

Connected In Christ



**A collection of devotions written by educators and friends of
the Pacific Southwest District**

Essential Piece

Isn't it a wonderful thing that we're all different? My former pastor, Rev. Bill Hemenway (recently retired), frequently used a phrase that has stuck with me. He called people "unique unrepeatable miracles", referring to the fact that we are each uniquely gifted by God! Each of us has strengths and skills to share, and it is marvelous to see the gifts that God gives people used in a collective and collaborative way to bring glory to Him!

I see this in our schools and congregations when I see the variety of people that God, through His people, has assembled to work together as a team. Each person uniquely gifted, each person specially qualified, each person an "Essential Piece"!

You know that our School Ministries slogan or motto is "Connected in Christ", depicted in a beautiful way by the "puzzle piece cross" as some call it. Each time I look at this cross designed by my sister-in-law, Tonya Loesch, it reminds me of all of you – the awesome and talented people who link together like a puzzle to serve our schools and congregations in the Pacific Southwest District – each of you an "Essential Piece"!

As we start a new school year and enter into the Fall season of the year, I pray that you take the time to reflect on God's gifts to you and thank Him for the gifts that he has blessed you with. I pray also that you take time to cherish and celebrate the gifts that He has blessed your "teammates" with – those gifts that, when combined together in ministry, can be an unstoppable force for the spreading of the Good News of Jesus Christ – the gift of salvation! Happy celebrating!

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" 2 Corinthians 9:15

Rachel Klitzing

Christ and My Time

On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: "O sun stand still over Gibeon, O moon over the Valley of Aijalon. So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped. Joshua 10:13

Have you ever wished for a "day stretcher?" Sometimes it seems like we will never accomplish all we have to do in a mere 24 hours. Time is the great equalizer. No matter how rich you are or what your occupation is, no matter where you live or how organized you are or how much help you have, every person on earth receives exactly the same allotment of hours in a day, days in a week, and weeks in a year. We may spend time or waste it, but we always receive a fresh supply each day. Time may appear to fly or to drag, depending on what we are doing, but the difference exists only in our own mind. Even if we do manage to save time, we find we have no place to store it.

We vigorously defend our right to do what we want with **our** time. But whose is it, really? You may have heard the saying, "Each day is a gift; that's why we call it the present." It's true, the only time we have is the time we are living right now. The past is over; the future is yet to come. It's what we do now that matters. God created time in the very beginning when He established morning and evening. He created us to live in this world bound by seconds and years. Someday, in heaven, He will free us from its restrictions. We can hardly imagine what that will be like. In the meantime, the same God who redeemed us and made us His children, redeemed our time. He turned it from an enemy into a friend—a tool to be used for good.

Joshua 10 tells us how God actually set aside the laws of nature and gave Joshua a bit more time to finish the task he was given to do. God usually chooses to work in less cataclysmic ways, but He remains the Lord of our time, just as He was of Joshua's. Some days we know we can never accomplish all the things on our list. But when we place that list into God's hands, He sees to it that everything really important gets done.

What is really important? That's a question each of us must ask and answer. We are busy with many things that seem to be important here on earth—buying food, meeting deadlines at work, staying healthy, managing our homes, taking care of our families. But what really matters are the tasks whose effects carry on into eternity. When we don't have time to talk to a neighbor about Christ or share God's love with a sick friend or teach a Sunday School class because we are too busy with other things, perhaps we are trying to manage our own time instead of letting it serve the God who made it—and us.

Time is a very personal gift. God decided when each of our days began and He knows when they will end on this earth. He knows why He put us here and what He will accomplish through us. Today we praise God for His gift and pray that our use of it will honor Him and be a blessing to others, whose place in time we share.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank You for Your gift of time. We know our times are in Your hands and praise You for Your care. Please help us use this gift to honor You and benefit others, so that those You bring into our lives will share eternity with You. For Your love's sake, Amen.

Carolyn Sims

CHRISTmas Spirit

It was mid-month, tuition time at preschool. Daily I checked the tuition box to process any newly deposited payments. As I opened the tuition box that morning out tumbled several checks that were neatly folded as well as a thick-filled regular note card envelope. In this day of automatic, debit, and credit cards payments I thought, hmmm...what is this, could this be someone giving thanks to God by giving to others or even an early “spirit-of-giving” behavior? As I read the typed inscription on the outside of the envelope I took a deep breath, smiled, and thanked God for the opportunity to bring families together in the name of Jesus as tears welled up in my eyes, for on that envelope was lettered these heartfelt words:

Mrs. Howland,

As I prayed this morning I asked God to “make me nothing that He become everything”God then put it on my heart to pay for ___ (child’s name omitted)___ tuition for December. Please let them know that God is everything! Thank You for always praying with me and turning me to the Cross! God Bless You!

That was it, that was all that was written. Now, I had a lump in my throat and tears stung my eyes!! This was a “God-gift” for a family in need, a “God-gift” for a community preschool family from another community preschool family, both who have come to a relationship with Jesus and proclaim Him as their Savior. These families have witnessed the spiritual growth of their children through prayer and the teachings of Christ we have shared at school. Families that we are humbly honored and privileged to be in contact with every day at our schools! This was a “God-gift” given in the spirit of Christ-like love.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10

There you have it; a gift, an unconditional gift! A gift from one person to another, to be sure, yet more importantly it was first and foremost a gift from God. You see, God has promised to provide for all our needs and He most certainly does! Through a Spirit-filled family, another’s needs were met; God’s hand working mightily in our midst.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights. James 1:17

So, why talk about gift, giving etc.? Well, we have become accustomed during the Christmas season to show our Christmas spirit by buying, buying, buying, giving, giving, giving (whether we want to or not!) and getting, getting, getting, getting, getting! You know what I’m talking about – making a list, checking it twice, seeing who is naughty or nice?! It sort of takes the spirit-of-giving right out of the Christmas spirit. Why do we do all this, for what reason? Is it because “that is what we have always done” or just “because!” Well let’s take a look at what the word gift means or implies.

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines **gift** (n) 1. something given; present 2. the act of giving. Okay, we all understand that. Now let’s look at a few of the definitions of the word that gift is derived from - **give** (vt) (*gave, given, giving*) 1. to make a gift of 2. to hand over in or for payment 3. to devote or sacrifice 4. to inflict (punishment, etc.) Hmmm...interesting, so is that why you give a gift? I think you know where this is heading – God’s most precious gift, the gift of His Son, Jesus

born of a virgin, born for you, for me. Who took on all our sin was bruised and condemned, died, won over sin, death and the power of Satan, and rose in quiet awe and wonder for all, ensuring eternal life for all who believe. Why, isn't that really what Christmas is all about?

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16

So if I may take a little liberty here to verbalize the point, let's replace the word *gave* in this scripture verse with each of Webster's descriptions of gave;

...God so loved the world that He *made a gift of* His one and only Son to the world...

...God so loved the world that He had His one and only Son *handed over for payment* of our sins...

...God so loved the world that He had His one and only *devoted* Son *sacrificed* instead of you and me...

...God so loved the world that He had His one and only Son *inflicted with our punishment* ...
...that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life!!

It puts a much different perspective on the word *give/gift* doesn't it? The Christmas spirit? Our preschool family sure had it right; a gift given in the Spirit of Jesus, not proud or pompous but quiet, loving, expecting nothing in return. Unfortunately, at no time is the Christmas spirit; the spirit-of-giving so endangered a species as it sometimes seems during December. We can not blame the tenacious lines at Target, the women on the warpath at Walmart, or even surly Scrooge and grumpy Grinch for the anxiety and frustrations we may be feeling. The genuine culprit is Satan.

The devil seeks to snuff the Gospel light at the very place it burns the brightest. You see, Christmas is his busy season too. What opportunity he has to spoil the real Christmas spirit during a time when even the secular world focuses on peace and goodwill!

Thank God that the authentic Christmas spirit is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit continues to work within sinners (just as He used a blessed preschool family to be a blessing to others) as we commemorate the birth of our Savior. In fact, the Spirit lets us see beyond the cloths that covered His newborn silky skin to the cloth wrapped around our Lord's tortured body on Good Friday. And still, as believers we see beyond that to the neatly folded cloth in the empty tomb on Easter morning.

***Someone special, Who would give,
His own Son that I might live,
And by Him would set us free
From all sin and misery.
Someone special I must be,
Since you gave your Son to me!***

J. J. Vajda

Hope, peace, joy and love in Jesus

Beth Howland

Come and Worship

Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. Matthew 2:2

Do you know where you are going? Do you have a GPS system? We all want to know where we are going these days. I still use MapQuest to find my way around. I like to click and see what the intersection or building looks like at my destination. We all like to know where we are headed.

As I packed away the star from the top of my Christmas tree and put away the outside Christmas lights on my house, I was reminded of the star God created to lead the Wise Men to Christ the newborn king. In God's perfect plan of salvation, God's prophets told of a star that would rise out of Israel (Numbers 24:17) and the Magi from the east understood that Jesus was the king of the Jews. They traveled hundreds of miles following the star and it led them right to Jesus' front door (Matt 2:11). When they arrived, they honored him by falling down and worshipping him and presenting him with gifts fit for a king. They were overjoyed when they saw Him!

God's perfect plan of salvation was fulfilled in the gift of His Son. As the star guided the Magi to Christ, so Jesus leads us to heaven through His death and resurrection. We can live in this joy even during difficult times. Unfortunately, many still don't know this! They are missing the joy and peace of worshipping the one true God.

As educators serving in schools and congregations, God has led us to serve Him in a unique way. We get to plan daily opportunities in our classrooms to tell children about God's amazing love for them. We teach adults about Jesus' love through Midweek and Sunday Bible classes and worship services. Still so many in our world today don't know this great news! They worship the things of this world, things that only break and disappoint. God also places many unplanned opportunities to share his love with those we meet in our community at the grocery store, bank, or mall.

In this New Year, Jesus has plans for us. Plans that we can't imagine! We don't understand why some of our churches and schools are struggling or closing. We don't always understand God's divine plan, a virgin birth, a manger, shepherds, angels, Wise Men, and a cross, but we know He will lead us where He wants us to go just as He led the Wise Men. We don't need a GPS. We know God's plan of salvation and in response we fall at His feet and worship Him with joyful hearts, giving Him praise and thanksgiving.

As my class of prekindergarten students sing every day before *Jesus Time*.

Come and worship
Come and worship
Sing God's praise
He will always love us
All our days

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.
Matthew 2:11a

Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank You for sending Jesus to be our Savior. Fill us with Your love that, in response, we fall down and worship You with our hearts, praises, and actions. Help us to always trust in Your plan and guidance. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Mary Anne McCombs

*But God demonstrates his own **love** for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*
Rom. 5:8

Love is in the air. It is February!

As our children were growing up, we had wonderful Christian neighbors. Our daughters were best friends. The only problem was they had a son who was always in trouble. We loved Johnny. He was pleasant to talk to, but we had difficulty trusting him. When Johnny was home we were always on guard. Other neighbors had seen him looking in our daughter's window at night. He went on to get himself in trouble with drugs, and finally he was arrested. We loved Johnny, so when the police came to arrest him, we gave the police our oldest daughter instead to serve his time. Of course we didn't. Who could imagine doing such a thing? But God did.

*"For you know the **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." Jesus gave up everything for us to give us the richness of His love and forgiveness. God had so much love for even someone like Johnny, who cannot seem to stay out of trouble. God loved Johnny enough to offer up His Son to pay the price of Johnny's sin. Even someone like me, who continues to make the same mistakes and fail daily, has been rescued. The gift of His grace rescues us from the mess we continue to find ourselves in.

In a children's message in church we talked about ways we can get "up" to God. How do we make that connection with God when we are such a mess, weighed down with sin? When the paper airplane failed and tossing didn't work, we attached to a big balloon of God's grace and soared up to God. That object lesson reminded me again that His grace enables us to be free of ourselves, free of focusing on our sinful condition.

God says to Paul and to us, "*My **grace** is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" (2 Cor.12:9)

We can leave all that frustration of our failures and shortcomings behind and live sharing the wonderful blessing God has provided. The "Johnnys" in our classrooms need to be reminded of this gift of love and forgiveness daily. His grace is enough!!! What amazing love the Father has for us!

*"May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His **grace** gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word."* (2 Thessalonians 2:15-17)

Carol Smallwood

Bowing or Bragging?

“But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. What is left for us to brag about? Not a thing! Is it because we obeyed some law? No! It is because of faith” (Romans 3:24, 27 CEV).

Wouldn't it be wonderful if at the end of your class, students applauded wildly while giving you a standing *O*? And you humbly and graciously bow in gratitude of their appreciation.

Okay, so maybe you would be satisfied if students acted less like weapons of mass destruction as they flee *en masse* at the end of the class, sometimes not bothering to open the door. And you duck (panic form of *bow*) to protect yourself from flying debris.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if at the next voters meeting, the governing body recognized your contributions to ministry and voted special budget expenditure to buy a Red Lobster gift card? (Don't let the two-hour discussion discourage you!) You could take your bows and be on your way to a seafood platter. Okay, maybe you would be satisfied with a Big Mac, a Coke, and a curtsy.

When it comes to bows, the best and triumphant came when Jesus lowered His head after completing salvation's work. He freed us from sin. He freed us to serve the kids who sit before us. He freed us to bring freedom's message to others.

Think about this: How does your freedom affect what you teach and how you teach? Spend a few minutes discussing or thinking about these questions. (We'll hold back the words for a while.)

Your teaching is nothing to brag about. (Paul said so!) So ... you're not into bows or curtsies. That's a good thing. (Please don't be offended. You are undoubtedly dedicated, excellent teachers, sacrificing salary and other perks to teach in a Lutheran school or congregation. Read on ...)

Credit for the dedication, sacrifice, and skills that you bring to your classroom belongs to Jesus Christ. You belong to Him. He died and rose for you—and your students. The only appropriate bow is in prayers of thanksgiving for what God has done for you, what He continues to do for you, and what He does for others through you.

Bow now and pray ... Heavenly Father, we brag on Your holy name. You created the universe and You maintain it. In Your unlimited power and will, You chose to love us and save us and give us Your work to do on Earth. Dear Jesus, we brag on Your holy name. While we were yet sinners, You sacrificed Your life to free us from sin. Your victory over sin and death frees us to praise Your name and tell others what You have done. O Holy Spirit, we brag on Your name. You shape our faith and empower us to work in the name of the Triune God.

Amen? (Now you can bow!)

Edward Grube

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Rejoice, Rejoice, Rejoice

Have you learned to rejoice in everything?

The Bible says, *“Rejoice always” (1 Thessalonians 5:16). A couple of verses later it says, “...in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (v18). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4).*

Sometimes it is not easy to rejoice or to give praise to the Lord, but that does not change the command. “It is God’s will that we find joy in prayer in Christ Jesus in every condition of life,” writes A.T. Robertson. There are no circumstances in the Christian’s life where he cannot give thanks. God works everything together for the good of those who love Him. (Rom. 8:28) “Rejoice...pray...give thanks” is God’s will for every believer in every situation.

Nehemiah knew “the joy of the Lord is your strength” when he saw his workers weeping as they listened to the law read to them (Neh. 8:10). The apostle Paul writing from prison in Rome said, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4). “Rejoice” is in the present, as in 3:1 when Paul said, “rejoice in the Lord.” Paul repeats it in 4:4 for emphasis.

Paul did not tell his readers to “be happy,” but “rejoice in the Lord.” We are to “rejoice in the Lord,” not our circumstances. Our rejoicing is to take place in Christ. We are to delight in Him. The apostle Paul had inner joy when his external circumstances did not look very promising. What for you is the most difficult time or situation for you to rejoice? Do you find it difficult to “rejoice in the Lord always” when you face conflict at work? Do you find it overwhelming to “rejoice in the Lord” when the weight of responsibilities at your school pull you down? Is it hard to “rejoice in the Lord” when you are slandered for the sake of Christ? Illness, sickness of a child, aging parents, and bankruptcies are all times to “rejoice in the Lord.” There is no limit to the exhortation to “rejoice in the Lord.” Indeed, as one beloved pastor said, “Through fire and through water, through life and through death, rejoice evermore.”

Whatever happens, rejoice. That is an attitude. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ everything that really matters in this life and the next is yours in Christ. If you trust in Jesus Christ the whole covenant of grace is yours with all of its infinite inheritance.

“Rejoice in the Lord” is something every Christian can do regardless of the chances, changes, and circumstances that come in your life.

Is your hope fixed on Jesus Christ? Rejoice in Him! Are you a partaker of the life that is in Him? Rejoice in Christ! Have you been begotten to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Rejoice in Him! The Psalmist said, “Delight yourself also in the Lord.” Have you been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ? Rejoice in Him! Do you know the grace of the Father that has given you eternal life? Rejoice in the Lord. Have you experienced the forgiveness of all your sins? Rejoice in Christ! Has the Holy Spirit spread abroad in your heart the love of God? Rejoice in Him! Do you delight in knowing you have been saved by grace through faith in Christ? Break

forth with rejoicing with all your heart and soul! Do you delight in knowing Jesus Christ died as your substitute on the cross? Rejoice in the Lord! You have been saved. The Holy Spirit has taken up permanent residence in you. Rejoice in the Lord.

Rejoice in His dwelling in you and comforting you. Rejoice in Him! Is He abiding in you forever? Rejoice and be glad!!!

Let's Pray:

Gracious God, you know the prayers of our hearts and the desires of our minds before a single word is spoken. Hear our prayers this day. Make your presence felt in our lives. Help us to see the unity of the body of Christ here on earth. Help us to hear your command to rejoice in you. Thank you Lord for never letting us down, for never failing us, for never leaving us, for never forsaking us and for never allowing anything to happen to us unless you plan to use it for good. Lord we celebrate and rejoice today in you.

We give thanks to you no matter what is going on around us. We rejoice today Father, in the knowledge that our true joy is not rooted in the circumstances of this world, but rather rooted in YOU the ONE who promises us unending joy. Thank you Father. Amen

(Selected passages were taken from Selah Daily on-line devotions.)

Michelle Hines

What's Your Name?

Five-year old Sarah was excited when she arrived at church on a beautiful Sunday morning. This was the day she was to be baptized. She wore a new white dress with lacy socks and white slip-on shoes. When the moment came, she proudly took her place on the small step stool in front of the font. She was tall enough to bend her neck and have her head hang in place over the basin all by herself.

The pastor worked his way through the liturgy, and solemnly began pouring water on Sarah's forehead as he intoned, "Sally Jean Bishop..."

Suddenly Sarah's head bounced up from its forward position. "That's Sarah" she exclaimed—then bent her head again, waiting for the pastor to say it right. While most adults would be embarrassed to correct the minister in public, to Sarah his slip of the tongue could not be ignored.

Names are important to little children as well as to adults. When I read the names of older students who have earned awards, I know that if I mispronounce one, I will hear about it afterwards. Your name tells who you are. Little Sarah was afraid that if the pastor didn't say her name, it wouldn't be she who was baptized. And she did not want to miss out.

Could you imagine your spouse speaking endearing words but getting your name wrong? Baptism makes God's love personal. He makes no mistakes as he calls each of us by name. In baptism he calls each of us by our name because he loves us each intimately. And in baptism he calls each of us by his name—Christian—because he makes us a part of his family.

On Judgment Day God will call our names again. He will get them right. There will be no mistakes. It will be the same name he called when we were baptized. He will call Sarah, and you, and me. They will be the names he has used often through the years, so his voice will be familiar to us. And we will eagerly respond--in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It is our privilege as educators to placing the names of children and their families forever in God's heart.

