by the Spirit so you can further the mission of Christ's church through the work of this congregation.

PRAYER

Creator God, forgive us for the ways in which we dishonor and ignore creation. Help us to remember that we serve the One who hung the stars in place, who made the mountains smoke and caused the whales to play along the paths of the sea. Remind us to trust your faithfulness. Restore us and send us out to love and serve, to be part of your renewing Spirit in the world. Amen.

Deacon Meg Nielsen is now retired and focused on regenerating the 115 acres of family farmland in Minnesota from conventional crops of corn and soybeans to more diversified, earth friendly crops like kernza, elderberries and hazelnuts.

May - Being the Church in the World

TEXT: John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

INTERACTION

When have you found love difficult and yet loved anyway? **Take three minutes to share that experience with the group.**

REFLECTION

Love is underestimated. Love is unappreciated. Love is dismissed and explained away.

Love is diminished – reduced to what we say we love – like bar-b-que potato chips, root beer, this music, that car, the Packers, or the Cubs.

Love is misunderstood. And this makes sense because God is love, and who among us fully understands God; because Jesus calls us to love and shows us the way, and who among us really wants to fall in behind Jesus and take up our cross and follow.

No. We explain away the love of Jesus and the way of the cross. We do not wish to deny ourselves, to sell all that we own, to love our enemies, to remove the log from our own eye, to say “Father, forgive them...” We do not wish to drop our stone and walk away (for ours is no doubt a righteous stone).

Jesus has told us and shown us what love is, and we who are Jesus’ followers still, after 2000 years, have trouble understanding and loving as Jesus loved us.

(Of course, we do love. We have lots of love and even self-giving love, and sometimes, some of us in the Church attain to a strength of love that most of us can barely fathom. But if I love those who love me, of what credit is that, and I know that most of my love is for those who love me also, and for those whom I can relate to and understand and agree with. But when I am honest with myself, I can see and feel the limits of my love, and I know that I do not love as Jesus loves.)

Because love is so misconstrued, and so difficult, and so little practiced in our world, our world is in desperate need of the love of Jesus. And this is why we, who are the Church, must love. Must try to love, even when we are not very good at it. Must do the difficult work of learning to love as we have been loved, of learning to forgive and accept as we have been forgiven and accepted.

This is why I believe that... (and you can fill in the blank here):

- Black lives matter. Because people who are black must be loved.
- Police lives matter. Because people who are police must be loved.
- Immigrants matter. Because I am called to love people who are immigrants – and why they left, or how they arrived, or what language they speak does not change my call to love them.

- LGBTQIA+ people matter. Because my call to love others has absolutely nothing to do with a person's sexual identity or orientation or self-expression, and whether I do or do not understand it does not change my call to love.
- Republicans, Democrats, etc., matter. Because love has nothing to do with agreeing with others.
- People who have experienced the hatred of this world matter, AND
- People who have perpetrated hatred in this world matter. Because I am called to love as Jesus loves and through that love bring healing to people who are broken in this world.

I do not understand how to do all of this. But I do believe that the Church is in the world to love the world and make the love of Jesus known.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, send me your Spirit that I might stretch the limits of my love. Help me to love others as you have loved me. Amen.

Pastor Robb Kosky is serving as Interim Pastor at Lakeview Lutheran Church in Madison. He and his wife, Pastor Lisa Nelson, live in Sun Prairie with two of their three children, their dog, Gandalf, and two cats, Rahab and Bathsheba, all of whom have taught them much about love when it is both easy and difficult.

June - Sharing our Christian Faith

TEXT: Romans 10:14-15

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”

INTERACTION

Invite someone to read this devotion.

“I have good news!” We say or hear that and celebrate with one another. A new job, a new baby, a marriage proposal, a clean bill of health. As you gather for this meeting, think about some good news you might have received in the recent past.

Briefly go around the room and share in a word or two of that good news.