Carolyn Sims

Christ and My Treasure

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Luke 12:32-34.

Paul and Jason were busy at the picnic table working on a complicated drawing. They were making arrows and symbols of all kinds and were eager to show me their work. —Look! they exclaimed, —We're making a treasure map! They were excited because they planned to follow their map and dig up a treasure for themselves.

Children may not know that drawing the map doesn't produce the treasure. The treasure must exist to start with. Adults sometimes operate with the same misconceptions.

We think we know exactly what we want—what is valuable and worth giving up everything to possess. We plot and plan and do whatever is necessary to acquire the treasure we have invented. We may strive for fame or money or a really nice house. An ideal family may be our goal or a fancy car or belonging to a perfect church. All of these goals are laudable. But the first misconception is that just desiring them makes them true. It is God Who decides what is best for us. We may desire wealth and prestige. He may know it is better for us to live humbly. We may seek a promising professional career. He may have plans for us to serve Him in a field or factory. In fact, the only real Treasure we know is in His plans for us is the Treasure laid up for us in heaven—His gift of eternal life.

The map to attaining God's Treasure is drawn by Him. We find it clearly plotted in His Word. As John 3:16 reminds us, —For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.||

We receive that gift through faith—no carrying of shovels or digging required. And now that this greatest of Treasures is ours, we are free to share it with others. We can point others to the same gift that has been given us. To do so may require giving up some of the things we once thought were important. The money we thought we would use to improve our own situation may be better spent supporting the spreading of the Gospel in our own churches and schools and throughout the world. The time we cherished as our own might be invested in serving others. The talents we take so seriously can be used as God sees fit to better His kingdom.

We are not children busy creating our own destiny. We are the people of God, following His plan and living in the joy of our salvation. That is a Treasure that is sure. It cannot be taken from us, and it will never run out.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, thank You for this Treasure of salvation, given to us by Your grace. Let Your goals be our goals in this world as we gladly share all of our gifts with others. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Carolyn Sims

Being busy is something I usually enjoy. I like to have a lot to do. When I was not surrounded with children in a classroom, I had the TV, radio or music playing. I heard many devotions about spending time alone with God, but never “found the time”.

In June of this year, I “retired” from my job. I had big plans to substitute, teach online classes, and take classes. My husband and I were going to get Disney passes, go to lots of movies, and travel. Still keeping busy and surrounding myself with noise. Since the end of May, my life has drastically changed. While I was preparing for the end of a 39-year career of ministry, my husband, Rob, was diagnosed with an inoperable, incurable, malignant brain tumor.

So now my job is to make my husband comfortable. He likes silence. So from 6 in the morning until around 4 in the afternoon our house is quiet. Talking exhausts him. Truthfully, the first few weeks I thought I would go crazy, but I decided God must want my attention, so I needed to listen. “Be still and know that I am God” Ps. 46:10.

This is what I have learned:

1. No matter what I have done wrong. No matter how worthless I feel. No matter all the opportunities I’ve missed. God wants to spend time with me. He is always there. He has forgiven me!
2. My heavenly Father wants me to know that He loves me. He wants me to take time to relax in His loving arms.
3. There is nothing in this world that is important enough to worry about. In the end we have no control. We don’t know when this tumor will take Rob’s life, (none of us know when we are going to die). God has a plan; He is in charge. In the end, our relationship with God is all there is.

This phrase from Nehemiah 8:10 keeps coming back to me “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” The joy that we feel spending time with old friends or family is nothing compared to the joy of spending time with our heavenly Father. That joy of the Lord’s presence in our lives makes everything else just part of the scenery.

I read somewhere that pioneer women who were always busy and lived in a one room cabin with their children always under foot, would sit in a corner and pull their skirts up over their head when they needed time alone. The children would know not to bother their mom. You are all busy people, especially in August preparing for the coming school year. But I challenge you to find that time to be alone with God daily. Take time to be with God.

More than knowing that God loves you and has a plan for you; it will be part of who you are. You will find that peace and joy that will give you the strength you need for each day!

Carol Smallwood

September Morn

One of my favorite singers and song writers is Neil Diamond. He wrote a song called "September Morn", and some of the words of this song go like this:

And look how far we've come
So far from where we used to be
But not so far that we've forgotten
How it was before

He was referring to his relationship with a woman in these words, and how things had changed between them over time. However, when I think of these words, I think of how much things have changed in our world over the years. Since we are about to move into the month of September, I am reminded of this song and some of the changes taking place right now.

This past Sunday in church, our senior pastor greeted those in worship with several announcements, much as he does every Sunday. This week, though, was a little bit different in that there were so many announcements to make. You see, we are about to head into the month of September, and that brings about changes in the life of the church. The choir begins to rehearse again, and they need some new members to fill those empty chairs. The Sunday School is looking for some new teachers to teach the little ones about Jesus. The altar guild is seeking people to help with their duties, and there is a need for more people to help as ushers and greeters.

Yes, the list goes on and on, and as you might imagine, pastor said there are just too many announcements to spend all that time going through the list. So, he encouraged those of us in worship to find the place where we can use our talents to serve the Lord. That is a part of stewardship-- seeking to fully serve the Lord with time, talents and treasure. All of those are gifts from God, and belong to Him.

September brings about some changes in our lives. School has already begun for many of our schools, and will begin very soon for the rest. As the summer ends, we start to gear up again for programs and events in our churches, schools, and also in our everyday lives.

Now, let's get back to the words of the song that we began with. Many of us have come a long way in our life's journey, but we remember where we started. While much may have changed in our lives over the years, one thing does not change, and will never change. Our Lord and our Savior is always there for us, and always will be. We have been studying the book of Romans in our congregation, and I love these words from the Apostle Paul:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39

Gary Spencer

Wonder – Amazement – Love - and Safe-Keeping

Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple, which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered into the temple. He, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, "Look on us." And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And leaping up, he stood and walked and entered with them into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and they knew that it was he that sat for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him. Acts 3:1-10 (21st Century NKJV)

Each of us is broken, and we look to the One, the only One, who can repair us. People are fond of saying that "the world changed on 9-11 and we're left to deal with the aftermath." No, that happened at the Fall, and more importantly, the world changed at the Cross. Although the Fall changed us, thankfully we didn't have to deal with it – the cross took care of that.

Our parents and students, broken as they are, look to us for repair – whatever is lacking in their life – they know and see that we have it. How can those of us, blessed beyond measure, not share what has been so abundantly given to us? How can we not reach out and give them that "word" that causes them to leap with joy?

I know you've experienced it – the wonder when the light bulb finally comes on and a student "gets it." Or, when a child, in amazement, understands what it means to be Christ-like, and is moved to share the love they've been given. Or, even better, when a parent sees this love of Christ in action through their child and says, "I am glad my child is here. You have made a difference." We can only hope and pray that the Spirit continues to move *them* to works of love and kindness as well.

These verses from Acts offer comfort especially in light of our current economic situation that, when gold and silver fails, or is lacking, all that remains is the precious Word of God. How will we continue to use that Word? How will we walk with our students? Will we wonder and be amazed with them? Will we love and keep them?

We've been entrusted with our Master's treasure and He will expect not only to have his treasure returned to him, but with interest! I pray that our walk with our students is fruitful and joy-filled. I look forward to many days of leaping and praising God, because of what He is working here, through all of us. Amen.

Christopher L. Saraga

One Thing

In a movie called "City Slickers", the main character Mitch is searching for meaning in his life. Curly, the crusty old trail boss, shares some advice. He tells Mitch that he has found the "Secret of Life". He holds up one finger and says, "It is ONE THING. Just ONE THING. Stick to that and everything else don't mean *nothing*." (edited)

Spending time with my father and husband at the end of their lives this year, the ONE THING took on new meaning for me. In the end, all of those things that we have spent our lives working for, the house, the car, the special collections, all of the tech gadgets, or money in the bank, none of those things matter anymore. At the end of our lives the only thing, the ONE THING that matters is our relationship with Jesus Christ. It's you and God. That is all there is. Paul says in Philippians 3:8 "I consider everything as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him..."

This November, as we make our lists of things to be thankful for, the top of the list needs to be the ONE THING. We know our Lord and Savior. We know the "Secret of Life". Having the perspective of knowing what is important also makes us realize with urgency that we have to share this "Secret of Life". Each student and family that you are in contact with needs to know the ONE THING. They need to have this wonderful blessing we have. They need to know the grace and mercy that God has for us. They need to know that heaven is theirs because of Jesus sacrifice on the cross.

Praise God for His love and faithfulness!!

Carol Smallwood

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."
Psalm 32:8

As we enter the New Year it is often a time to look forward and make resolutions. I find it is also a time to reflect on the past and praise God for His blessings. I enjoy looking back at the people God has placed in my life to watch over me and mold me through the years. I would like to share thoughts on two teachers God placed in my life at an early age.

As I approached the room, I noticed her. She had long dark hair that flowed over her shoulders reflecting the light from above. Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and exuded warmth, making me feel welcome. When I walked in the room, I knew I belonged. She was much taller than I was, but it didn't matter. I was now in first grade and it was my first day of school. She was my first-grade teacher, Miss Leuth.

You never forget those first impressions as a young child. Miss Leuth immediately alleviated all of the fears I had on the first day of school. It did not take me long to get up enough courage to propose to Miss Leuth. Of course, in a very kind and loving manner she let me know she was already engaged and would be moving at the end of the year. It didn't matter. I had her all day, five days a week, for an entire school year. As the year ended, I was left to wonder how I would move on without her for the next three years. The Lutheran School I went to had two rooms: grades 1-4 and grades 5-8.

As the next school year approached, I was again apprehensive as the first day of school came. What would life be like without Miss Leuth? I approached the room oh so slowly with my mother. There was again a head full of dark hair, but it was short hair and was on the body of a man standing so tall. He was dressed in a black suit and tie. His eyes were a piercing dark brown but were still welcoming as he smiled when we entered the room. His voice was deep and commanding. He was wearing black leather shoes. I remember feeling that I would need to do what he said immediately, not knowing what the consequence might be from such a commanding figure. I don't remember much about that year, but there was always one puzzling memory that struck me as funny about Mr. Ludeke. I remember how the toes of his leather shoes were always curled up. I had a good year and I learned to make sure I behaved and did my work.

God blessed me with many different teachers after second grade. The pastor, teachers, and church family at Zion Lutheran helped guide me to serve in Lutheran School ministry. Many years after I had Mr. Ludeke, I took my call to teach third grade in Ann Arbor, MI. It was then when I discovered why his toes were always curled. The leather from which shoes were made in the late 1950's and early 1960's was stiff, hard leather. It wasn't as soft and pliable as today's leather. Mr. Ludeke's toes were curled up because he was always squatting so he could be at eye level with his second-grade students. This tall commanding man with a deep voice, who demanded respect in every way, cared enough to bring himself to the level of his students. As I stood before a class of thirty-three third grade students in Ann Arbor, I remembered Mr. Ludeke's shoes. The preservation of a childhood memory made a huge impact as I began my teaching career. Always be at the level of your students. Miss Leuth and Mr. Ludeke were two very different teachers, but both of them exemplified the words of the Psalmist, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."

We have an amazing God. Our God places his servants, teachers, in our lives. Our God provides the loving eyes of teachers to guide and protect. He is a God who stores lasting memories in the miraculous brain he has given us. He gives us memories that bring meaning to our life as He uses us in his ministry. Our God sent us the greatest teacher, His Son, Jesus Christ, who came down and to our level as a man. I wonder... I wonder if Jesus sandals were curled at the tip?

Rich Nordmeyer

"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

I Thessalonians 5:18

This is probably not the verse you expected to see when you started reading this February devotion. Perhaps you expected to see "God so loved the world..." or "Beloved, let us love one another..."

I chose this verse because our Heavenly Father has been engraving this message on my heart over and over again these past few months. Has that ever happened to you? You take a step back and discover that your experiences, conversations and devotions seem to have a theme, as if your Father is trying to teach you something important?

One message came from a faithful follower when I shared my grief over a lost relationship. The first words out of her mouth were, "Remember, God tells us to give thanks in ALL circumstances, even the hard ones." That's a tough one, isn't it? It's easy to be thankful for all the blessings we have, but saying "thanks" when things are hard requires trusting His promise that He can use ALL things for our good.

Then I read a devotion and stumbled upon a verse in Habakkuk that I've rarely heard in my faith walk: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior."-Habakkuk 3:17-18 (What a fitting verse in these tough enrollment times for Lutheran schools!)

Next, a friend recommended the book "One Thousand Gifts" by Ann Voskamp. In this book, the author recounts her commitment to (with the Spirit's help) live a life of "eucharisteo", a life of giving thanks in all circumstances, of choosing to make "giving thanks" her first reaction in all situations. As she chronicles this faith journey, she decides to write down one thousand blessings, and invites the reader to do the same. (She even provides an "app for that!")

Finally, I had one of those "mom moments" where my sage parental advice was handed back to me. ☹️ It was one of those "we're headed in four different directions and no one will be home for dinner" moments, and I was waiting to pay at a drive-through. The gift card I was planning to use slipped out of my hand and fell between the seats. As I was muttering to myself, I heard one of my kids say, "Really, Mom? You're in a drive-through buying food (there are people who can't!) with a gift card someone gave you (it's not even your money!) and you're complaining because the card fell between the seats??" Ouch.

See what I mean about the Father trying to teach me something?

I think this message is instructive for Lutheran educators, too. We have so many blessings, and so many reasons to give thanks. But let's face it: we also encounter tough situations that can dampen our enthusiasm and desire to serve. Some days we have heavy doses of both! But our Heavenly Father reminds us to give thanks in ALL circumstances, and to trust that He can use them for our good.

Mary Fink

For Such a Time as This

“And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

Esther 4:14b (ESV)

As a Lutheran educator, I sometime wonder why God has placed me where He has. Don't get me wrong; I love the ministry of which I am a part. However, not every day is a bed of roses. I am somewhat of a controlling person, and when I feel that I am not in control of a situation, I feel that I am not doing my best job. How prideful is that? These are the times that I have learned that I need to stop, listen, and let God be in control. He is, after all, the one who placed me in this ministry; and He is the one who makes the plans. I once had a friend who used to say, “Man plans, God laughs.” Isn't that so true?

This school year has been a year of tests. God is working hard to find out if my peers and I are willing to trust Him. We think we are, but then we worry. We think we are, but then we try to take issues and matters in our own hands. We think we are, but then God shows us how little we do trust Him. It is quite convicting when that happens. As we began this school year, I had a conversation with a friend, and amidst the terrible events surrounding our school at the time, my friend asked me why I was still there? She basically said that I was nuts and that I had many more opportunities out there. My answer to her was that maybe my desires and plans were not God's. God would make sure the truth of the situation would come to the surface in His time. It was then that I was reminded of the story of Queen Esther and Mordecai's words to her as the Jews were about to be persecuted. He said to her, “And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” God gave her the opportunity to bring justice to the Jews. How awesome is that?

I believe that we are all called for a special purpose. God has purposefully placed each of us in the positions we serve “for such a time as this.” It is up to us to trust Him and live our lives with the light of Christ shining through us, proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If Christ can go to the cross and suffer the torture and death he suffered, then I can certainly, with His guidance, handle the adversities that come my way in His ministry. In this season of repentance, we have the opportunity to focus on the amazing work Christ did for us so we do not have to suffer eternal damnation. This gives me the encouragement I need to face anything that comes my way. I don't know right now what God's plan is for the work He is calling me to do at my school site. However, I know that He has placed me there “for such a time as this.”

Marci Nuoffer

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Heb. 12:1-2

If you have worked in a school more than one year, you understand to some extent the meaning of perseverance. When you get into May and June, teaching isn't easy. The students are not excited about sitting in the classroom as the weather gets better (neither are we), so we try to make our lesson plans interesting and learning fun. We try to keep our enthusiasm up while we go through spring plays and the rest of the craziness spring brings. We are usually happy to see that last day of school in June.

When we really look at the big picture of life we know that we will have to persevere through much more important issues. Maybe you have already gone through times when you felt like you had something in common with Job, or maybe you are in the midst of it right now. We deal with sickness and death of loved ones, conflicts in our family and in our ministry, and difficulties with our own health. Sometimes we don't fully trust that God has prepared good things—for us, for family, for friends for others. Circumstances don't always look promising. When we start caving into those feelings of despair we need to go back to the Truth. God's word reminds of us His redemption and faithfulness. God never changes. Chapter 11 of Hebrews shares with us a list of the history of people of faith. No matter what the dire, dreary circumstances, God turned each into a hopeful future. When Job was in the midst of his trouble he said to the Lord, “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.” Job 42:1. We know the end of that story. “The Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before.” Job 42:10 While Joseph was a slave and in prison, God was planning on him being second in command in Egypt. When Peter lost faith and denied Christ...God saw him bringing many to faith as he proclaimed Christ. When Mary saw Jesus die...God saw Jesus resurrected and seated on His heavenly throne. Read Hebrews 11 again and rejoice in God's faithfulness to his people. These witnesses to God's faithfulness are also great examples to us of perseverance through the hardest times.

We can persevere because we know that God's plans for us are to prosper us and not to harm us, plans to give us **hope** and a **future**. Jer. 29:11

No matter what our circumstances are at this moment God can and will reverse, restore, revive and renew. He sees beyond the present troubles and is sparking a fire to light up the future with hope. So let's start sprinting forward toward the finish line, accomplishing all the things that God has planned for us to do.

Carol Smallwood

“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”
Matthew 11:28

These are certainly familiar words from Scripture. In fact, if you teach elementary kids, you have most likely assigned these words as a memory verse at one time or another. This is certainly a verse that ‘pops’ into my mind with regular frequency, when the weariness and burdens of the day threaten to overwhelm me.

While this verse was first spoken by Jesus to the people of Galilee centuries ago, I believe it is certainly applicable to educators, especially as the school year draws to a close! Some of you have already completed the year and many more will be wrapping things up in the next few weeks. You may be involved in year-end meetings, updating student folders or, in the case of our early childhood educators, cleaning your rooms and preparing for your summer program. And, you are WEARY! You are weary and perhaps burdened as well! Your weariness may be physical, emotional and even spiritual. Your burdens may be for your ‘kids’, your peers, your job and your family. Listen once again to the verse – and the promise Jesus offers to us!

“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus promises us *rest!* Rest for our weariness and rest from our burdens. All we need to do is *come!* He is waiting! He will speak to us! Hear God’s voice as you read His Words.

“The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Exodus 33:14

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.” Psalm 91:1

“Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.” Jeremiah 6:16

“He restores my life...” Psalm 23:3

May you reflect on these verses, commit them to memory and hide them in your heart! May these summer months provide the *rest* you desire - and need - as you faithfully *come* to our gracious Lord Jesus each and every day! And for my early childhood friends who continue to share Jesus with children and families throughout the summer, I pray you will especially be blessed and refreshed as you come to Him and spend time with Him in His Word!

Lynne Rose

Incredible!

Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? Acts 26:8

Lots of things are incredible this time of year. It's incredible that the Gutenberg family is leaving the congregation. (What other printer will do the Fun Fair flyers free?) It's incredible that Freddy is back this year! His parents threatened to pull him out every week last year! It's incredible that Mr. Ruble's bulletin board looks the same this year as in the past 46. (Perhaps it's an alternative to a field trip when we study fossils. The bulletin board, not Mr. Ruble.) Among the most incredible facts—and the best incredible fact—is the truth of our salvation. Is it not incredible that God loved you so much that He sent Jesus to take away your sins? You of all people! You were dead in your sinfulness—truly an enemy of God. But now you are sanctified and becoming more so every day. Incredible

It's incredible that the Holy Spirit selected you to reach students with the news that Jesus is their Savior too. Was there ever a time when you thought you would serve God in the mission field? It's incredible that (most of) you didn't need a passport to reach the place in which you serve. Who would have thought the Lutheran school classroom, VBS, or Sunday school would have a mission similar to missionaries in faraway places?

God does incredible things. His resume includes redeeming lost sinners from death and the devil. Equally incredible, He redeemed believers even before Christ's sacrificial act of redemption on the cross. By just His promise of a Messiah, God redeemed Abraham, Ruth, David, Daniel, Thor, and Thorina. (Okay, so the last two believers didn't get their names in the Bible, but they are in the Book of Life.)

God still does incredible things. He revives the spiritually dead through baptism, bringing them to new life as His children. And can you just imagine Judgment Day when Jesus returns to split open the graves and revive His children to a life that will never end? God empowers us to do the incredible. He sends the Holy Spirit to work through us as we teach His children about His incredible love for them. Sadly, some will find the Good News too incredible to believe. Others, especially the very young, will soak up incredible amounts of fact and faith. Are you ready for all this?

Your task is incredibly important. But your God-given faith makes you ready for the work. As you start a new academic year, you'll always want to prepare your lessons ahead of time. But always be confident that God has made you ready to serve.

Conversation: Dear Father, send your Holy Spirit to me and to all whom I teach. We are ready to grow with each other, to learn from each other, to praise God for each other. Help us always to be ready to share the news of salvation. Amen.

Enrichment: Acts 26:1–8

Ed Grube

Hope that Really Matters

Each year I begin the school year full of excitement and anticipation! I feel refreshed and renewed from summer break. I have lots of high hopes and dreams for my students, my classroom and what I want to do better.

As the school year progresses however, I begin to tire and get “bogged down” by the many demands of teaching. Those “high hopes” begin to fade a bit and my lofty goals begin to look a little less attainable. I begin to feel a little more “hopeless” than “hopeful.” Do you ever feel this way?

This summer I had the opportunity to visit Ghana West Africa. While staying on the coast I was blessed to meet Dorcus. Dorcus is a first grade teacher in a small, beachside fishing village. Her classroom is about 500 square feet which houses 34 lively boys and girls! The children sit 2 to a desk, which is nothing more than a small rough board table and bench. There are no computers, Smart boards or playground equipment. Textbooks are scarce and math manipulative are seashells Dorcus collected on the beach. The building is in great disrepair, with chunks of concrete missing from the floor and paint peeling from the walls. I began to wonder...”with so little to work with, does Dorcus dare to have hopes and dreams for her students?”

As we visited, it became clear that Dorcus does indeed have high hopes for her students. It dawned on me that she doesn't even *know* about the things that I take for granted, to help prepare my students for their future. Dorcus beamed with pride as she shared her students penmanship which read- “God is good” and “God gives me food...a home...a family”. She patiently demonstrated how she taught addition and subtraction to her students. We discussed discipline approaches and the joys and struggles of teaching.

I felt a close connection with Dorcus. Even though we come from different countries, cultures and economic standing, we both have “hopes” for our student's futures. As we hugged and said good-bye, I whispered, “God bless you Dorcus”, and she smiled and said, “And may God bless you too! Maybe someday we meet again”.

As I walked away, I knew I *would* see Dorcus again someday. We have the best hope of all...the hope of eternal life! It is because of God's grace and his Holy Spirit who is continually working in me and restoring me that I am able to do what I do. So when I get “bogged down” and begin to lose hope, He is there picking me up, shaping and molding me into the masterpiece he has created me to be. It is by God's grace, not my lofty intentions, that has brought me this far, and will continue to guide me while I carry out His purpose- “Feeding His Lambs”.

While it is important to set goals and have hopes and dreams for your students, remember to keep the most important hope of all out front...the hope we have of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **1 Peter 1:3** (NIV)

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. **1 Thessalonians 1:3**

Susan Brandt

Walking with Jesus: Equipped, Empowered, and Encouraged!

"...What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul...?"

Deuteronomy 10:12

As we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, as we open not only our eyes, but our hearts to His leading us in grace and in truth, we are equipped, empowered, and encouraged as partners in school ministry to not only walk with our Savior, but for Him. What a comfort it is to know that we do not walk alone, but hand in hand with our Savior, Who has a firm grip on the reality of what is, what is not, and what can be! What a blessing it is to share His message of salvation, love, and hope with our students and families! Each day, the Lord affirms to us His unfailing love and His faithfulness through the children and families we serve as we see the fruit He brings forth by His grace. God also uses the circumstances and challenges we face in our daily walk to not only help our faith to grow, but to provide encouragement and comfort to others as they see God at work in us and through us.

I never cease to marvel at how the Lord teaches us life lessons through the words, actions, and simple faith shared by our children and our students. These lessons are valuable gems we can treasure and ponder in our hearts. We can incorporate and share them as we teach and encourage one another in ministry. One "gem" the Lord brought to my remembrance recently was the memory of little, laughing Ella Preus at LEC several years ago. She had learned to walk, and was keeping in step with her grandpa, Mark. Her eyes lit up with a twinkle, and she took off running with her wispy red hair flying... down the corridor crowded with educators! I witnessed not only Ella's confident spirit as she forged ahead, but also the faithfulness of her loving grandpa pursuing her, and the gentle, quiet strength with which he picked her up into the safety of his arms. In his eyes, there was a sense of pride and joy in seeing his grandchild finish her adventurous run, and in her eyes there was the peace in knowing that in his arms she now had refuge from the throngs of teachers she had faced in her "race". Another such "gem" was added to this lesson's crown when I also witnessed my pastor holding his one and only grandson, Jacob, in his arms as he shook our hands. It reminded me of the way Jesus, the Good Shepherd, holds His lamb so tenderly in a painting I have of Him, and of how Mark held Ella that same loving way, too. Jacob, like Ella, has learned to walk, and Jacob thrives on encouragement from his grandpa as he steps out on his own, but never *alone*. God calls us as Christian educators to encourage our students and each other to walk in the light of "Him Who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light." Like Ella and Jacob remind us, Christ's lambs walk with Him in love, security, and the freedom that comes to us by grace through faith in Him.

As we walk together, fixing our eyes on God and all that He has done, still does, and can do, may we be filled with thanksgiving and hope. If we only look to ourselves and to one another with regard to doing His Will in ministry we would have every reason to be discouraged. However, it is in our weakness that God is strong in us. It is in our humility and submission that He takes us and uses us to accomplish His purposes. Through challenges, He nurtures and

strengthens us in faith and provides us with opportunities to trust Him. When our human eyes view adverse circumstances as obstacles, through the clarity of His vision revealed in His Word and through other people as instruments of His grace, we can see adversity as an opportunity for God to be glorified, and faith and trust in Him strengthened and affirmed.

As partners in school ministry, we have by faith taken the first step with Him, accepting by the power of the Holy Spirit the call to share Christ with youth and families. With each step thereafter, our Shepherd of Tender Youth guides us all in love and truth. We can thank the Lord for the steps taken thus far with Him and for Him, for the unity of the Spirit evident and at work in this endeavor, and for the hearts in our schools and churches that He is transforming in accordance with His Will. In all the steps, God will be with us and for us, just as He has promised in His Word. God doesn't call us to skip steps or leap over and avoid what may seem daunting to do, but rather calls us to walk with Him. This requires taking life and service in ministry one step at a time, always looking ahead through the eyes of faith, for we are called to walk and live by faith. May He Who has begun this good work in each of us carry it on to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ!

"...Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Isaiah 40:31

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3:5-6

Charlene Soon

Milestones

"Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, 'Till now the Lord has helped us.'" 1 Samuel 7:12

The hikers stand at the trailhead. The trail winds unpredictably up the mountain. How will they find the destination? How will they know how far they have gone and much farther they must travel? The rough map is helpful but it is only an abstract paper guide.

Previous hikers and trail explorers have left journey markings. There are stones with directional arrows painted on them. There are piles of stone that hold mile markings and directional indicators. The hikers wisely note the milestones and proceed to the peak.

God had mapped out the plan of salvation. Israel climbed His path to completion. Sometimes they ignored His signs and found themselves lost. At times they noted a wide and seemingly scenic path to the side and they found themselves in peril. If they followed God's markings they were safe.

Many of the mile stones are not noted in Scripture. Some like "Ebenezer" are noted and named. Along this path the Israelites had encountered the Philistine army and God had rescued them. A stone celebrated God's presence. God's rescue points in our journey are too numerous to note. However, it is fitting that we note His presence and stop to praise and thank Him. Our milestones also become points for others (family, students) to stop and see God's rescue and to follow His markings on their own journey.

Reflecting On Christ the King: When have you experienced the Lord's help? How might we mark times and places of rescue in our own lives and in our family? How does your church and school note faith milestones?

Relying On Christ the King: Dear Jesus, "Thank you" for the witness of the generations of family members and others. The witness of others marks a faith path for us. Thank you for teachers whose work and witness before us has marked a ministry path. Through your Spirit bless our witness so that we might leave a path for others to follow. In Jesus' name. Amen

Pastor Bob Riggert

Landmarks

“For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” 1 Corinthians 10:4

Plymouth Rock, Chimney Rock, and Pikes’ Peak are only a few of the rocks that are geographical and historical landmarks in our country’s history. Whether arriving on the rocky Atlantic shore or venturing westward across the plains, rocks served as destination guides and goals.

As we journey through Scripture our faith eyes always see the “Rock” that is Christ. He is in the view of the faithful Old Testament “travelers”—patriarchs, kings, prophets. Sometimes their view became obstructed by the idols of foreigners. Sometimes in their stubbornness they refused to see the obvious landmark. However the Rock never moved and never changed. New Testament “travelers”—disciples, apostles—stood by the Rock. Those who traveled with the message of salvation always had the Rock in their rear view.

As we journey through Scripture, the Rock in our view is Christ. Everything leads to Him and leads from Him. He is the reason for the journey. He is the destination. As we seek the rocks of Scripture we always look to and from The Rock. See the Landmark! Share the Rock that you see with your students, families, and into the world.

Reflecting On Christ the King: What are some of the landmarks in your travels as an educator, parent, spouse, citizen? What keeps you on course? Is Jesus always in your view? How might He become more clearly in your focus?

Relying On Christ the King:

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood, From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure: Cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.” LSB #761

Pastor Bob Riggert

GO! TELL!

And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Matthew 22:37 and 39

I was 12 years old when my great-uncle, Ernie, called me into his office during a family reunion at his home. His thin face, lined from years of exuberant laughter, took on an air of seriousness as I reached for his outstretched hand.

Drawing me near to his side he said, "I have had a GREAT life! Eight years ago I had a heart-attack and almost lost my life...but God wasn't finished with me...soooo...He gave me eight more years of GOOD life to tell others of His love."

Pulling me closer to him Uncle Ernie continued with words of great conviction. Calling me by name he said, "You are so special to Jesus. NEVER, NEVER turn away from Him. ALWAYS keep Him in your heart. REMEMBER that He will always be with you...so share the love He has given you with others." As he gave me an even bigger hug I confidently affirmed my faith and belief in Jesus as my Savior, promising to follow His way. My uncle, his face beaming with assurance and peace, sent me off to play.

Shortly thereafter, Uncle Ernie passed away. Although there was sadness, my memories were filled with love for a man who was passionate about His Savior; a man who wasn't afraid to share God's unconditional love with others.

Today I ponder: How often do I tell people that they are special to me and to Jesus? Do I passionately encourage them to follow His way? Do I consistently witness to God's love in my speech and through my actions?

Having had the privilege of working with children and youth from preschool through college years, I am a respectful witness to the myriad of behavioral choices and the growth that comes in learning from mistakes. But few experiences resonate with me as does the response of a parent to their child's classmate following a barrage of insults toward their first-born. A young child named Steve fell down and skinned his knee on his way into school. Pete, a friend of the child stood in the doorway, watching, as Steve's mother rocked him in her lap trying to ease the pain. All of a sudden Pete jeered, "Look at the baby! Mama's boy! Mama's boy!" The mother stopped rocking. Gently, she eased Steve off of her lap with a kiss and sat looking at Pete who continued to sneer from the doorway. In an unexpected gesture, the mother opened her arms wide to him. Pete stood motionless for a moment. Then, to Steve's surprise, Pete rushed into his mother's arms, climbed up onto her lap and buried his face into her shoulder. In Matthew, Jesus commands our love and the extension of it to our neighbors. There aren't conditions attached to His love for us nor are there any rules or guidelines of how to share it with others. In interpretive simplicity...as children of God we are commanded to Go! and Tell! (Matthew 28:19-20) The call is to action and the time is now.

God's intention is pure and clear:

God sent His only Son, Mary's first-born child, into the world with the knowledge that He would face trials and temptations. He was believed, beckoned, blameless, battered, bullied and betrayed. God's Son, Jesus, died on the cross and rose triumphant, defeating death for the sake of all humankind and forgiving every sin. This passionate display of love unfolded with His arms outstretched on a wooden cross, open wide for you and for me.

Just like Pete, we need to feel loved. God's open arms are waiting to embrace us, to hold us tight and to welcome us home. Through all the difficulties we face on earth we are encouraged to hang in there....because Jesus did!

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. When we put God's command into practice we are able to share His love with others, to reach out a hand to our neighbor and say:

You are so special to Jesus. Never, never turn away from Him. Always keep Him in your heart. Remember that He will always be with you... so share the love He has given you with others.
GO! TELL!

And may our Lord's face beam with assurance, peace and great joy because of you!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, You have left us a legacy of love to pass on to others. Give us the courage, faith and conviction to share it. Help us to express your love in all that we do and all that we say. With passion help us to GO! and TELL! And, Lord, please wrap us in your arms of love. It feels so good! In Your name we pray, Amen

Sandi Scott

White as Snow

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. Isaiah 1:18

Bright, bold, beautiful scarlet. It's a color that brightens up a room or defines a smile on the face. When presented as a rose or heart the color proclaims "I love you." Red can be a beautiful color.

But we've all done it, whether it was an accident or not. Somewhere along the line we've put that one red item in the wash with the white clothes. You know the result...pink where we didn't really want pink.

Now we have a problem. No amount of washing or bleach ever completely removes the color. We can try all the spot removers and special treatments we want. It's pretty much impossible to get rid of that stain.

Life can be compared to that. Our sinful actions stain the perfection of His creation. Nothing we can do will cleanse the stain or remove the spots.

The love of God the Father solves the problem. He sent His Son to live, die, and rise for us. Because of His love, our sins, though scarlet, are as white as snow. What a powerful comparison. The stain of scarlet contrasted with the pristine pureness of new snow. Our Father looks at us through the perfection of His Son. Gone is our sinfulness and stain. In its place is the clean, forgiven child, washed clean in the blood of Christ.

This incomprehensible love is especially evident this time of year. It is our Valentine gift. It is the message of Lent as we look forward to the celebration of Easter. It is the Gospel message we share every day. Embrace it for yourself. Let it permeate your being. Proclaim it loud and clear to your students and their families.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for washing our sins white through the blood of Your Son, Jesus. Help us to daily embrace this gift and to proclaim it to all we meet. In Jesus' name. Amen

Elinor Courvoisier

John Phipps received a phone call to come early to his aerospace engineering job at a plant in Burbank. He got up early to take a Metrolink train into work. Normally he caught a later train.

Juan Alvarez also got up early the morning of January 26, 2005. He had decided to commit suicide. He decided he would drive his Jeep Cherokee to a set of Metrolink train tracks, park it there and allow himself to be killed by the train.

Mr. Alvarez had second thoughts; he got out of his Jeep and ran. But he left his Jeep on the tracks and a crash happened. 11 people died and over 200 were injured.

John Phipps fell asleep on the top deck of his train car. The next thing he remembers is an incredible jolt and then he felt mist on his face. He tried to move and realized he was trapped. He was able to touch his face and head and saw there was severe bleeding – blood covered his hands, head, and face. John Phipps called out for help. He was alone and trapped. He could not get out. He suddenly realized he was going to die.

He decided he wanted to leave one last message for his family, so he reached for the wounds on his head, and wrote in blood. He wrote I (heart) my kids. I (heart) Leslie. Leslie is the name of his wife. He then loses consciousness.

LA Fire Department Captain Robert Rosario is searching through the wreckage. He has found at least one of the casualties from this horrific accident and found many more injured people. He comes upon a scene that shocked a seasoned veteran of train wrecks, auto accidents, fires, and other devastating events. He finds the message of love from John to his family.

What do you think he felt? What would you do in that situation? Captain Rosario knew there was only one thing to do – to make certain that message got to the loved ones of John Phipps. He knew there would be no doubt that he would relay that message exactly as he found it. It was an incredibly humble honor to deliver that message.

There was no way he was going to edit that message in any way. There was no way he would not deliver the message. He told everyone he knew about the message. His life was changed because of the message of love written in blood.

He did not feel worthy to share that message, but knew he was empowered by both the message and the sender of the message. It did not matter what had been part of his life up until that moment, once he heard the message, it was time to deliver the message, and nothing else beside the message mattered. He did not select or enhance the message; he just delivered the message. Everyone who heard the message was happy to hear it. Who wouldn't want to hear about love written in blood? Good news – John Phipps lived to tell his family the message face to face. He lives, and he tells the story of love written in blood. Isn't it great that the one who gave the message of love written in blood lives to share that love in person?

Do you see the parallels? Love written in blood? The message gives strength and power to the messenger. Nothing can stop the delivery of the message. Nothing can stop love written in blood. God loves you so much that He wrote the message of His love for you in Christ's blood. Christ tells you He loves you as He comes to you in person, as you hold His message of love in your hands in His Body and Blood. What a joy it is to share the message of His love, in His blood.

Mike Gras

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace & that he lavished on us. Ephesians 1:7-8a

To say I am not athletic is an understatement. Recently, while doing some boot camp type training, I was painfully reminded of this, literally painfully. You see, it took weeks for me to jump rope for more than just a few consecutive jumps before tripping on the rope. My trainer even bought me a heavier, plastic, beginner's rope to help...and it did...sort of.

Growing up I did not learn to ride a bike, and I have never had the experience of playing on any sports' team. Being on a sports' team is not the only experience I lack. I also do not understand the concept of taking credit for another's achievement on a favorite sports team. Can you envision the scenario? The one depicting those fanatical fans who hoot and holler at the television when their team does well and enjoy saying things like, "We won!" "We beat that team!" "We are the best!"

Who's "we"?? What part of the achievement was yours other than turning on the right channel? What makes you think you can align yourself and enjoy the accolades and achievements of another? You played no part in the game, unless you call spectating a sport. Your performance was nil; you're depending on the merits of another...

And then I think, "Oh my...that IS me; that is what I do too!" My performance in life is nil, awful, unworthy, grossly inadequate, insufficient, laughable, lacking and incompetent...and I am not just talking about my jump rope and bike riding skills. This describes my sinful life. Because of Jesus, I can depend on the merits of another...His blood, His perfection, His righteousness, His worth, His sufficiency, His life and death, His resurrection and His promise that He will take my brokenness and worthlessness and trade it for his perfection. WOW! There is no better team to be a part of!

Tanya Grasz

I Hate Roller Coasters!

When I was in college my boyfriend coerced me into riding the old cyclone racer at the Long Beach Pike. The coaster was built in 1930 and taken down in 1968 (probably the week after I rode it). I don't remember any details of the ride itself. I do, however, remember that when the thing finally came to a stop I was shaking so hard that I had to be helped off. My head ached from slamming into the headrest that had long ago lost its padding. My neck hurt from holding it stiff so that my head wouldn't slam into the padding-less headrest. Even before I stopped shaking, I looked my boyfriend in the eye and declared, "No one will EVER make me do that again!"