REFLECTION

What is the good news? We all have different ways of describing the good news of Jesus Christ. Here's one: Nothing can stop God from loving you, not even death. God knows you and loves you – no matter what others might think of you or what you might think of yourself. And just as important: God knows and loves those who have been misused and marginalized by others and calls us to do the same.

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” Romans 10:14-15

We know this because of Jesus. Because Jesus is God with us. Because death did not stop Jesus from loving us. Because Jesus ate with those whom others rejected. Because Jesus stood with the poor and marginalized and countered anyone who would oppress them. This is good news!

You want the children in your lives to know this good news, don't you? They will hopefully hear this good news in church, but they need to hear it from you as well. They need to know that the person who loves them believes Jesus loves them. *That's sharing your Christian faith.*

Are there others in your life who need to know this? I believe so. But it's only through building relationships of caring and respect that we can share this good news. It's not something you can just drop into a casual conversation. Building close relationships with others can be challenging, but it's a necessary part of sharing your Christian faith.

Pair up with one other person in this meeting and describe in one or two minutes who Jesus is to you. Listen closely to one another. When all have spoken, share with the larger group what your partner said. ***Not what you said, but what your partner said.*** Part of creating mutual relationships is learning how to listen to one another. When everyone is finished speaking, please pray the following prayer together.

PRAYER

Gracious God, teach us to hear you, teach us to hear each other, teach us to hear the voices of the poor. Help us to grow in our relationships with others and show us how to share the good news of your love, a love we know through Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Lisa Nelson serves at St Mark's Lutheran in South Madison. She is also training to become a life coach in a desire to be bi-vocational. She is married to Pastor Robb Kosky and lives in Sun Prairie with two of their three of their sons.

July - Mystical and Contemplative Wonder

"One thing have I asked of Love, that I shall ever seek: that I might dwell in the Heart of Love all the days of my life, to behold the Beauty of my Beloved, and to know Love's Plan,"

by Nan C. Merrill from Psalm 27 in ***Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness***

REFLECTION

"One thing have I asked of Love, that I shall ever seek: that I might dwell in the Heart of Love all the days of my life, to behold the Beauty of my Beloved, and to know Love's Plan," says Nan C. Merrill in Psalm 27 in ***Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness.***

As people of faith, we long to draw close to God. God loves us and created us in the image and likeness of God's self. We yearn for oneness and union with God. The

mystics of the early church and of every age have shared in this kind of yearning for union with God.

In this time of the 21st Century, the people of God are also seeking this oneness and to abide in God's love. People from all walks of life and different cultural and economic backgrounds are seeking to deepen their faith. These days, we hear that people are more spiritual than religious, especially younger folks. As church leaders, delving into mystical and contemplative wonder helps create a connection with these folks. It helps everyone to feel closer to God and to the mystery that God has woven into all of life.

Julian of Norwich, a mystic from the 14th Century in England, wrote a beautiful poem about God's love for us called "The Hazelnut." ***Open this church council meeting by reading and reflecting on this poem.*** Read it several times to let the words sink deeper into hearts. You could bring hazelnuts for people to hold in their hands and feel while the poem is being read. Or if you're meeting virtually, you could ask participants to use any small nut they might have in their cupboard. Spend some time in mystical and contemplative wonder with this poem. Close with the prayer below.

The Hazelnut

by Julian of Norwich

*God showed me in my palm
a little thing round as a ball,
about the size of a hazelnut.
I looked at it with the eye of understanding
and asked myself:
"What is this thing?"
And I was answered:
"It is everything that is."
I wondered how it survived
since it seemed so little,
as though it could disintegrate in a second
into nothingness.
The answer came:
"It exists and always will exist,
because God loves it."*

INTERACTION

Does the poem evoke any thoughts or feelings in you? Does the poem have an invitation for you to do or believe something? Share with each other and the group as time allows.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we know you love us and dwell within us. We are grateful for the mystical and contemplative ways that you remind us of your abiding and loving presence. Amen.

Deacon Judy Nolde is a Co-convener of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin Prayer Team, she serves as a chaplain of Central WI Center, as spiritual director and is a member of Midvale Community Lutheran Church in Madison.