I have almost the same level of fondness for emotional roller coasters; and I feel like I have been riding on one for the last few years. Six years ago last December 15; my family celebrated my mom's 90th birthday. A few days later we learned that she had terminal breast cancer. She wasn't unhappy with the diagnosis because she was very ready to join my dad in heaven. For the next four months I watched my once-very-active mom wither away; and then on April 24, 2007 I went home from work and went next door to take Mom a little dinner, but she wasn't there. Her body was, but God had taken Evelyn to be with Him.

That's when the ride began in earnest! One minute something great was about to happen, the next...the world seemed to drop out from under me.

The ups are great...I have wonderful, loving relationships with my families... biological, work, school, church and friends.

I have what has to be the best job in the world! The people with whom I work are amazing! It is an incredible honor and joy to be part of the Bethany Lutheran ministry team. I get to spend time every day with some of the cutest children in the world! Playing with little children is on my job description (Although I admit that I don't get to play often enough. One little girl went home and told her mom she liked it when I came into her class because I loved her. When her mom asked what else I did, she replied, "Nothing. She just plays on her computer"). I thank God every day for the blessings He has given to me. I'm not going to list any of the downs of this ride we call life. I'm pretty sure each of you could make your own list. Suffice it to say... parts of the last six years have NOT felt wonderful or loving. Parts have left me feeling confused, hurt, sad, and angry, betrayed, scared, rushed and overwhelmed.

One really interesting thing I have observed in all of this though is that...as life has happened; my "What's most important" list has been refined and narrowed. God is, more firmly than ever, at the top of the list. Family and friends, the gifts God has given me, are next. And all the stuff that I used to think was so important and necessary, just seems to be getting lower and lower on the list.

Recently, the Sunday morning scripture reading hit home in a new way. The reading came from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Chapter 4 verses 12 and 13 "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every

situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

I used to think that Paul was bragging; but my emotional roller coaster ride has led to a new interpretation of Paul’s words. I’ve realized that the secret of being content in any and every situation is to just keep going...with His strength. I don’t have to love, or even like, every situation. But I *can* be content when I know and submit to His control. The more I depend on Him, the stronger, in Him, I become.

The ride hasn’t ended. I realize that it won’t end until I finally “coast” through the pearly gates. Then I will meet my Lord and Savior face to face; and He will help me from the car. As I practice and begin to learn how to be content no matter what my current circumstances, I become able to proclaim with Paul, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* Philippians 4:4

Nola Seaman

Thanks to a Monday morning BOOM-CRASH-SPLAT, the Cypress sidewalk near Gridley and Orange now owns some skin from my left knee. While I'd like to chalk up the morning's event to an unknown bump or crack in the sidewalk, an untied shoe, the absence of appropriate eyewear, or the lack of that 2nd cup of caffeine, I really can't blame the incident on any one thing. What I do know is that my body didn't move like I had expected it would, and BOOM: it CRASHed into that which rarely moves: (SPLAT!). Been there? Done that? Ever said: "Why in the world did that happen?"

WHY the Lord allowed or afforded me this experience is really beyond my comprehension. I could assume that He was reminding me that I have hit the mid-century mark and should slow down. I could believe that He was reminding me that I should take advantage of the corrective eyewear on which I've spent hundreds of dollars. I could also presume it was to humble my competitive spirit in the presence of nearly 100 hundred high school students walking to their first period class OR, I could believe that my fall was a result of a "spiritual" issue and say something like: "I should have prayed about my jogging before I went out this morning, and *then* God would have protected me."

While the lack of prayer would naturally fall into the category of "sins of omission," I don't think God causes us to fall on the ground because we've forgotten to pray. That makes about as much sense as one who says "I should have prayed for my hip joint before I went for an x-ray and *then* God would have kept me from getting arthritis." OR, "If only I had been going to church consistently before my cancer exam; maybe then God would've spared me from this disease." God doesn't give arthritis to people who have forgotten to pray for their joints, and God doesn't assign disease to people who failed to follow the 10 Commandments.

But God does allow accidents to happen. God, in His wisdom, does allow disease and illness to invade our bodies. In His wise providence, He allows cancer; He allows people to die, and He allows many other unfortunate events to happen.

Does He want us to pray? Yes. Does He want us to go to church? Yes. But the cause and effect of these kinds of human efforts (or lack thereof) really cannot be linked to trial and tribulation, although people of every time and place have tried to do so. Remember Job? Remember the Gospel lesson: *Who sinned that this man was born blind?* (John 9:30).

What we can be confident of is this...

The Lord is compassionate and gracious (Psalm 103) and unfortunate events occur, *so that the work of God might be displayed* (John 9:30) and

In all things God works for the good of those who love him... (Rom 8:28).

A little unsure of this? Then just take a minute or two and look back in faith to the stories in Scripture of the saints who have gone before us. They too had their share of days when they went BOOM, CRASH and SPLAT. While they weren't privileged yet to have known the modern day remedies of Advil[®], Neosporin[®] and Band-Aids[®], I'm confident they will join with us around the throne of God as we sing praise to YHWH-Rophe (the LORD our healer). I'm sure they'll be eager to recount God's many blessings and I imagine they'll be willing to share a story or two about their battle scars as well. +S.D.G+

Carol McDaniel

Be Still

As each school year ends, whether you are a teacher or a parent, we seem to rush pell-mell toward summer with a flurry of end of year activities and ceremonies. As we try to finish the curriculum and meet every responsibility, the stress of the year seems to double. Yet, in the midst of all of that May and June insanity, Christ calls to us in Psalm 46:10 to “be still.”

Seriously, doesn't he understand the cycle of life? We rush from one event to the next, and then its summer. When I go in to grab something I left in my classroom, the halls at school now are strangely quiet. There's only a skeleton crew in the office, and the sounds of children's happy laughter and noisy chatter are absent. So now should be a great time to “be still.” But no, now it's summer! We have trips to plan, people to visit, things to fix all over the house, and bodies to get back into shape after the long school year. So, we fill our days with activities, and I am sure a few parents out there are already longing for the start of school. And still, in the midst of summer, Christ calls to us in Psalm 46:10 to “be still.”

The problem is we aren't very good at being still are we? I know I'm not. From emails in the morning to texts during the days and Instagram posts at night, I am rarely still, even when I am completely alone. Why in the world would David even pen those words from God? Of course, he didn't have to battle the technology and pace of the 21st century, so maybe those words were easy for him.

However, a closer reading of Psalm 46 reminds us exactly what God means when he tells us to “be still.” Before verse 10 God is not the speaker, but rather David as he reminds himself that “God is [his] refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” As David continues he describes the power of God, how he “makes wars to cease” and that in him our trust is sure. David notes that even if “the mountains [should] be moved into the heart of the sea,” God is totally in control.

Then in verse 10 the voice of God himself interrupts David's narrative. “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will exalted in the earth.” Quietly we pause, stunned at the profundity of that statement from the creator of the universe. What more do we really need to know? God is God and we're not!

Ultimately, God's command to be still is Christ's personal call to you in this stormy tornado we call life to quiet the outside so you can hear what's really important. And, since I can't help but go back to the original Hebrew, the word “still” actually means to be weak, to let go, to surrender. In other words, we surrender to KNOW that God is in control, and it is His saving power in our lives that makes every distraction in this crazy existence fade away. By trusting in your own powers and designs you are destined to be filled with distractions and confusion, but to be still is to trust in Jesus Christ for the meaning and purpose in your life. And notice, it's not be still and hope, it's not be still and wish, it's not even be still and believe, it's be still and KNOW. Know that right now Christ says to you, “Surrender to me.” Yes, be weak because that's when Christ will make you strong in him.

Our chapel theme all year came from John 20:31 which reads, "These were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in his name." And that theme completely ties to Psalm 46:10 because what does Jesus say to the storm that threatened to overwhelm the disciples on the Sea of Galilee? He said, "Be still," and that storm surrendered to Him. If he can handle that storm, I am more than certain that he can still every storm we face.

Thus, we, along with the disciples, question, "Who is this Jesus that even the wind and waves obey Him?" You know that answer don't you? Why He is the one true God and to you He says, "Be still." In the middle of summer, to you he says, "Be still and know that I am God." To you Christ Jesus says today and every day, "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" May you surrender all your chaos to Christ, rest in His power and "BE STILL."

Joanne Krafft

Living Water

Jeremiah 2:13 – “...for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

I read this last month while at a meeting at the Desert Marriott in Palm Desert. It was early in the morning and I sat on the balcony of my room reading my Bible, listening to the fountain in the pool area. If you have been there I would imagine you can picture that spot. I sat for a bit meditating on the fountain of living water.

The fountain I was watching and listening to was active, you could hear it as the water fell and hit the standing water sending ripples into the lake. Yet in that noise and activity it was so peaceful – the ducks on the lake were drawn to the fountain – they weren’t swimming away from it they were swimming to it. There are fish in that lake and they were swimming in the freshness of active water. The ripples going out from the fountain across the lake were evident throughout the whole area. Everything seemed just as it should be – a refreshing and peaceful picture.

Quite a visual the LORD gave me as I read Jeremiah chapter two and got caught on the 13th verse – this verse states the evil and builds the case for judgment upon the people of Israel to whom Jeremiah had been sent. Looking on this scene in front of me I couldn’t imagine who would choose to dig their own rocky cistern with no guaranteed ability to hold water instead of taking the living active fresh water from the fountain before them. And then God pointed out to me – Me, that’s who.

It is so easy to read through books of the Bible like Jeremiah and see what “woulda, shoulda, coulda”. We wouldn’t ever be like the Israelites, right? We know who Jesus is and what He has done for us so we won’t choose to walk away. But when we really take time to ask God to apply those verses directly to our everyday lives – where are my cisterns – He faithfully opens our eyes to the areas in our life that we have tried to hide and turn from Him; hoping He won’t notice. If we are honest, there are areas in our lives where we have chosen stale, dank, dead water-or worse-no water at all. Nothing can live there, nothing can grow, and nothing is drawn to it. Lovingly though our Savior shows us these areas and offers us His living water to cleanse, heal, and start growth.

I love the first Psalm. In that Psalm we see a vibrant picture of what can happen when we are planted by living water, *“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”*(vs. 3) Have you ever looked out the window of a plane when you are beginning your descent? You can always tell where the water is by the lush growth of trees. Oh, that all areas of our life would reflect a lush growth of deeply rooted trees, trees that won’t wither and die or be driven away by the wind! Allow the LORD to reveal your stale areas and refresh and renew them with living water so you will thirst no more – I am working on that in my life, I hope you will too.

Prayer: Almighty GOD, You are the source of Living Water. In You everything lives and moves and has its being. As we study Your Word, be the source of light to highlight the areas we tend to hide and let stagnate. Be the living water we need to flush out the areas of our life needing Your Living Water so that all of our being can believe in You. Allow from our hearts to flow streams of living water drawing others to You as well. We hear and are thirsty LORD, let us hear you say, “Come!” Amen

Kim Violette

A Special Gift

“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” James 1:17

My oldest daughter started kindergarten this year, which is both exciting and terrifying. Exciting because she loves school and is going to learn so many wonderful things. Terrifying because it means she is now growing up and in the care of someone else all day. (I am sure most parents can relate.)

It’s amazing to think that only five years have passed since I first held her as a baby. I remember feeling such a peace about her and knowing she was truly a gift from God. I have seen her grow and learn about Jesus these past few years, and can’t believe how strong she already is in her faith. I have to admit, I feel a little like Hannah must have felt with Samuel, excited to see her grow and serve the LORD.

As educators, we have been tasked with caring for our own group of students each day. *They are each a unique gift.* There may be challenging students, but each brings something special to our classrooms and schools. It is so important for us to remember that each one is truly a gift from God. That is not always easy to do, especially for the ones who cause us to pull our hair out. It can make our day to day job exhausting.

And what a job we have! Making sure we meet the standards, extra duties, planning, grading, implementing new strategies, testing, talking to parents, answering emails, staff meetings-it almost seems impossible at times. But we can never forget the most important part of our job as Lutheran educators-being able to teach them about God’s unfailing Grace each day. What a blessing that is!

Jesus also had a huge job that loomed in front of him. He woke up every morning knowing he was going to take on the sins of the entire world. He woke up every morning knowing he would have to die a brutal death. I can’t even begin to imagine how he must have felt. It’s hard for me to wake up some mornings when I know I have a difficult meeting that day, and He woke up knowing that we would ultimately face betrayal and death. But, Jesus also woke up every morning knowing he would conquer that death. He woke up knowing He would take away our sins. And He woke up every morning thinking about each and every one of us and His love for us. In Psalm 5:3, it tells us how important and vital it is to start each day with LORD. “In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly.” What a great reminder to us that we can start each morning with God. Even Jesus started His mornings with prayer. “In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.” Mark 1:35. It makes facing those challenging “gifts” a little easier every day.

Teachers are also a special gift to the families and students they work with every day. We have been tasked with an amazing and challenging job, but what a relief that we can do it each day

with Jesus as the focus. Teachers have also been given so many gifts and talents to enable them to serve each day. There is a reason that I hear, almost every day from parents or other professionals, "Wow, I could never do what you do."

I am not a morning person, but these past few days of the first week of school, I have found myself getting up earlier than usual-with the help of a prayer. I challenge you to start each day in prayer to the LORD. It makes such a difference.

My daughter is also not a morning person so you can imagine my surprise when yesterday she was awake and ready to go before me. When I asked her why she woke up so early, she said she had something important to do. I found her coloring a picture at the table.

"Who is it for?" I asked.

"My teacher," she replied, "because teachers are special. And so am I."

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for the gifts and talents you have equipped us with. Thank you for families and students that we serve. Please work in the lives of our students so they know and help us to serve you as well. Each of these students is a special gift and we are thankful that you have placed them in our lives. Thank you for sending Your only Son to complete the greatest job of all. Bless our schools and teachers, O Lord. Amen.

Meredith Binnie

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”
Jeremiah 29:11-13

At the beginning of every year my second-grade students fill out a special paper titled “All About Me.” On this student spotlight page seven and eight year olds tell their favorite food, book, subject, color, hobby, and of course what they want to be when they grow up. Well, second graders have a wide variety of answers for their future from firemen, to doctors, to ballerinas, to veterinarians, to professional basketball players, and, of course, there’s always the token student who says “TEACHER.” These are their plans, their big second grade plans for their future.

As you started this school year, I am sure you made some plans and formed ideas for how this school year would play out. Did you plan to have the perfect class? Did you plan to stay healthy this year and not miss one day of work? Did you plan to have not one issue with that “problem” parent? Did you plan a vacation for Christmas break? Did you plan to stay caught up on grading? Did you plan to get along with the people you work with? Did you plan to enter the classroom each day with a smile on your face shining brightly the love of Jesus for your students? How are your plans forming up? Maybe your plans are forming up exactly how you expected, or maybe they are even better than you expected. Perhaps your plans have gone array and nothing is shaping up the way you planned.

On August 21st I had big plans. I put the finishing touches on my classroom, I had everything copied, and I was certain that August 22nd was going to be a great first day of school. With one last glance at my classroom, I locked up and headed home with much anticipation for my new students. Upon arriving home I found that my husband was very ill and needed to be rushed to the hospital. The next few hours spun way out of MY control. This was not what I had planned...a heart attack, stiff words from the doctor informing us that my husband might die, open heart surgery, a long recovery if he made it out of surgery. What was going on? How could this be happening?

Perhaps you have faced something similar already this year. Perhaps you have lost the control you thought you had just a few short weeks ago. The truth is it is God who is in control. I had made God too small. I had forgotten the incredible vastness of God’s abilities to have much greater things going on than I imagined. I was being reminded of the hymn from my childhood and I was singing, “My God, How Great Thou Art!” I just want to praise Him! He does this all the time for those who love Him. Why should we waste our emotions with worry and sadness? God’s got something going on in the background; what we see is always cloaked by our limitations.

Sometimes it’s hard to see God’s hand at work in your life. He may seem hidden, far away, or totally out of reach, yet nothing could be farther from the truth! Your tender Savior is always watching over you, and always at work behind the scenes. As you pass through the waters and

look back, you'll see the way He worked on your behalf. Remember, although you can't see His hand, you can trust His heart.

"Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see." Hebrews 11:1

Whatever the situation, your well-laid plans changed unexpectedly, and the change in plans allowed you to discover something about yourself. Even though the experience was unplanned, your life was enriched by it. The Lord's plan is always what is best for us, while our plans may not be. He has a path that He wants you to follow, and He will make sure that we do so, even if it means overriding the path that we had constructed on our own. The truth is, God really does have a plan. We never know what tomorrow may bring, and we never know how past events, even painful ones, might be used by God to create a brighter future! My God, How Great Thou Art!!!

Michelle Hines

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. Psalm 92:1-4
It is good to give thanks to the LORD... Psalm 92:1

As we approach Thanksgiving, we are surrounded by a cacophony of sights and smells that draw us into this season. We are reminded that this is a time to give thanks to God for our many blessings. But *why* is it “good” to give thanks? Let’s explore three reasons.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD **because it is right**. God deserves our thanksgiving. Before the foundations of the world, God knew us and knit us together in our mother’s womb. God deserves our thanksgiving, as He chose to obligate Himself to us as lost and condemned creatures through Christ in order to save us from eternal death. God deserves our thanksgiving. He preserves and blesses His creation providing for all our needs in this body and life. God deserves our thanksgiving. He seeks to lead us nearer to Himself through prayer, His Word, His Body and Blood, and the waters of our baptism. God deserves our thanksgiving. He knows suffering and is there to sustain us in our hour of trial for the sake of Jesus.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD **because it is pleasant**. Gladness comes to King David through the works of the LORD. He recognizes the hand of the LORD, the Potter, to discipline, shape and mold him into God’s child from a shepherd boy to God’s regent here on the earth as the King of Israel. He recognizes that His salvation can only be found in the LORD and that God will redeem him from the grave calling him out of sin and declaring him a saint through the One true King. This gladness was expressed in song, in the hymns of the Psalms. These hymns are the Words of the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God awakening our dead spirit inherited from Adam and Eve. These Words are the promises of a loving, merciful and just God who loves the sinner but judges the sin. These are the Words that make us glad, as we declare His steadfast love in the morning and His faithfulness at night.

It is good to give thanks to the LORD **because it rids us of our persistent tormentor, ourselves**. As David gives thanks to the LORD, he decreases so that the LORD may increase in his life. The concerns of David’s life shrink in the face of the One Who cried out, “It is finished.” It is good to give thanks to the LORD because it is here that doubts and fears are released at the throne of the Savior. The self begins to sink out of sight so that only God alone is seen. As David gives thanks, he basks in the promise that the LORD is in control. Luther understood this and called on Melancthon to “sing a psalm and drive away the devil!” It is good to give thanks to the LORD because praise is a vigorous activity of faith that clears away the fog of unbelief, despair and hopelessness, replacing it with the sure confidence that the LORD is our Rock and our Salvation.

O give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good. For His mercies endure forever. Amen

Conni Schramm

My eldest daughter Mayah is just about two and a half. She was almost exactly six months old for her first Christmas, and even last year at one and a half, she didn't quite know what to expect or why we were doing strange things like tearing paper off of boxes and making a mess. This year is different. This year she is excited. She is ecstatic. She is not entirely unlike our high school students as they eagerly anticipate Christmas. But there is a key difference that I want to talk about for a moment.

Mayah is nakedly excited. She does not have any expectations. She loves Mickey Mouse, but she won't be disappointed if she gets Hello Kitty toys instead. My goodness, at this age she won't even be disappointed if she gets a roll of butcher paper and a set of crayons, or even a pair of new socks. No matter the gift, Mayah is at the age where she will glow with joy and gratefulness no matter the gift.

My high school students on the other hand, if they are anything like I was at their age, are excited because they think that they will get the particular things they've been hoping and asking for since last year or last month. They are eagerly anticipating their gifts, but they already have in mind the gifts that they have deemed appropriate and pleasing, and every year when we return from Christmas break it seems like there are a few students whose body language tells a story of disappointment on Christmas day. They didn't get that one gift that they so passionately wanted. They got socks.

As I consider the difference between my two-and-a-half year old's reaction to receiving a gift and my high schoolers' reactions to receiving their gifts, I am compelled to reflect on my own attitude toward the Gift we celebrate this Christmas season. I often find myself anxiously hoping for a particular feeling, for that childlike excitement and pleasure, as I consider the gift of Christ at Christmas. But in the chaos of life in Lutheran ministry I don't always get what I want. I have papers to grade, parent phone calls to make, tests to order, schedules to set, meetings to organize, and so much more. That elusive emotional response I anxiously wanted isn't always willing to show itself. But perhaps I have taken the wrong attitude toward this Christmas gift. Perhaps I'm looking for the wrong thing.

Indeed we recognize that the gift is so much more than a feeling. We recognize that the gift is outside of us. We see the gift when we witness a baptism. We taste the gift at Holy Communion. We are assured of the gift through these tangible, "ordinary" means. But what an extraordinary joy it is to have this assurance from our God, not on account of anything other than His work.

As I close, I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's definition of joy as something that is never in our power to choose, while pleasure often is. This Advent and Christmas season, I pray that we all recognize the joy that comes from Christ Jesus our Lord regardless of whether we get that present we were really hoping for and that which would please us so much. I pray for joy.

Paul Kasaty

Special Thoughts to You for the New Year, 2014

New Pope elected. Royal baby born – Prince George. Boston Marathon bombing. Boston Red Sox win World Series. iPhone 5 introduced. Obamacare. Greatest college football finish ever: Auburn defeats Alabama.

Headlines like these are real. Yet unreal. Unreal because at some point, perhaps all of us have dreamed of being a part of something that makes headlines, achieving certain lofty status or place of privilege, or “making it big”.

But how about these “headlines” for 2014?

- Chris loves kids and is responsive to their needs
- Becky supports aged mother, visits her weekly
- Matt known for honesty in dealing with the public
- Angie aids poor in slums
- James known for faithfulness to wife
- Seth comes to aid of accident victim on freeway
- Jeanette encourages tearful parent

God gives strength to us each day to make headlines like that! Don’t miss these opportunities! And remember, you already have lofty status and a place of privilege – you are a CHILD OF GOD! Treat your students as such!

Finally, remember the very best headline of all: *Royal baby born – Jesus Christ, Savior of the World!*

God bless you in the New Year!

Rachel Klitzing

How Far Reaching is 'The Whole Creation'?

The Great Commission: *"Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation,"* (Mark 16:15 ESV) challenges us to not only reach *out* in mission, but to reach *in* to our very own school families.

2 Thessalonians 1: 3 (ESV) says: *"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing."* God has blessed our schools with God-fearing teachers that 'walk the talk.'

Evidence of God's love shown is seen in classrooms as teachers direct students in lessons for life. An example of forgiveness in action was observed recently when Robbie lost his cool during a dodge ball game.

As his voice rose and his ball tosses were fired fiercely across the court, the teacher gently called him over and privately helped him regain composure. With a prayer and the announcement of forgiveness and a fresh start, Robbie returned peacefully to the game.

Not only was Robbie shown forgiveness, all the students present were able to observe a caring teacher model how to deal with situations that have unacceptable actions. The importance of our school's mission to share the Gospel in our schools is invaluable. Well done, good and faithful servants.

We pray: Loving Father, we thank you for the gift of grace that guides our daily lives. Continue to bless our schools as we share Your love with students, parents, and colleagues. We pray in Jesus name, AMEN

Karen Markin

The theme of Jesus' hour or time, is seen throughout the Gospel of John. Each time His "hour" is mentioned, a different story shows how people misunderstood just what Jesus' hour was about. The hour was all about Jesus' coming Glory. However, other people or events often tried to quicken, distract, or even attempt to change His mind and purpose in reaching this hour.

In John chapter 2, Mary, Jesus' mother, encourages Him to use His power to quickly help the situation. John wants us to see that Mary is attempting to hurry Jesus into showing the world His Glory. A similar situation happens with His brothers leading up to the Festival of Booths. Later, we start to see that Jesus' Glory will come not from doing miracles, or by being made an earthly king (John 6:15, 8), but His Glory, His hour, comes with his sacrificial death and resurrection. In chapters 13-16, Jesus explains to His disciples that the hour is near, and that soon they too will partake in a similar glory. Finally in chapter 17 Jesus declares that the hour or His time has come. From there we are led into the Garden of Gethsemane and His crucifixion follows.

Time drives our lives. We fill up our time with the business of running our schools, churches, and classrooms. We so easily become distracted with the many things that we have to do and the little time we have to do them in. We sometimes want things to happen immediately and expect God to align His will to *our* time and *our* plans. More often than not, we find ourselves acting like Mary, His brothers, the disciples and His followers. As we go into this Lenten season, let us STOP, reflect, and realign our focus to the Glory of Jesus, and the Glory of His death and resurrection. When we align our time around Him, we find our hours filled with love, mercy and peace. We find the time God has given us filled with purpose—the purpose of leading and loving those around us to His Glory.

Pastor Trevor Van Blarcom

Have you ever been asked, "What is your life verse?" I am certain that at one time or another that question has come up in everyone's ministry or worship at least once. For some, Bible verses take on different meanings at different stages of life. I too have held certain verses close during seasons of my life, but I do have one that truly is my "life verse". **John 10:10** states, "***I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly!***"

I have let that verse direct me in many decisions. Christ lived, died, and rose so I could live my life fully. I have often used the verse with the directive of going for the adventure and not sitting idly by; getting involved in youth trips, mission trips, or vacations with Christ Care groups; joining ministries at church or music groups; simply using the talents given to me by God. I looked at that verse primarily with the activities of my life. I do believe it has added meaning to each day.

But this past week has brought death close to me. My great-aunt, a long-time friend of my parents, a mother of my peer, and the mother of one of my 8th grade students have all been called home to the Lord. Especially with my young 8th grader and her grief, my life verse kept popping up in my head. The words started to take on more meaning than what I had always focused on. "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly!" Those believers that have been called home have the true "abundance".

He did live, die, and rise for me and you to live each day fully not just with great activities of fullness, but to live "abundantly" in fellowship with our Lord here on earth, and eventually get the ultimate "abundance" when we meet Him face to face. What a joy that will be!

"Heaven is real and filled with "***ABUNDANT LIFE***"!"

Jenny Jordan

Beginnings

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:3-6

Oops! Surely the title of this devotion must be a mistake. This is **June**, not September. It is the **end** of the school year—not the beginning. You have worked long and hard to get to this day. You have planned and prepped and assessed. You have prayed and listened and counseled. You have laughed—and wept. You have probably counted down the days until the last day of school—when you can shelve the textbooks, un-charge the iPads, and file the lesson plans. You have (or will) say your good-byes, turn in the attendance sheets, and seal the report cards. Off your students go—all assignments complete, all lessons learned, all standards met. The End. Except, of course, for the FINAL final exam. Now the real work begins. Do the numbers on the worksheets make sense in the grocery store or kitchen? Will there be books to read just for fun and learning without Accelerated Reader to check on comprehension? Does the faith that was so intentionally integrated into your lesson plans remain integrated in real life? Does the Jesus who loves them remain the center of all they do and the decisions with which they are faced? Will they continue to KNOW that they are loved and forgiven? If they should leave this life before next September, will they begin their new life in heaven?

You know what you have taught. Now your students are beginning to demonstrate what they have learned. It is the beginning of their life without you. Is it hard to let go? Do you wish you could keep them (at least most of them) for one more lesson, one more day, one more year? Too late. But you are not sending them off alone. The same Jesus who began the school year with your class last fall doesn't distinguish between beginnings and endings. Alphas and Omegas are all the same to Him. By the grace of God, each day is a new beginning—sins forgiven, the Old Adam drowned.

So on your “last” day of school, be sure to celebrate all that is ending and all that is beginning and all the beginnings that are to come--for you and your students.

Pray: Dear heavenly Father, thank you for all of your blessings this year and for forgiving all that was wrong. Please go with each of my students, and with me, as we live out all that we have taught and learned. Let us look forward to all the beginnings you provide, and let all of us gather again one day before your throne to begin our lives with you forever in heaven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Carolyn Sims

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Matthew 18:20

Parents, siblings, and extended family usually come together and help form our earliest sense of community. As we get older, friends, school, work, and church play roles in that understanding. We grow up yearning for the feeling of community; to be a part of a group we can relate to and turn to in times of need. Christ understands the importance of community and continually pushes us and creates opportunities for us to draw closer to other believers. However, most of the time we don't accept this gift and run in the opposite direction. We look for that feeling of community in people, places, and things that don't draw us closer to Him, but away from Him, which in return leaves us empty and confused.

College was a time in my life where I felt connected to others each and every day. I was involved with student leadership, met new people in every class I took, and was able to walk a mere ten yards to get to any of my friends' dorm rooms. I was "living the dream".

Graduation eventually came and went, my friends and I dispersed into the real world, and my mom remarried and moved to Texas. My sense of community was lost, and I started to question my own sense of community. Where do I fit now? Who am I without my parents, school, and friends? Who is going to guide my steps now? These and many more questions raced through my head. All I wanted was to feel connected again.

Eventually, God called me to teach at a place that would forever change my mentality of what it meant to be part of a community of believers. My first year of teaching at St. John's was over in a blink of an eye. In that year, I connected with my first class of sixth graders, started singing with the praise band, figured out what it meant to live on my own, became stronger in the friendships I already had, and all this while developing new friendships, as well. I was finally feeling connected again; a part of a new community that I loved, but God was not going to stop there. He wanted me to grow even closer to Him; grow closer to Him in a way that I would not expect.

In the fall of 2013, I was approached about leading a small group devotion with young adults my age. My first reaction was, there is no way I am capable, let alone have enough biblical knowledge to even consider leading a life group. My feet were firm in saying no, I don't think I have enough time to take on this responsibility, but God strongly urged me to reconsider. I was like Moses, at a loss of words, not knowing what to do, and then He provided in a way that He knew would give me just enough confidence to take charge. He delivered two incredible young adults to work alongside me, friends that would work beside me, encourage and provide support when I needed it most.

The first night of life group came, and by the end of the night a connection was made that would forever change my thoughts about a community of believers. We understood each other, listened, laughed, prayed, and read scripture. It was a community unlike any I had been a part of before. God had been leading me to something greater all along, even when I felt alone and lost. He wanted me to grow stronger in His Word and develop relationships that were Christ-centered, leading me toward Him instead of away. He led me through a season of life, fostering my knowledge of what He truly meant in Matthew chapter eighteen, verse twenty, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Each time my life group meets, I feel His presence more and more. He knew exactly what I needed all along. Doesn't He always? ☺ What a blessing it is to be a part of such a strong, uplifting community of believers.

Sara Doyle

I Belong

With a knowing grin and glimmer in his eye, my father would say, "I'm the luckiest dad. Other parents get stuck with whatever kid they have, but I chose you." In his love and wisdom he knew the importance of making his adopted daughters feel chosen. His tone was playful, but his point was clear: I was accepted, wanted, anticipated, valuable, and loved.

Even so, I always struggled to feel connected. I remember, over the years, giving multiple family history and genealogy presentations in school and always feeling like a bit of a fraud. Telling the beautiful story of my father's ancestors, a Chickasaw Indian who married an Irish immigrant and eventually made their way to California from Oklahoma, seemed to lose its appeal when I came to the part of the story where I revealed that I was adopted. It didn't feel like my story. Other students owned their stories. My report could have just as easily come from a library book. In Max Lucado's *God's Story, Your Story: When His Becomes Yours*, he writes, "Perhaps you've traced your ancestry through the Apache's hunting grounds, African slave ships, or Polynesian sailors. We love to know where we came from. We need to know where we came from. Knowing connects us, links us, bonds us to something greater than we are. Knowing reminds us that we aren't floating on isolated ponds but on a grand river."

No matter how much my adoptive father loved and valued me, so long as I defined myself by my unknown earthly lineage, I would feel insignificant. I still work at letting go of my need to connect to an earthly story as I gradually accept Biblical history as my own. God tells me that I am a part of "...a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light," (1 Peter 2:9). Although my adoptive father gave me acceptance, love, and earthly family, his greatest gift was introducing me to Jesus. His reminder that he got to choose me tenderly modeled the love of God, who has chosen me to be a part of His family, to carry out His mission on earth alongside my brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the next few weeks, your classes will fill with students. Many of them will feel disconnected. Some may be new to your school. Others may have been within your classrooms for years, but have never felt like part of the family. Still others may have family and home struggles known or unknown to you. Like me, some might not know their family story. Sadly, there may be some who know their story, but want to escape from it. God has chosen these students for your classroom according to His divine purpose. He has called us to introduce them to their Christian family--His family! We get to tell them about their royal lineage. We get to share the story of family heroes who, in spite of their sinfulness, were chosen and equipped by God for marvelous work! We get to help them connect to something greater than themselves.

Let's not neglect the vertical connection! We frequently talk about the cross as a reminder of Christian relationships. We connect to God vertically and we connect to one another horizontally. In July, St. John's celebrated the 100th birthday of the sanctuary by unearthing a long-buried time capsule. As the precious treasures were pulled from their hiding place, one of our senior members, whose family has been at St. John's for generations, made sure that I had

a good view of the event. That small gesture from a long-standing member toward a newcomer demonstrated that the horizontal history of St. John's belongs to all our members, old and new. It reinforced a meaningful connection. This is something that we can do for our students, too. At home that night I shared the day's events with my family. When we talked about the original design of the church, my daughter eagerly shared what she knew of the now hidden panel of stained glass behind the altar. This "inside information" had been provided by her art teacher, and my daughter took pride in knowing a part of the sanctuary's history. New to St. John's, she is increasing her connectedness and claiming its history as her own, helped along by an art lesson. Imagine the small ways that you can help students connect both vertically and horizontally! Small gestures can make a significant difference in how effectively our students and their families connect to God and others.

Sharing the love of Christ is similar to sharing family history projects in school. Remember when I said that I felt like a bit of a fraud when sharing all those family history stories? Revealing that my adoptive father's story wasn't my true lineage was embarrassing and I felt like it let my audience down. Sometimes I feel like a fraud when sharing God, too. Maybe you feel the same way. Because of our sin, we feel embarrassment and shame. Because of our sin, we let down people we love. Because of our sin, we wonder how God could use us for His work. This is when I remember that it isn't my feelings that make the story effective. In my adoptive father's eyes and heart, I always was and always will be 100% his child. In his perspective, his story belonged to me because he gave it to me when he chose me. My doubts could never separate me from his love. Likewise, we always have been and always will be 100% children of God. He tells us in Romans 8:38-39 that, *"...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

God's story is our story because He gave it to us when He chose us. Baptized into God's family, our doubts and struggles cannot separate us from His love. We can effectively share God's love with our students because of God's amazing grace, forgiveness, and acceptance. We are His.

The best part of connecting ourselves and our students to God's story rather than defining ourselves by earthly lineage is that we know how God's story ends. You and your students will face many challenges this year, both in and out of the classroom. Some of your students may face terrifying uncertainty and you may be called to walk alongside them and their families. In the midst of it all, we can rest securely in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the knowledge of His love and salvation, the truth of His resurrection, the certain hope of our own eternal life with Him in Heaven, and absolute victory over evil as royal children of The King! No other connection is so strong, no other story is so wonderful, and no other love is so great.

Robin Gomes

The doors were opened, and it happened. The first day of preschool.

Again.

A two year old child, attached to his mom, walked into my classroom and decided to stay. Was encouraged, expected, and decided to stay. *"I have called you by name"*. Isaiah 43:1

Quinten cried. Note the picture of him along with this letter. No more tears.

Grant cried, but quickly decided the room was ok.

Sarah was shy, Lindsey was not. AJ, Lily, Logan and Elias walked in as veterans. *"We've got this"*.

Darby was on vacation. She decided on Tuesday that she would be just fine. By Thursday, she joined the veterans.

We all have "first days". It's tough being 25 inches tall. God is always in control. Always. He's in control of our first days, and our last day. He looks after us whether we are 42, 72, 102, or 2. He is listening. He bends down to assure us that He hears and understands human language. Jesus has much experience coming down to our level. We praise and thank God for sending Jesus way down here to live like us. That Jesus came down to us was absolutely necessary, not for Him, but for **us** (Philippians 2:5-8). His perfect life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection fulfilled God's demands for us.

Because of these events, we can proclaim with confidence *"The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me."* On the first day. On the last day. And every single day in between. God knows our hearts, our names, and our purpose.

Quinten, Grant, Sarah, Lindsey, AJ, Lily, Logan, Elias, Darby. God has called you by name, and you know what? You are His, and oh how blessed you are. Our God is an awesome God. This year will be amazing, from the view of a 25 inch tall preschooler and beyond.

Inspired by Mrs. Chapman's amazing 2014-2015 Preschool Prep Class and Psalms for Teachers

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” Mark 9:35-38 (NIV)

September has ended and the original flush of excitement from the beginning of school has begun to give way to the normal ups and downs of the school year. Thus, I wanted to share a word of encouragement with you starting with a story from a blog that I follow:

*I remember a story a good friend told me about her first year as an assistant principal. She worked with a teacher who frequently referred the same boy to the office for misbehavior. Although the boy (I'll call him Billy) deserved the consequences he received, the teacher was convinced he was impossible to help and really wanted him out of her class. One day when the teacher had endured an especially rough time with Billy, my assistant principal friend asked if she could take her for a drive during her plan period. The teacher agreed and before long, they had driven a short way from the school and parked in front of a home that was so neglected, it could have been condemned. “Why are we here?” the teacher asked. “Because this is where Billy lives,” said the assistant principal. They sat in silence for a minute. My friend just let it sink in. Suddenly, the teacher burst into tears. “I had no idea,” she cried. That drive changed the way she saw her student. Billy didn't get any easier to manage, but her heart toward him had changed. Now when she disciplined him, there was something different about her tone and motivation. **

There may or may not be students like Billy in your class this year. Nonetheless, all of our students are burdened with the consequences of sin in a broken and fallen world. It may not show in the condition of their home, like Billy, but it may show in the condition of their heart. On a daily basis many of our students struggle with broken families; the addictions of a family member, a family member with a serious illness, or the physical needs of a sibling. Knowing that these are our students, how then do we treat them?

In the selection from Mark 9 we see an expression of the heart of Jesus for his people. He sees their pain and instead of responding with anger or lectures he responds with compassion and healing. He sees the crowds are “harassed and helpless” and have no direction. Jesus shows his compassion by teaching and proclaiming the message of the kingdom. Jesus also calls his disciples to pray that the Lord would send workers into the harvest fields. You and I are the answer to those prayers!