August - Listening for God's Voice

TEXT: 1 Kings 17:16

She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

INTERACTION

Read 1 Kings 17: 11-16 and answer one or more of the following questions as time allows. Or break into groups of two or three, choose a question to address together, then report back to the group after discussing it for 5 to 7 minutes. What questions remain?

- What stood out to you in this passage?
- What would this passage have meant to its first hearers?
- Do you find Good News here? If so, where?

REFLECTION

At this moment, what are the things that remain on your to-do list? We all came to this meeting intending to focus, to serve, to do the work of the church. Yet we know that there's a lot for us to do outside of this meeting. We've set aside an hour to serve and an hour to worship. Yet it is tremulous time because what remains undone echoes through our minds, disturbing the quiet focus we intended.

Today we're going to read 1 Kings 17: 11-16. 1st Kings tells the history of ancient Israel as they became an established nation. 1st Kings lists who the kings are, and also teaches us about the prophets of Israel. Prophets were people who spoke on behalf of God. They speak about God's future, but they aren't fortune tellers. In this passage, the prophet Elijah is running for his life from Queen Jezebel and King Ahab. He's told them the truth from God, and it hasn't gone over well. Elijah seeks refuge in a cave when our story begins. As we read, try to remember what grabs your attention in this passage.

Let us remember Elijah who listened for God. He listened for God in the cacophony of wind, in the rending of an earthquake, and in the crackle of a fire. At each sound, Elijah must have asked, 'Is this God?' for the Bible tells us the answer, that God was not in these things. Still Elijah attended to them. He stopped, listened, and asked, 'Is this God?' The noise didn't interrupt his listening for God, it **informed** it.

Sometimes our focus frays because our minds wander. When you notice that happening, when the conversation is off topic, or, in the weeds of details that rightly belong in a committee, when you notice this, rejoice. Let's not lament 'time wasted' or beat ourselves up over our inability to concentrate. Instead, let's give thanks that we noticed at all and return to the task at hand.

The distractions, diversions, and to-dos can inform our focus on God's voice. By paying attention when they pop up and naming them for what we are, we clear our mind to listen to God.

PRAYER

Holy God, help us hear You. (Pause)

Help us listen to You. (Pause)

Help us serve You. (Pause)

Amen.

Pr. Amy Waelchli is the pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Fort Atkinson.

September - The Presence of Christ

TEXT: Psalm 105:4

*Keep your eyes open for God, watch for his works:
be alert for signs of his presence.*

INTERACTION

Many of us live in such a fast-paced world-moving through work, school, appointments, meetings and a variety of other activities that fill our days to the brim. It's rare that we slow down enough to see the blessings in our lives or God's presence in our lives.

We have come to realize that in our hurry, we miss so much of what God wants us to see and to experience. We know and believe that God is present within us as well as all around us and everywhere we go. We believe that one God exists in 3 persons – God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, working within our lives. I appreciate the psalmist's words telling me to "keep my eyes open...be alert for signs of God's presence." ***Now, pause a moment, pair up and share where you see or experience God in your lives. (After several minutes of sharing, return to the large group.)***

REFLECTION

With my eyes open, here are a few ways that I see or experience God's presence.

God's creation is full of God's presence. Nature displays all of God's wonders and declares glory to God. I feel God's presence when I see the blue sky with puffy, white clouds, colorful fragrant flowers, birds chirping, the stillness of a hawk from its high post, stars twinkling in the sky, a full moon, lakes and streams, wild flowers along the road, a double rainbow, a gentle breeze, a crane's haunting voice, otters' playfulness.

When church members prepare the Sunshine Supper for our community, Christ's presence is everywhere! Christ is in all of the faces of those who buy and prepare the food, those who serve and eat the food, those who share meal conversations, and those who clean up afterwards. With Christ's presence and our hands and feet, amazing moments occur!

When checking out after shopping, I'm reminded that Christ is present in the faces of the salesperson assisting me. It only takes a moment to smile and say a kind word knowing that I'm speaking to Christ in disguise.