Isaiah 52 says, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation.” This is the calling that we have every day in Lutheran schools. Students will continue to misbehave and will inevitably forget to do their homework. Through the power of the Holy Spirit however, we see students like Billy who are “harassed and helpless” with hearts of compassion and speak the gospel message of peace to them. As educators, we are consistent in our expectations, not at the expense of the dignity of those in our classes and schools but out of an overflow of compassion and empathy. Our students will achieve many standards and complete numerous benchmarks during the year, but the greatest message that we share every day is about the compassion of Christ for the salvation of mankind.

Scott Ferguson

*Parker, William D. “The Heart of an Educator” *Principal Matters*, August 6, 2014, <http://www.williamdparker.com/2014/08/06/keeping-the-heart-of-an-educator/>

We're Asking the Wrong Question

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Doctor. Lawyer. Writer. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I answered, “teacher”. From a very early age, we tie children's identity to what they do. We shouldn't be surprised then, when our students assign their value or worth to their grades, achievements, friends, awards, etc. We've taught them to do that. And quite frankly, it's not Biblical. Yahweh never links His people's identity to what they do, but rather to who they are. Yahweh did not call the Israelites His slaves, but rather His chosen people. David was not a king to Yahweh, but a “man after God's own heart”. Moses served as leader, but was always primarily identified with the community of Israel as His covenant people. Thank goodness their identity wasn't defined by what they did because they were grumbling, rebellious, murderers, adulterers, terrible fathers, distracted leaders, no good, very bad people. No, their identity was found in being delivered by Yahweh according to His gracious covenant. (Ex 2:23-25).

What is your identity? If we fall prey to the same temptation as our students, by linking our identity to what we do, we also will measure our value based on how well our students like us, what their parents say about us, our enrollment, our test scores, our awards, etc. No, Scripture tells us our identity is not found in what we do, but what has been done for us. In Christ, you are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), a child of God (1 John 3:1), saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9), received in the waters of Baptism because of His mercy and not your works (Titus 3:5) whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). Just like the Israelites, your identity is found in being delivered by Yahweh according to His gracious covenant (1 Peter 2:9-10).

We need to stop asking our students, “What do you want to be?” and instead ask, “What do you want to do?” Even better, “As a redeemed child of God, in what vocation do you want to serve?” As teachers and church workers, it is easy to link our identity to our role in the church. This leads to doubt, guilt, frustration, anger, exhaustion, self-deprecation, burn-out, etc. The reality is we want to *be* free, forgiven, loved, delivered, supported, encouraged, and cared for, and that is what we already are in the shadow of the cross. With the cross, there is freedom in our vocations as church workers; there is also an understanding that in our sinfulness, we will screw up. We're in good company with Moses, David, all the Israelites and the church. The truth is our identity is linked to the forgiveness given to us daily in Word and Sacraments. So, what do you want to *be*? A loved, redeemed, forgiven, child of God washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is finished (John 19:30).

Prayer: Dear Yahweh, thank You for the sources of encouragement You give us, especially your Word and Sacraments. Alleviate the fear we have in teaching and prepare me for the calling You have given us. Most importantly, thank You for our identity being founded in Christ and His work on the cross, and for calling us to teach in response to that act of grace. In Christ's name, Amen.

Sarah Salzberg

Mark 16:15 He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."

The Navy Seals are a highly trained, special operations branch of the United States Navy. They are called on to deliver beyond standard military forces in intensely challenging warfare situations. At the conclusion of their assignment, Navy Seals leave an American flag at the site of the mission.

Lutheran educators have been trained to teach children reading, writing and arithmetic. However, our calling is different than that of the average teacher. We are "highly trained" in the teachings of the Bible. We know The Truth. God created our amazing world. We are sinners. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. The gift of Jesus is the true meaning of Christmas. Good Friday and Easter are the pinnacles of our faith. We are incredibly loved by Jesus, and we carry out our daily lives enveloped in God's grace and forgiveness.

Lutheran educators are called on to share this Good New in our classrooms. Each of our students is a mission who God has assigned to us for the school year. Some of these missions are more challenging than others, and some days are tougher than others, but God has specifically chosen each of us to carry out His work and share His love. He believes in us. An excellent academic education is important, but as Lutheran educators we are called to provide more with the help of the Holy Spirit.

During this peaceful Advent season, as we wait for His coming, we have time to reflect . . . have we left the cross at the site of each of our missions?

Lisa Ellwein

Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus came and told His disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

As the dawn of 2015 breaks, many of us will make New Year's resolutions. By the time this short devotion is read, ours will be mostly broken or forgotten.

I do not like New Year's resolutions. The problem I have with them is I try to make my life better by subtracting something from it. I will not eat donuts; I will exercise more (subtracting weight) or I will eliminate certain words from my vocabulary. All of this to me seems like one big adventure in missing the point. I cannot become holy by subtracting things from my life that shouldn't be there. I am focusing on my sins of commission but not realizing that goodness is not the absence of badness. I can end up doing nothing "wrong" and still do nothing right! God considers all sin to be the same but for me, it's my sins of *omission* that haunt me. Those are the sins that I have a rough time accepting God's forgiveness. The lost opportunities to share the saving Grace of Jesus with people who do not know Him are the sins that have eternal consequences. If I am going to subtract anything from my life by way of a New Year's resolution, I would like to subtract the fear that keeps me silent at times. Holiness, however, is not achieved by subtracting sin, because *I can never subtract enough*. Holiness has already been achieved for me by the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

We seem culturally programmed to make New Year's resolutions. The Great Commission could easily be the Great Resolution! It is certainly one we can keep, since God promises the presence of the Holy Spirit until the very end of time. As Jesus sent His disciples, He now sends us; whether it is across the world, across the country or just across the parking lot! I wonder what the world would look like at the dawn of 2016 if God's people made and kept "The Great Resolution" in 2015?

Darren Hansen

You've Got a Friend

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.
John 15:12-17

How rich are you? I don't mean how much money do you have, or how big is your house. Wealth can be measured in many different ways. This month, as we concentrate on Valentine's Day and love, I'm wondering, how rich are you in terms of people you can count as your friends?

Perhaps you still keep in touch with individuals you have known since grade school. Are you still close with the friends it was so important to have in high school? Many of us see college friends more often—perhaps even at LEC each year. And those friends and colleagues you have accumulated at each school where you taught or in every neighborhood where you lived have probably added to your friendship cache like a rolling snowball. If that is the case, you have been greatly blessed. There are friends you see every day and those you haven't seen in years, but with whom you feel such a strong bond that you never really feel separated. There are friends who are easy to get along with and those whom you love in spite of their idiosyncrasies—and vice versa. With friends you can be yourself. They care for you no matter what. And they don't desert you when the going gets tough. Often our spouses are our very best friends, which is the way God planned it and which enriches the relationship.

Friendship is one of God's greatest gifts to us. It is a blessing—and a responsibility. To have a friend requires that you be a friend—and all that includes.

John reminds us in John 15 that even if our earthly friends are few, we are blessed to be called friends of Jesus, our Savior. This relationship exists not because we are so desirable, but because He chose us to be His friends since before the world began. He couldn't wait for us to be born so He could interact with us, share His life with us, and ultimately die for us because He loves us so. Although we are separated physically for a while, He also can't wait until we will be able to see Him again and enjoy His company for all eternity. In the meanwhile, being friends with Jesus means that we live as His constant companion here on earth. It also means we are friends with all of His other friends along the way. He has set the example of what it means to love one another passionately and unconditionally. That's what friends do.

Social media has made it possible for people to identify and stay in closer touch with their "BFF" s. So, as you celebrate Valentine's Day with your friends and with the children in your classrooms, remember to celebrate the true BFF you all share. It's a friendship made in heaven.

(When I typed the title to this devotion, my "computer" made a mistake and substituted the word God for Got. So, the title read, You've God a Friend." Where do these typos come from? 😊)

Carolyn Sims

I Need A Shoebox

"I need a shoebox," my middle son, Josh, announced on the way to school one morning.

"Okay, sweetie," I replied. "We'll get you a shoebox."

"I need a shoebox."

"I know. I heard you. We'll get you a shoebox."

"Do you have a shoebox?"

"Are you asking me if I have a shoebox with me right now?"

"I need a shoebox."

"Josh, I do NOT have a shoebox in my purse or in our van. We will get you a shoebox. When do you need the shoebox?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday?!"

"I told you that I needed a shoebox."

"You did? When?"

"When you were sleeping."

Sometimes we don't communicate too well with each other, do we?

On the other hand, Jesus is a clear communicator. Actually, He's perfect at it. Jesus uses His Word, His life, people, nature, circumstances, prayer, and anything He wants to communicate to us His deep love and His desire to have a personal relationship with each one of us on our journey with Him. How come we sometimes miss the messages?

Sometimes we have preconceived notions of what Jesus should tell us so we don't expect Him to communicate with us in certain ways. Sometimes we don't like what we hear. Sometimes we refuse to listen. Sometimes we don't recognize what He is communicating to us. Sometimes our selfish and sinful ways add static to the message. Sometimes He whispers. Sometimes He's silent. Sometimes we missed the message because we weren't even looking for it.

We are in the midst of the church season of Lent. Lent is a season of opportunity—a daily opportunity to be in God's word, to be in prayer, to repent our sins, to look intentionally for Jesus in all things, and to surrender our lives to His leading. All of this prepares our hearts and minds to listen as Jesus communicates to us by His death and resurrection that we need a Savior and He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Proverbs 8:34 reminds us that we don't want to be asleep when God is daily speaking to us.

"Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors."

"Blessed is the one who listens to me." God blesses those who surrender to the act of listening.

Listening to God especially within His Word, may catapult us into action or keep us still.

"Watching daily at my gates." We are to be alert and aware watching daily for Jesus' leading in all things.

"Waiting beside my doors." We are to be close to Jesus, expectant and patient—waiting for Him to open the doors.

God is the *perfect* communicator. Let us daily listen, watch, and wait for Jesus' voice. *Postscript:* Josh did get a shoebox because his very wise teacher had extra ones. Praise Jesus for Mrs. Bowman!

Tanya Calendo

It Is Well with My Soul

God's definition of thankfulness and mine are often a universe apart. God says we should give thanks in everything. I struggle with that. Can God mean that literally? It is easy to give thanks for the things that bring me joy and cause me happiness, but can God really mean to be thankful in times of severe sickness, sorrowful problems, frustrating circumstances, or maddening relationships?

Horatio Spafford was a 43-year-old lawyer. He lived in a north side suburb of Chicago with his wife, Anna, and his five children. In 1871 his only son died. A few months later, the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 consumed Spafford's real estate investments. He lost his entire life savings. Two years later, Spafford and his family decided to take a vacation to Europe. However, Spafford was delayed by last minute business. He sent his wife and four daughters on the S.S. Ville Du Havre as scheduled, promising to follow in a few days. On November 22, 1873 the ship was struck by an iron sailing vessel, and it sank in 12 minutes. Two hundred twenty-six people were killed. When the survivors of the shipwreck landed in Europe, Anna Spafford cabled her husband, "Saved alone. What shall I do?" Spafford immediately left Chicago to bring his wife home.

In the midst of his sorrow, while sailing near the place of his daughters' death, he wrote the words to the hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul." In spite of their tragedy in 1881 the Spaffords moved to Jerusalem to meet the needs of the people. Through their service the Spaffords were able to share Christ with the local Muslim and Jewish communities.

After learning about Horatio Spafford, I return to my original question, "Can God really mean give thanks in everything?" We all have our own story; although it may not be as traumatic as the Spafford's, or perhaps it is even more, each of us has suffered in one way or another. "It Is Well With My Soul" has been my favorite hymn for years, but I never knew the story behind the author and his life. I know you may find this shocking but being in Lutheran ministry doesn't always bring peace like a flowing river. In fact, it often feels like a journey on a billowing sea. At times, I have lost sight and have forgotten to give thanks to God for everything. God really does mean it...Give thanks in all circumstances. When issues on earth seem too overwhelming to bear, remember the love and sacrifice of our personal Savior, Jesus Christ as well as the words of Spafford,

"Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul."

Michell Hines

The Finish Line

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Hebrews 12:1-2

It’s May! As a coach and athlete, I particularly love the symbolism of the race shared in these verses from Hebrews, but the heart of this passage rings true for all educators and administrators. Races mean finish lines, and for Lutheran educators, finish lines are all around us.

For some students, this year’s finish line is significant as it includes graduation. They will leave our elementary and high schools and move on to the next level of education or the workforce. Athletes are approaching the finish to sports seasons with sights on championships. Students with talents in music and theatre are prepping for final performances, a finish line to demonstrate the skills developed this year. All of these require perseverance to achieve a successful finish and, in many cases, the hope of a slower pace during the summer.

Many teachers can tell you the number of days left in the school year-an exciting finish line. In our classrooms, we as educators look at what needs to be accomplished prior to dismissal so our students can be properly equipped academically to move on to the next grade.

Other finish lines are a bit different. Recently, my family has faced the reality of an earthly finish line for my grandfather. As his health declined and he lived his final days in hospice care, friends and family were able to share memories with him and say their goodbyes. Although there was sadness in his last days, through his life-long example, my grandfather and our family focused not on finishing the race, but rather on the message found in verse two of this Hebrews passage. My grandfather did not fear death, for his eyes were on Jesus. Our family misses Gramps’ earthly presence, but in focusing on Jesus, we feel comforted knowing that our separation is only temporary, for we will be joined again in heaven.

My grandfather loved cookies and was known to eat a few in his day. One of the life lessons he taught his grandchildren and great-grandchildren was that if anyone ever asked how many cookies you had eaten; the answer was always “two...the first one and the last one.” Reflecting on his life, this mantra reminded me of Christ’s declaration: *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”* (Revelation 22:13) Not to suggest that indulging in cookies is biblical, but Christ uses the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, to remind us He is both the beginning, for *“in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,”* (John 1:1) and end *“the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* (2 Peter 1:11) We should fix our eyes on Him, for everything starts and ends with Him, and that ultimately is all that matters.

Even though the finish line of this school year is approaching, other races loom in the future. August will come all too quickly, bringing with it new students and challenges. As educators, we will work to persevere through next year, and through all of our races, it is Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, who continues to be our foundation. As we persevere to impending finish lines and recharge this summer to head back to new starting lines in the fall, look to the counsel of Paul: *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”* (Colossians 2:6-7)

Jeff Courvoisier

June

This school year has been wonderful, but it has also had its conflicts, problems and decisions that were not easy. As we approach the end of this school year, I am starting to feel very weary, looking anxiously ahead to the light at the end of the tunnel. For me it means the end of this task and on to something new. For you it just might be a break in the constant daily stress and strain that is the school year. All of us need refreshing. The verse in Psalm 23 keeps coming to mind "He restores my soul." That's what I need!

That's as far as I have gotten on my devotion idea. For the last week I have been wondering how I get this devotion around to where God meets my needs – to where my soul gets restored. I know he wants me to be restored.

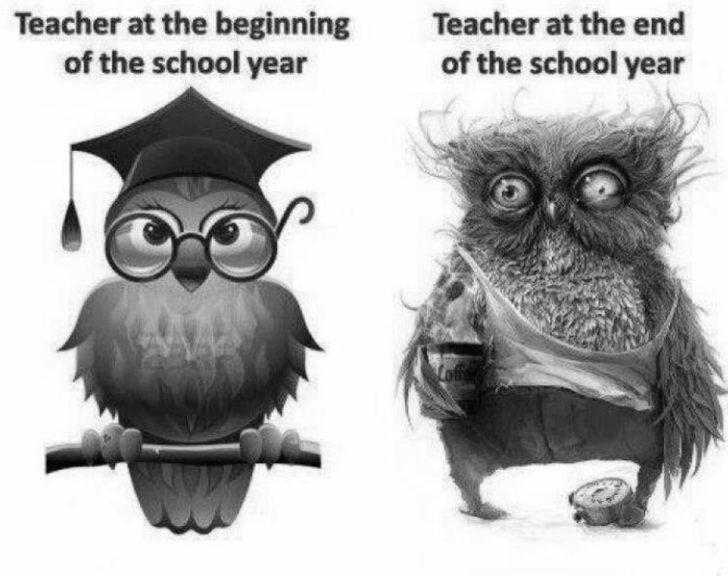
This morning it occurred to me. My journey, this year, has been like a marathon. I'm running. I know the end is in sight. I keep running. I am getting more and more tired. I keep running. All along the way God has been standing on the course offering to me glasses of refreshment. I just kept running by. I haven't taken those small moments to drink in His word and listen to His encouragement. I may pass out from dehydration because I didn't stop or even slow down to take what God was offering me.

His Word is how we get spiritually refreshed and renewed. Don't wait until the end of the school year. Grab the glass of the water of life God is offering you. Drink it down feel refreshed and renewed in His word, and then run on to accomplish the ministry tasks God has given you.

Carol Smallwood

I'm writing this July devotion in June. School just ended and the last faculty meeting is over. Cumulative files are done, and classrooms are empty. Academic year 2014-2015 is in the books. Whew!

Perhaps you've seen this cartoon circulating on social media:



Is this accurate for you? Education is, by nature, a giving profession. We give of ourselves right to the very busy end. (And on a side note, is there really a NON-busy time during the school year? I think not!) By the end of the school year, our tanks are pretty much empty. We've given and given and given, and we've dragged ourselves across the finish line. Now what? Now it is time rest and refuel. Resting and refueling gives us a chance to re-create and re-connect with who we are and Whose we are.

Jesus set the example for us when it comes to resting and refueling. He often stepped away from the busy-ness of His ministry to re-connect with His Father and He encouraged His disciples to do the same:

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Mark 6:30-32

Do your summer plans include time to rest and refuel? My prayer for you is that you will find times and places to do so, and that you will reconnect with Jesus this summer, filling your tank for the ministry to come!

Mary Fink

Reflections on Adoption

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. Galatians 4:4-7

Some of you may know that over the past few years, my wife and I have been involved in the adoption process of the two younger siblings of our adopted son. We weren't long into the process when we realized that we were involved in something much bigger and more complicated than we had ever planned. Paperwork, classes, home visits, financial commitments, waiting, roadblocks! And that was just the physical/emotional stuff we went through. Spiritually, we were being stretched beyond our imagination as we learned to trust God more deeply. Two months ago, my wife and I, along with all of our family and friends, celebrated and praised God that the adoptions were both finalized!

As I took time to reflect about our journey, I realized that the physical, emotional, and spiritual hurdles we went through is nothing compared to what our Heavenly Father had to do, through Jesus Christ, so that he might adopt us into the family of faith. God has also used our adoption of our three boys to show me some amazing parallels of Him adopting us into His family.

1) Before the boys even knew us, we were thinking about them and preparing for them to join our family. We loved them before they were officially ours.

In Psalm 139, the Bible says that God knew us even before we were knit in our mother's womb. He loved us before we knew anything about Him. Again, He was willing to go to great lengths to prepare a place for us and make us His own.

2) Part of the adoption process was giving the boys a new identity and life. Legally, our family name became their name and our home their home.

God does the same for us as written in Isaiah 43. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are redeemed with a new identity and inherit all the rights and privileges of being God's children.

3) Finally, we went to the courthouse and declared our intention and desire to make the boys a legal, permanent part of our family. The judge's finalization and signature of approval meant that it was official. It's the same way with God. Jesus died by saying, "It is finished!" and signed our adoption papers with His blood. What an amazing gift it is to be in a secure relationship with the Father for eternity!

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it is our privilege and calling to let those around us know that Jesus has always loved them, came to this world to be our Redeemer, set us free from our old identity, and by faith, be forever adopted as His children!

Matt Fischer

Who Was the Teacher That Influenced You the Most?

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God Colossians 1:9-10

Most of us were influenced by a teacher. Because we are in the “education business”, typically we can point to one or two people that made such a profound difference in our lives that we said “hmmmm, I wonder if God is calling me to the teaching ministry?”

My story is unique. Not growing up as a Christian, my worldview was quite different in high school and college. Some teachers’ influence was not necessarily the best. Further, I was a Business and Accounting major so teaching really didn’t cross my mind.

Becoming a Christian for me was an evolutionary process. The more I was exposed to the Word and Christian friends, the more my faith began to take root and grow. A key turning point in my life happened when a teacher (actually a Director of Christian Education)¹ challenged me to an in-depth Bible Study. That sounded interesting, but really, 6:00 AM every week for two years. Really?

I agreed to give it a try. I was fascinated. The teacher opened up the scriptures to me in ways I had never heard or considered. I found myself devouring the Word of God wanting to know more and more and more. Years before, I had given up the resistance of the Holy Spirit and accepted the unconditional love of Jesus. But getting into the Word is what caused my faith to grow. More than a dozen years after beginning this class, the process one teacher started caused me to walk away from a very successful business career into full time ministry.

In just a few verses, Colossians 1 talks a lot about being in the Word. “... be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (emphasis mine)

Who was the teacher who influenced you the most? Who encouraged you to dig deep into the Scriptures? Who caused you to follow God’s calling in your life? More importantly, who are you teaching, guiding and influencing?

To God the glory!

Todd Moritz

1 - In gratitude and thanksgiving to Timothy J. Hetzner, DCE

I grew up in a super small Iowa town. Before I moved to that town, I lived on a farm. So that farm town, well, it was even smaller. We had rotary phones, and you didn't even have to dial more than four digits to reach the person you were calling.



We didn't have cell phones. We didn't have computers.

We had each other. Jana, Carrie, Nathan, me. Sounds kind of "Little House on the Prairie", but it's true.

We had days of catching crawdads in the muddy creek. We rode horses along the purple and yellow wildflower ditches. We "walked beans" and "walked corn".

I had the most fabulous of playhouses. An old corn bin was my kitchen, my house and my living room. It was home, and I can still feel my feet landing on the dark, squeaky boards as I walked along the "kitchen" corridor, preparing the next meal for my guests.

Childhood. My childhood. Memories near and dear to my heart.

I pray that you let your children be little. I pray that you will allow them the time to make memories as children, to remember that they once were learning to be big. Time goes so fast, and if you blink, you will miss it.

Hold each moment and remember that God has a plan for you. Don't let the moments pass by without really embracing each and every second. It's in the quiet moments that things become clear.

Let them be little. It only happens once.



Heather Chapman

*What do you think Dian? I think they have bad ideas.
Do you believe in the Jesus you learned about at our school? I think so...yes.*

The two Mormon missionaries in Pacific Lutheran High School's office didn't have a chance. Though they had practiced their arguments, cultivated an emerging relationship with our former valedictorian (by speaking to him in his native Mandarin), and had prayed to their gods before their testimony to Dian and me, they had not believed the Scriptures, "Let the man who has his dream tell his dream. Let the man who has my Word speak It faithfully." (Jeremiah 23:28)

What these missionaries failed to realize was that our Holy Spirit was working in Dian's life, targeting him for salvation, and bringing him to the Savior: a dead God-man hanging on the cross for all.

Pacific Lutheran High School's staff had prayed for Dian numerous times by name, showed him Christ's love over the course of three years as an I-20 student, taught him God's Word in Theology class, and modeled forgiveness after failures. He had been incubated, nurtured, protected and loved while he was with us – this too the work of a loving and grace-filled King. **These lost young missionaries didn't have a chance.**

Restoration of the gospel, exaltation to celestial heaven and a living prophet pronouncing God's Word would not stand up to God's truth for "the Scriptures cannot be broken." (John 10:35) Grace plus works, translating the Bible correctly and ordinances of the Gospel fell before salvation by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone.

Dian listened to these men's beliefs, measured Christian responses to them, and respectfully remained silent during the spiritual warfare which took place between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. at 2814 Manhattan Beach Blvd. in Gardena. Then the two young men left.

Looking at him directly I asked, "What do you think Dian?"
"I think they have bad ideas" he offered quietly.
"Do you believe in the Jesus you learned about at our school?"
"I think so...yes"

We will of course follow up with Dian, encourage him to get baptized, continue to pray for him and his family, and help him to find a Christ-centered church. We are privileged and thank God for the opportunity to teach and serve His children in the limited time we have.

The devil will continue to attempt to thwart the work of God's kingdom of grace. He will seek to catch us in sins to render us ineffective in ministry. He will have us look to the problems in our schools rather than the daily victories we have won in and through Christ. He will attempt to cause dissension among staff members and administration in order to divide and conquer. He will ask us to question ourselves saying, "Is this really worth it?" When these questions come, we are to remember Christ's words to a struggling Paul. "My grace is sufficient for you." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The former archangel, now sworn enemy of the living God never had a chance.

Jesus, we praise and thank you for your grace and mercy. We thank you for your undeserved love and the privilege to teach your children that "the Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17) Help us to trust in your promises, focus on Your victory and serve Your children faithfully. To God alone be the glory. Amen.

Lucas Fitzgerald

Finding Your Roots

People are fascinated with discovering their family history and to see the contributions of their family line to the world. Asking the question, "Where did I come from?" and seeking out that answer is part of our human nature. We want to know who's who and how are we connected. Google makes it easy to see our ancestry. But there is another place, a better place to discover our more important roots. That answer can be found in the season of Advent where we are told "who" we are and "Whose" we are.

During this season, we look back at Genesis and see we are God's special creation, different from all other creatures because we have the breath of God, His very Spirit, in us through Adam. We see how that Spirit of God was dead within Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God trusting in their intellect and letting it be a substitute for the truth of God's Word. The Old Adam would need to be regenerated by the working of God the Holy Spirit through His Word and in the saving waters of our baptism.

During this season, we look back at the manger, where we see the Savior God, Yahweh. The Messiah comes in humble form taking on human flesh, connecting Himself to us as God to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. His name tells the story, Jesus, the One who came to save us from our sins. (Matthew 1:21)

During this season, we look back at the cross and see the Genesis 3:15 promise fulfilled. Our God obligated Himself to us out of love. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden has become the sacrificial wood of the cross, the wood of our salvation. "It is finished" Jesus said. No longer are we condemned because of sin but saved by Grace through faith. And as we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

During this season, we look forward to His return at the end of time and are reminded that as redeemed sinners, our purpose is to love one another as He has loved us. As we live in this time of Grace, we are commanded to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that He has commanded. We are to remember that it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we are equipped and empowered to be His salt and light to the world.

Who are you? A sinner by nature, conceived in sin, separated from God and condemned.

Whose are you? "God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It! I am baptized into Christ." Your sins are paid for because God keeps His promises in and through Jesus Christ. Because of Christ and for His sake, you are equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments to live out His command in your vocation so that others may know Jesus.

In full confidence and joy, pray and sing:

God's own child, I gladly say it:
I am baptized into Christ!
He, because I could not pay it,
Gave my full redemption price.
Do I need earth's treasures many?
I have one worth more than any
That brought me salvation free
Lasting to eternity!

Sin, disturb my soul no longer:
I am baptized into Christ!
I have comfort even stronger:
Jesus' cleansing sacrifice.
Should a guilty conscience seize me
Since my Baptism did release me
In a dear forgiving flood,
Sprinkling me with Jesus' blood!

Satan, hear this proclamation:
I am baptized into Christ!
Drop your ugly accusation,
I am not so soon enticed.
Now that to the font I've traveled,
All your might has come unraveled,
And, against your tyranny,
God, my Lord, unites with me!

Death, you cannot end my gladness:
I am baptized into Christ!
When I die, I leave all sadness
To inherit paradise!
Though I lie in dust and ashes
Faith's assurance brightly flashes:
Baptism has the strength divine
To make life immortal mine.

There is nothing worth comparing
To this lifelong comfort sure!
Open-eyed my grave is staring:
Even there I'll sleep secure.
Though my flesh awaits its raising,
Still my soul continues praising:
I am baptized into Christ;
I'm a child of paradise!

In the NAME of Jesus. AMEN

God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It by Erdmann Neumeister (1671-1756)

Conni Schramm

Last Thursday, I called to make Ben's yearly cardiologist appointment. He has pulmonary valve stenosis, and his heart is monitored yearly to make sure he's ok. I dialed the number, waited on hold for (quite a few) minutes, spoke to the nice appointment taker for (quite a few more) minutes, and then came the question.

"Which insurance would you like us to bill?"

"United", I answered, "the same insurance we've used every year. Nothing has changed."

"Oh, well I'm sorry to say that as of July 1st we are no longer contracted with United."

(Then why did you send me the reminder card to schedule his appointment?)

I paused a moment. I didn't expect her to tell me that they no longer accept our insurance. He's been seeing Dr. Shaw since he was an infant. Now, he will no longer see Dr. Shaw. That just broke my heart. Dr. Shaw, who has known Ben's intricate heart from infancy from the inside out, will no longer be seeing Ben's amazing heart.

The nice appointment taker could tell I was a bit sad to learn the news, so she piped in with the encouragement of, "Well, we work with our established patients to ensure an affordable option to keep you with his doctor. If you hold a moment, I will transfer you to our (inaudible) department and they can give you an estimate. It may be considered out-of-network care, but I'm sure we have an option for you."

An estimate for an EKG, echocardiogram, dye testing and consultation. I was sure that this wasn't going to be "affordable". But I played along, all with the hope of an "affordable" option so Dr. Shaw could keep peeking at Ben's heart.

Unfortunately, Dr. Shaw will have to find a new super heart to peek at.

It was tough for me to accept, as silly as it may be, that Ben will have to see a new doctor. However, this new doctor will have the blessing of peeking at Ben's heart, with a reasonable \$75 co-pay and a front row seat to the "Ben Chapman Show". God knows Ben's heart, and He's going to share it with a new doc.

In these moments of such pure disappointment, I am so very thankful to know that, even through life's twists and turns, we have a Savior who doesn't cancel contracts. He doesn't crunch numbers, He doesn't weigh pros and cons, and He most certainly doesn't expect extra payment for out of network care. He even gives us secondary insurance FOR FREE.

He's always there, loving us and carrying us, providing us with the most perfect of insurance. His assurance of eternal life is the greatest insurance policy we could ever be given. There's nothing you need to do. There are no monthly payments, no co-pays, no deductibles, nothing.

Simply invite Him in, and you'll receive the greatest protection you will ever need.

We are Christians, dun da dun dun dun dun!

Heather Chapman

God's Love

"Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:39

The month of February is upon us. When you hear that, what do you think of? I would venture to guess one of your first thoughts is Valentine's Day. So that of course brings up the whole topic of "LOVE." Images in your mind immediately include cards, flowers, candy, dinners out, and countless others. (OK guys, a gentle reminder. 😊)

Let's talk about love, but let's shift it away from the secular perspective and put it in the context of our spiritual life. Looking at the Bible, did you know the word "love" appears 310 times in the King James Bible, 348 times in the New American Standard Bible, 551 times in the New International Version and 538 times in the New Revised Standard Version.

Love is found throughout scripture and is at the center of our faith. Love is the essence of what our God is. As you read the Bible from cover to cover, the theme is clear – *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..."* John 3:16. The practical life application is there for us too, *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.Dear Children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."* 1 John 3:16, 18

Let me remind you, it says "God so loved the world." That means YOU, ME and EVERYONE! STOP! Soak that in. Every day we go about our routines, interacting with spouses, family, friends, co-workers, children.... Likewise, every day we find circumstances that seem to "chip away" and distract us from this joyful truth!! The God who created this world and everything in it, loves us – loves YOU. And what is so amazing, He loves you no matter what. There is nothing you need to do for that love! It is unconditional. STOP and think about that! "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." The empty tomb is our constant reminder, and not just words either.

I invite you this month and every month, to joyfully live in God's love. When you are having that terrible day, GOD LOVES YOU! When you are having that amazing day, GOD LOVES YOU! When you get the bad news, GOD LOVES YOU! When you can't express what is on your mind in fear of _____, GOD LOVES YOU!

Don't just stop with absorbing this life changing truth, share it with those around you! Not just in words, but in actions. How will others know of this amazing love God has unless we live it ourselves!

Randy Einem

March Devotion

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. Daniel 3:16-18

We recently had a situation at our school concerning texting, or Instagram, or Twitter, or something. The older I become the less I understand about technology. However, this involved students who did understand and wanted other students to be embarrassed. They could do so anonymously from one of the aforementioned accounts that they have access to. Some of the students, we discovered, are too young to have these accounts, but the techno-savvy world in which we live made it easy for them to use it.

Most of our young people bow down to the “images of gold” (technology) that are ever present in the world in which we live. Yes, I am for technology. It has greatly enhanced our communication and intelligence gathering. But there is the point where it can also become all-consuming like anything in this world. And then, like our three friends in Daniel, we can either bow down to it or take a stand. This ‘stand’ should be coming from the parents, but often it is we teachers who are the role models. Students need to understand that all that is available to them in this world is not always good for them. And, sometimes, it is our job as educators to educate the parents of how easily the world can seduce our children.

With God’s help we can use what technology has to offer in a way that glorifies Him. May we always take a stand on the Lord’s side, confident that He will save us “and rescue us”.

Bill Roan

So, What Now?

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” Luke 24: 5B-7

The tomb was empty. This was certainly a game changer. The present story had been turned on its head when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb that early Sunday morning. Nearly two thousand years ago something unthinkable happened. A man who had been put to death by the mighty Romans was raised to life on the third day. So, what now? What did this mean for them? The religious leaders that had so smugly believed to have won two days earlier would soon be scrambling in attempt to cover up what was to be the greatest story ever told. Disciples that were in hiding, fearing that they would be next, would be boldly proclaiming the risen Messiah.

What does this mean for us? Without Easter, without the Resurrection, there is no hope. Without Easter, there is no real life. Simply put, without Easter, there's no Christianity. The Resurrection of Our Lord is the day on which the Church throughout the world celebrates the new reality we are given because Christ Jesus is indeed risen from the dead, never to die again! For many people, Easter Day is no different from any other day, except perhaps for a few special traditions involving a bunny, buying a ham, or an egg hunt for the kids. We know more, don't we? And we have a blessed opportunity today, don't we? May the world know what we know! May our students, their parents, and all we come in contact with each day know that without Easter, we have nothing. Yet with Easter and because of Easter, we have everything! Forgiveness and new life are ours in Christ – both to receive and to share! *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Casey Sitze

When I was in junior high and high school, I really wanted to be a good singer. I was in choir and all of that, but I wasn't a "good" singer. I lacked the natural ability. I just didn't (and still don't) have "it".

Now don't get me wrong. I pretended to have "it". Pick any day of the week and you'd be sure to find me driving around in my car belting out Mariah Carey like I could actually sing. I feel sorry for that little white Jetta. Lucky the car didn't have ears. Cars these days have seat belt systems for teenagers that refuse to let the radio play if the seat belts aren't latched. My car would have unlatched the seat belts immediately and the check engine light would come on - "STOP SINGING".

I've never stopped singing. Ask my kids, my husband. I sing to every song on the radio. I pick up the tunes quickly, and I just sing along. New song, old song, bad song, fun song. I'm singing along, and you can't stop me. I think it annoys them. *But I like it.*

Why do I sing in my car? What makes me try to belt out a note I know I can't sing, but I try anyway? It just makes me happy. When I'm in my car, I'm a Grammy winning artist. I can sing like Mariah Carey, and my audience loves me. (Ben is usually asleep, and Grace has headphones on, so, yeah, they love me.)

I remember a song I used to sing in my car back then called "Place in This World" by Michael W. Smith. I was searching for where I belonged. I didn't know what my future would hold. I didn't know that I would be called to His highest calling as a teacher.

The coolest thing about our Savior is that He just wants to hear from us. He only asks that we welcome Him in and let Him know what's going on. He wants to hear from us daily, whether it be through prayer, song, whatever. Through a hug for a sad child, an encouraging word for a friend, a forgiving prayer. He's there for us, always.

He's listening to us, no matter off-key or Grammy worthy. He loves to hear YOUR voice, because YOU are HIS child. Belt it out so everyone can hear. God's work has been done for us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Sing it loud, He's always listening. Share it. God's love and grace is for everyone. Faith is pitch perfect. He has paid the price and He's right on key. What will you do with the gift He's given you?

Heather Chapman

Finishing is better than starting! Patience is better than pride! Ecclesiastes 7:8 (TLB)

The last week of the school year... you can almost hear the excitement as the lines of cars drive onto your campus for the final drop offs, as yearbooks arrive, and friends excitedly share memories. The final weeks of school bring extra trips, parties, and special events that help to celebrate the accomplishments of the year. The students are beside themselves with excitement for the future as well as a little nervous about what is to come.

As a teacher, there are a myriad of emotions that this time of the year brings: relief that the hours of planning, grading and teaching are over... for a while, excitement for all that the summer times brings, and sadness that the students you have grown to love and have become part of your family will be moving on to a new chapter in their educational journey.

I recently came across a quote from Gretchen Rubin, "The days are long, but the years are short." I never really realized how true this is. While some days seem to drag on, especially those that are the most challenging, this school year especially seemed to fly by! It seems like we were just planning school calendars, curriculum maps and event schedules and now here we are again, ending one year and looking to begin another. As we look forward to the challenges that the next school year brings, it is so important to remember Jeremiah 29:11 *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."* Even though we may not know all the next year holds for our schools, children and families, we do know God is with us, loves us and will never leave us. He is with us through every beginning and every ending.

*May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your **plans** succeed. Psalm 20:4 (NIV)*

Nancy Bellamy

Rest

Rest used to be easier. When you are young rest is so simple. Little kids fall asleep sitting straight up in their car seat with their neck at a ninety-degree angle. Teenagers sleep until early afternoon without a second thought. As responsibility and stress increase, life becomes chaotic and rest becomes elusive.

Summer rest has begun. Another school year is in the books. The final grades are entered, and end of the year checklists have been completed. Now it's time to rest, but it can take days if not weeks to unwind from a long school year. This is true of good years and bad. And of course, not everyone is done working. Administrators are still up at school. Coaches are already on the field weeks into summer practice. Maintenance staffs can finally get some work done with all those people out of the way. Teachers are cleaning out classrooms and inevitably already thinking about ideas to make next year even better. The work slows, but never stops. And of course, many aspects of life are quite unaware that it is summer. Parenting does not stop in the summer. Illness doesn't disappear in the summer. Broken relationships do not mend simply because it's summer.

Where is our rest? Maybe the answer isn't summer rest.

God invites us to enjoy Sabbath rest:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God." (Exodus 20:8-10a)

People of the Ancient Near East (those people and nations that were contemporaries of Israel at the time of Moses) understood rest as a safety from enemies. They relied on their created gods to provide rest by defeating their enemies and protecting them from future attack.

We must remember that our sin, our rebellion, makes us enemies of God. As an enemy of God's, we will never enjoy rest or peace. BUT it was while we were His enemies that Christ died for us reconciling us to Himself (Romans 5:8). Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2).

Now on account of Christ we are at peace with God. So, we live without fear of judgment. We live with hope, certain of the promise of the life to come.

Regardless of the circumstance of our life, we can enjoy true Sabbath rest.

Gracious Heavenly Father grant us summer rest so that we are ready for another year of ministry in August. Grant us Sabbath rest, keeping us mindful that through Christ's death and resurrection we are at peace with you. Prepare us to share the message of Jesus with all those we encounter that they may know the peace that passes all understanding and enjoy true Sabbath rest now and forever. Amen.