Knowing that Christ is present with us during the hard moments is a reminder to treat all of God's children with respect and kindness. When talking with people we disagree with or don't get along with or may not like at all. Can we see Christ's face in others? (Take a moment to silently consider this.)

I have made many trips home to Rochester, MN through the years to visit my family. On a trip home to visit my mom in the hospital, I knew that God was present with me as I traveled, but even more so when I saw an eagle in flight along the Mississippi River! Later, while sitting with Mom in her hospital room reading, I came across the verses from Isaiah 40:28-31: "...those who wait for the Lord...mount up with wings like eagles..." Wow! After spotting an eagle, this was another sign of God's presence. It was a comforting reminder that no matter what happens, God would always be present in the midst of everything! (I think of these times as a "God moment" or a mini-miracle.)

ACTIVITY

As you move through your week, be aware of Christ's presence all around you. Where did you witness God's presence and activity in your life? Where did you see Jesus in another this week? Jot down a few notes on index cards to later share with the rest of council.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of this day. Thank you for your constant presence within us and all around us. As we go out in the world each day, nudge us to keep our eyes wide open and to be alert for the wondrous signs of your presence. Amen.

Diane Padrutt is a Co-convener and member of the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin Prayer Team and an active member of Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Sun Prairie, WI.

October - Mysteries of Faith

TEXT: 1 Timothy 3:16

*Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.*

REFLECTION

It is a paradox of faith that the element which draws us in and leads us forward, the mystery of Christ, cannot be explained or accounted for. These verses in 1 Timothy 3 are statements of truth—statements of *fact*, if you will—but not in a way that can be verified by the senses or accounted for by logic. Yet this passage encompasses everything that we are about as Christians, just as do these familiar words from our

liturgy: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” How exhilarating it is that we find this list of truths in 1 Timothy 3 prefaced by the assertion, “Without any doubt....”

Our worship life must lift us into this mystery, for indeed this is the goal of worship. Yes, we worship to praise and thank God for all God has done, but we also come into Christ’s presence through the mystery that lies at the heart of faith and especially through the sacrament of Holy Communion. Otherwise, our worship services are no more than noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

It is important to recognize that “mystery” does not mean “hidden.” In fact, when the disciples asked Jesus to explain why he spoke to the crowds in parables—which they knew that people were not grasping—he replied, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew 13:11). Whenever Jesus is speaking to the disciples, he is speaking to us. So let us ask how the experience of worship can lead us more deeply into the mysteries of faith which have already been handed to us.

INTERACTION

- Do you come to worship with the expectation of being changed in some way, whether through hearing God’s Word read and proclaimed, singing the hymns, praying together, or receiving Holy Communion?
 - If so, briefly share a recent experience you’ve had in one of these areas and what it was specifically that affected you in this way.
 - If not, consider what changes or innovations in your congregation’s worship life in one of these areas might make such an experience possible.
 - What can you, as leaders of the church, do to help bring these about?

PRAYER

God of wonder, you have given us the church as the body of Christ in this world, that through it we may encounter the mysteries of faith in our discipleship. Inspire us as church leaders to find new and creative ways to bring others to you through the shared discipleship that is ours in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

When this devotion was written, *Rev. Nancy Raabe*, served as Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI.

November - Celebrate the Abundance

TEXT: John 6:12-13

When they were satisfied, [Jesus] told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

INTERACTION

Remember the last time you gathered up “fragments” after a meal. Was it an act of respectful thanksgiving? When you sit down to eat, do you take a moment to thankfully remember the land, the farmer, the producer, the store keeper, the one who prepared the meal and those who do not have enough? ***Break into triads and take three minutes each to share those things for which you give God thanks. Share with the larger group if time allows and then read the following.***

REFLECTION

Fragments. Remains. Leftovers. Bits and pieces. Jesus fed 5,000 people and there were 12 baskets full of fragments left over! Such abundance in a culture where meat was rare and even daily bread was sometimes scarce! Gather them up, Jesus said, so that nothing may be lost.

Even though we are not told what Jesus’ disciples did with those miraculous leftovers, we can appreciate the act of saving even the fragments. Or can we? Americans are an incredibly wasteful people. On average, we throw away two-thirds of a pound of food per person per day. That is 20 percent of what goes into our landfills. Our economy is built on propagating an insatiable desire for more. Our throw-away society speaks of a profound disrespect for the “fragments” whether those are food waste or the gifts of people we choose to ignore.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Native American Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: “In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires. Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness . . . [it] doesn’t send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity.”

Kimmerer says, “You can’t [be thankful] without feeling wealthy. And, while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea.”

Kimmerer also references the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, a Native American practice that offers thanks for aspects of the natural world from strawberries to brother sun and sister moon. One section says, “With one mind, we honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest. . . Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and fruit have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them as well. We gather together in our minds all the plant foods and send them a greeting and thanks. Now our minds are one.”¹

How wonderful to focus on the abundance of our gifts than to wallow in an attitude of scarcity. Gathering up the fragments shows that we recognize and are grateful for the gifts we have been given. This congregation has many gifts and resources. Some are as humble as strawberries. Others are as necessary as the sun. You know what they are. God knows, too. There is an abundance of gifts. Do miracles await in the recognition of those gifts, both personal and financial, and the generous sharing of those resources?

Take a moment to “gather together in [your] minds.” Consider the gifts of your congregation and the abilities of the people in this room. Share/recognize them. Give thanks for the gifts you have recognized in the prayer below.

PRAYER

Generous God, you have given us so much. Give us one more thing. Give us grateful hearts. We thank you for all the gifts you have given us and our congregation, with grateful hearts, we now acknowledge the following gifts we have identified . . .

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Deacon Meg Nielsen's most recent call was at Triangle Community Ministry in downtown Madison where she served as Outreach Development Manager.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013, p.109

The Church as the Incarnation of Christ's Body

TEXT: Colossians 1:15-18

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

REFLECTION

At Christmas we typically focus on the miracle of the Word made flesh. We marvel at the mind-boggling reversal characteristic of God's Kingdom in which power is revealed in the guise of the opposite—here, a small, helpless baby born in the humblest of circumstances. From there we move outward to embrace the mystery of the incarnation as “God's seminal idea,” in the words of one writer: “God's apparent change of heart brought Jesus into the world as a startling new divine self-revelation” that turned the world upside down. As one of our most beloved modern Christmas anthems puts it, “Who would send a baby to heal a world in pain?”

But there is more to the Incarnation than God's entry into this hurting world as a human being. The bodily form of God's Son is manifested in the church, as well. As we welcome once again the retelling of the story of the nativity of our Lord, let us also take this time to ponder more deeply the mystery of the church as the incarnation of the body of Christ.

The exquisite language of Colossians 1 takes us there. We, the many members of the church with unique gifts and abilities, as Paul describes us in Roman 12, have one body in Christ.

QUESTION

In the midst of the busy-ness of our prophesying, ministering, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and healing (Romans 12:6-8), how can we remain rooted in the great

mystery of the incarnation from which our church bodies, our individual congregations, draw their strength?

- Take a few moments to jot down three distinctive expressions of the experience of Advent or Christmas in your congregation.
- Share with the group: Which of these draws you most powerfully into the wonder and mystery of Christ's birth? Why?
- How could this experience be extended into other aspects of your congregation's celebration of this cherished season?

PRAYER

God of grace, you entered our world in human form to know us, love us, and carry us on the shoulders of your wounded body into healing and wholeness. As we move into this season of joyful expectation of our Savior's birth, fill us with the creativity and hope of your Spirit so that we may be knit more closely together as members of the body of Christ that is your church on earth. Amen.

Rev. Nancy Raabe, was Pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, in Marshall, WI and a member of the Synod Prayer Team.

¹ Donald Heinz, *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 1.

¹ "Who Would Send a Baby?" Text and music by Mary Kay Beall, Hope Publishing, 1988.