Ben Strohschein

He has showed you, O Man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

It sounds so easy. Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Yet it never ends up being quite as easy as it sounds. As we relax and recharge during the summer months, we remind ourselves how much we love teaching and being around the students. As summer starts, we can't wait to get them back on our campus. What about in February when everyone is in the midst of the year? How easy is it to remember to act justly when the same student asks the same question for the thousandth time?

Plus, what does it mean to really love mercy? The definition I saw of mercy said it is the kind or forgiving treatment of someone who could be treated harshly. Maybe I am the only one, but this can be a struggle. There are times when forgiveness and kindness come naturally, but then there are the other times when it is the last thing I want to do.

The idea of walking humbly with God sounds so peaceful. The crazy thing is, it is peaceful. Yet we struggle with it. We get pulled to the side and off track. When I was younger and would read through the Old Testament, I was always amazed by the lack of faith the Israelites showed. God would do an amazing miracle and then not long after the Israelites would be moving away and chasing other gods. As I have grown older, I read the Old Testament and look at myself and ask, "Why can't I learn from their mistakes?" Just when God does something amazing in my life, I seem to get distracted and forget it was God who blessed me in my situation.

These three things are preceded by a question. What does the Lord require of you? Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. God doesn't require these of us for His benefit. He knows what is best for us and knows our lives will be better if we can do these things. As we get set for the beginning of another school year, I invite you to focus on these three things with me. If we can show the patience to act justly, the kindness to show mercy, and the faithfulness to walk humbly with God, imagine the continued and ever-increasing impact we will have on our students this year.

Bob Koehne

A Child of God: Dressed, Prepared, and Ready for School...for Life!

What memories do you have of your preparations for each new school year as a student? I remember fondly the excitement, the anticipation, and the expectation of new adventures spiritually, academically, athletically, and socially. In addition to the usual school supply shopping, my sister and I would go with my mom to select fabric, and she would sew us three new dresses for the school year. My aunt, a fashion designer in New York, would also send us several dresses. We felt “dressed and ready” for school!

As Christian educators, our preparation perspective has expanded to include a plethora of plans that go beyond clothing and school supplies, as we seek to support each child in learning and living a life of love and service to God and others. As lifelong learners, we are called to not only be prepared, but to prepare our students for lifelong learning. The Lord calls us to perpetuate the legacy of the Christian faith, to encourage, to equip, and to love as He loves us.

Jesus, our Master Teacher, provides both teachers and students with the ultimate plan to follow in the new school year and in life. As we address the basics of the 3 R's and more, may we remember the 3 P's: Prayer, Preparation, Planning. Throughout His ministry, Jesus prioritized prayer, and exemplified that prayer is intrinsic in preparing to carry out the will of our Heavenly Father. As Jesus effectively and successfully carried out the plan of salvation, He prayerfully, prudently, and patiently prepared. In carrying out the plans God has for us and in preparing our students for the plans He has for them, may we find wisdom, guidance, and encouragement in following the example of Jesus. He has provided us with the ultimate textbook and lesson plan as we look to His saving Word, a lamp for our feet, and a light for our path. We have direct communication through prayer with our Master and Teacher. As teachers and students, our strength and power to stand firm comes from the Lord, Who prepares us fully with His armor: the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; feet readily fitted with the gospel of peace; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation; and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

LOVE is the most important lesson we teach as Christian educators. It is the golden thread that binds hearts and minds with true and lasting wisdom to know and apply throughout life. Learning that God loved the world that He gave His one and only Son as Savior; learning that Jesus in love gave His life to save us and reconcile us to our Father; learning that Jesus calls us as children of God to love Him and to love others is wisdom beyond what the world can give learners of any age. This lesson extends into eternity. It is the ultimate and eternal lesson we are privileged to share.

May you and each of your students remember this lesson not only as a new school year begins, but each day of every year. A Child of God...

Loves, lives, learns, and leads through Christ, our Light.

Obeyes the Lord and offers thanks and praise.

Values God's Word and people.

Encourages others and follows Christ's example.

Serves the Lord and others in love and submission to our Savior.

Dressed and ready for school and life? Colossians 3:12-17 gives us our dress code: ***“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another, Forgive as the lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”***

A Song for the School Year (To the tune of “Jesus Loves Me”)

Jesus Christ, our Savior dear
Bless and keep us this school year.
Help us learn and grow in grace.
Guide us in all things we face.

Jesus, we love you.
Jesus, we need you.
Jesus, we serve you.
Lead us in all we do.

In our hearts, may your peace rule,
As we learn of You in school.
May your love in us grow strong.
May we share it all year long.

Jesus, we love you.
Jesus, we need you.
Jesus, we serve you.
Lead us in all we do.

Charlene Soon

Live as Servants of God

Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul. 1 Peter 2:11 (RSV)

Where is your Bible? Hopefully it is an arm's length away at most times, sitting on your nightstand, in your work bag, on your smart phone or iPad, or even better yet open in your hands. For more than one thousand years the Bible has been the most widely read and circulated book in history. Why then are we experiencing a culture that seems to be devoid of its teachings and standards?

Unfortunately, many Christians have become a bit too "comfy-cozy" in the world, all the while forgetting that this time spent here on earth is only a rest stop on the timeline of eternity. Our students are faced with situations daily that could compromise their faith; we must do all we can to equip them in advance to stand firm as alien residents in this world.

When I think of alien residents, I am reminded of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo. After Babylon conquered Jerusalem, King Nebuchadnezzar ordered some of the younger Israelite men of royalty and nobility to be brought back to Babylon to be taught the language and literature of the Babylonians. Among these young boys were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo. Imagine how these young boys must have felt after being separated from their families and taken to a foreign environment. The boys were trained for three years prior to entering into the king's service. The king ordered the boys to consume a daily ration of food and wine from his own table, but they refused the king's food and opted instead for vegetables and water. No doubt, the majority of young Israelite boys in captivity chose to conform to their new environment, readily accepting the king's rich food and wine. To Daniel and his friends, it was a matter of the conscience, something they felt would compromise their faith.

Most likely, Daniel and his three friends were trained early on to put the Lord their God above all else in the world. As workers in the Lutheran ministry we are called to guide our students who, like Daniel and his friends, refuse to sample the forbidden delicacies on the world's table. God was kind enough to leave us the Bible, His divinely inspired Word, which He intends to be our road map for living. When we develop the habit of filtering our thinking through God's Word, we are able to "test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will." (Rom. 12:2b)

The Bible is man's moral compass, clearly defining good from evil, and right from wrong. Further, it is divinely inspired by God. It contains the one "absolute truth" in this world—Jesus Christ. It is impossible to counteract the negative influences of our culture unless we use the truths set forth in the Bible as our standard of measure. So be purposeful, as servants of God, in teaching students that Christians are called to live in the world without being of the world.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for this opportunity to live as your servant! Help me to abide by Your absolute standards consistently and with permanence. Our world is in desperate need of more "Daniels."

AMEN

Michelle Hines

God Has Chosen Me

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. James 3:1-2

I love being a Lutheran teacher. Even as a small child I played school, and in mimicking the mannerisms and words of my teachers, I admonished, praised, and encouraged my pretend students. Fast forward to today, and I am still admonishing, praising, and encouraging but with a classroom full of God's children. Throughout my own schooling, I have had exceptional teachers as well as teachers who tried their best (and almost succeeded) to destroy my ambitions. Obviously, words and actions in the classroom matter, but as Lutheran teachers, our words and actions matter even more because our students are carefully watching everything we say and do in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

At times, I have questioned my calling—who honestly has not? God and I go 'round and 'round at times, particularly when criticism from a parent goes straight to the heart, or the inability of a student (or refusal) to learn challenges me to question my ability to teach and reach the needs of every student. Indeed, James' warning that not many of us should be teachers unless truly called gives me pause at these times, particularly when I stumble in my own thoughts, words, or actions. James tells us that "all stumble," but more often than not, my stumbles are spectacular!

But then, just when I allow myself to wallow in self-pity, or question (again) why God has called me to be a Lutheran teacher, He brings me a student or parent to remind me that my persistence and unfailing belief that every child can learn has made a difference. Time and time again, God sends messages and signs that teaching is my true calling, and He will never leave my side, but in my selfish and sinful ways, I do not always see because I am blinded by that very sinfulness. When I do see, when the Holy Spirit fills me, my heart leaps with joy because I know that God chose *me* to be an instrument of change in a child's life. When will I learn not to question the plans that God has for my students or for me? When will I learn to turn everything over to God in His perfect plans and ways?

Lutheran teachers *are* judged more strictly, but perhaps when we stumble, or question our ministry, we should pause and consider that we do not know who our students will be in five or even ten years because God is never finished with any of us. Today our students are watching what we say and do...let your words and actions as a teacher in the classroom make a difference in a child's life—God will take care of the rest. And when we do stumble, be confident that God will pick us up, dry our tears, and push us right back into the classroom to carry on with the calling of teaching for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Dear Lord, I know that you will never leave my side. Help me to be a perfect model in the lives of my students. With you, I can be a better teacher in thought, word, and action. Let me love each of your children and teach them with a passion and fire that will shine like a blinding light—a light to guide their paths to You. You personally chose me to be a teacher for the Kingdom of Heaven—but I will stumble in my sinfulness. When I do stumble, Lord, help me to my feet and give me the strength to continue in your ministry, the ministry of leading your children in the Word of God. Amen

Shari Greene

Home

Even though the Pre-School had been in session for several weeks, this was Christopher's first day. To help him be comfortable, the teacher had arranged blankets in a circle on the classroom floor, one for each child, with a spot for Christopher right next to her stool and blankie.

As children arrived, they were invited to go to the big toy box and choose one to bring back to their blanket. Christopher complied, chose a cool truck, and took his place on the floor. To welcome him, the teacher asked each student to say her or his name and something about their toy. Christopher went last, just after the teacher had also shared, and he did just fine.

It was mid-week. The teacher reminded the students that Wednesdays were Chapel days, and it was time to go into the church. Christopher took his place, sitting on the long hard bench, quietly looking around at the stained glass, candles, cross, the steps, the water-thing, and the tall ceilings. Just as the music started, he couldn't stand it anymore, blurting out, *"Hey, what is this weird place?"*

When it was time to leave, after all the singing, standing and sitting, the line moved back to the pre-school classroom to the blankets and the toys. Upon arrival, Christopher shouted, *"Oh, thank God, we're **home!**"* (The teacher later told me that Christopher had never before been inside a church. I thought that it was a pretty successful excursion, for it seemed to me, on this day, Christopher had also spoken his first prayer!)

As I recall this incident, I'm reminded of the incarnational part of the Christmas story. The perspective in these thoughts is not about the comfortable, human, long-awaited, "God-With- Us" part, but rather the heavenly, in the fullness of time, "God- Sending" part. Scripture tells us of Jesus,

"Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross." (Philippians 2: 6-8 NIV)

Jesus left His heavenly **home**, on a mission to live in His earthly **home** in the very creation He created. Why? Because He loves you, me, and Christopher. He couldn't stand the gulf our sin wedged between God and people and His created order. He wept at the wrath of God, even death, that would fall upon our sorry sinful selves. So, He came. He lived life among us. Taught. Modeled. Challenged. Forgave. Healed. He became sin for all of us and took the punishment for each of us as He died on a cross in a death He freely accepted. Then, in the grandest excursion of all, He rose from the dead to take each of us **home**, to live with God and praise His name into eternal life, forever!

What a Christmas gift! What a reminder! **Oh, thank God we're home!**

Bob McKinney

Where is Your Focus?

I recently read an article that was talking about woodpeckers, that they have hearing that is so acute that they can hear bugs moving inside trees when they fly by. This writer likened that to his childhood thoughts of superman's superpowers and asked, "How do they figure out what to listen to, pay attention to?" He concluded that he wasn't sure about superman, but the woodpecker must pay attention to the bugs moving in the trees because their lives depended on their finding them as food.

God has given us so many gifts, so many blessings, so much evidence all around us that points to who He is and how much He loves and cares for us. In Matthew 10 and Luke 12 Jesus shares how much we are cared for by our loving God, even using a bird illustration, from Luke 12:6-7 *"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."*

If we are honest though, there are times that the very blessings of our Father's love can get in the way of the Father. How easy it is for us to focus on the food we eat, the house we live in, the clothes we wear, the job we have, the families we love; even with recognition that they are gifts from God. Good gifts, good blessings, but they can become the focus. It also seems that when the blessings aren't exactly what we would have wished for the focus can become even more intense. In the midst of all that is good from God (and what we perceive to be not so good) how do we figure out what to listen to, to pay attention to? Going back to Luke 12 the full context of the passage quoted above helps give focus. Look at it again starting in verse 1.

"Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be[a] on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. "I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God."

Do you see it? Joshua 1:7-8 says it this way, *"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."*

The gifts and blessings of God are products of His love but, as wonderful as those blessings can be, if we focus on them instead of on Him who gave them, we have lost sight of what to listen to, to pay attention to. God, as He reveals Himself to us in His Word, is our "bugs in the tree" – our lives depend on God's Word to feed us.

We need to pay attention to our life-critical mission, to seek Him and Him alone. Jeremiah 29:13, *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”* It is just as Peter found when he stepped out of the boat, when his focus was on Jesus he could walk on water, but when he took his eyes off Jesus, he sunk. (Matthew 14:28-30)

Where have you taken your eyes off Jesus? Where has your life-critical mission lost its focus?
Important questions to ask so that we stay ready to serve when called upon!

“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Hebrews 12:1-3

Almighty God, we are ever so thankful for the goodness you daily and richly pour from your hand to us. We don't deserve anything from you, and yet you continue to bless through your grace and mercy. Thank you. Keep us though solely focused on you as you reveal yourself to us in your Word. Let us always remember to let your Word illumine our path. Keep us mindful that you and you alone are our life-critical mission and create in us a hunger and thirst for your Word so that we may seek you where you will be found with our whole heart. Amen

Kim Violette

A Special Kind of Love

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8.

February is always a very busy month for teachers. We have Presidents’ Day, the 100th Day of School, and Valentine’s Day. It is typically a month where hearts and love are emphasized. My second graders make Valentines for each other and look for ways that they can demonstrate “love.”

One year we made a “kindness castle” out of boxes. The students were told to write down any kindness done to them by other students. At the end of the week we would take out the notes and read aloud any kindness that was done. It started out very well and I was pleased how my students would look for opportunities to help another. But soon the “kindness castle” turned into an “unkindness castle.” Many of my students started complaining that their classmates did not recognize or write about a kindness that was done by them. They did not want to write about someone else’s kindness if their classmates did not reciprocate. They started picking on each other and arguing about who was the kindest.

Adults also have a similar problem of understanding that love should not be conditional or boastful. Our sinful nature tends to put the focus upon ourselves and what people can do for us. “If he/she loves me, then he/she would ……” We tend to put “love and getting” together, instead of “love and giving.”

Examining the “love chapter” in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13, helps us understand that love is not about “me,” but is looking at God’s example of undeserved, unconditional love and trying to follow His example in our relationships with others. It is not a love that we can accomplish on our own. It requires more strength, endurance, and self-control than we possess. The Holy Spirit empowers us to love sacrificially. Romans 5:5 states “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” We can (with God’s help) pray for those who make life difficult – the parent of a student that continually challenges you, the student whose problems keep you awake all night, the student that disrespects you daily, the friend who seems to have disappeared, and the list goes on. We can forgive and love those who have hurt us to the core, but only through our new “nature” given to us through faith rooted in God and His mercy and grace.

It is written in John 13:35, “By this (love) all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” The world observes us and the way that we Christians demonstrate love. God uses our hands, our feet, and our mouths to represent Him here on earth. Our students, our students’ families, our neighbors, and others are watching us.

Several years ago, the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) was very popular. My students had bracelets that they wore every day for a week. My students were very good at pointing to their bracelets when someone in the class demonstrated a need to be reminded of Jesus’ perfect example. I was not above reproach as well and it was humbling but needed. Deeply hurting the feelings of a student who was not listening to me was not “what Jesus would do.” I did apologize to that student and the class for my behavior. I knew that God gave me the strength and wisdom to demonstrate His kind of love.

1 John 4:8 states “The person who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” His love has always been and always will be. We don’t have to worry or be concerned about the past, present, or

future because we can trust that “nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38)

What a great message to share this month and every month!

Dear Lord Jesus,

Thank you for your all-encompassing love and forgiveness. You are there when we are sad, happy, scared, and through everything that we encounter in this sinful world. Please help us to demonstrate to others the kind of love that you have for us so that they also may be secure in your promise of eternal life and everlasting love. What joy your love brings! Thank you for such a great Valentine! Amen!

Linda Staake

Well friends, it's March! The phrase, "in like a lion, out like a lamb" is a well-known popular idiom for this month. An early record of this phrase is from a 1732 book of proverbs titled, ***Gnomologia: Adagies and Proverbs; Wise Sentences and Witty Sayings, Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British***. The exact wording used is: "Comes in like a Lion, goes out like a Lamb" which is very close to the phrasing we use today.

As people of God, our month of March is the "journey to the cross" by our Lion and our Lamb. The Lion and the Lamb both refer to our Lord Jesus. He is both the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Lamb who was slain. As the Lion of Judah, He fulfills the prophecy of **Genesis 49:9**: *You are a lion's cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?*

He is the Messiah who would come from the tribe of Judah.

As the Lamb of God, He is the perfect and ultimate sacrifice for our sins. **1Peter 1: 81-21**: *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

Even though He had the divine ability to save himself, Jesus went to the cross for our sins. His love was so vast that He made the ultimate sacrifice for us, thus redeeming us from our sins and giving us eternal life in heaven with him.

As called servants of God, we serve with a purpose.... that of sharing His love, to our students, their families and a world in need. This month let us "roar" with the good news of Jesus, the Lion and the Lamb!

Kim Imes

It's true; I'm that annoying mom. Even my four and seven-year-olds know it. I can't help but kiss, cuddle, and obnoxiously tell my girls that I love them. Not a day goes by that I don't express my crazy love for them in some way, no matter what. Not because I'm this amazing mom, but simply because, to quote Cat Stevens, I "can't keep it in." When my oldest sweetly reads to her little sister, I tell her I love her. When my oldest sneakily manipulates her little sister into doing what she wants, I sternly correct her and then tell her I love her. When my youngest makes me laugh hysterically, I tell her that I love her. When my youngest is in her third time out for the day and working on a fourth, I take a deep breath, keep disciplining, and then I tell her I love her no matter what. I will do this until the day I die. I don't care if they roll their eyes; I don't care if it gets old. I don't care if it becomes routine because I know that they will learn that in all situations, no matter what, I love them. They need to hear it every day, when they care, and it warms their hearts and when they could care less.

It is no different with our students. They need the message of Christ crucified all the time, no matter what. We all need the constant reminder of Christ's love for us. We are a Good Friday, Easter people. We are the ones that left Jesus in His time of need, but He loves us. We are the deceivers who betrayed our Savior which led Him to the cross, but He loves us. We are the disciples desperately trying to figure it all out, and He loves us. We are the forgiven, messed up people of God, and He loves us. We are even the people who turn the focus into what we can do for God, forgetting how often we fail in the law, who desperately need the gospel promise of God's grace. This message is not always flashy or even exciting. Hebrews 9: 11 – 15 says that Christ did not make a sacrifice like the high priests, but rather:

"He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining^[b] eternal redemption. ¹³The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death,^[c] so that we may serve the living God!

¹⁵For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant."

My girls need my constant annoying, "I love you" and embarrassing hugs and kisses to be reminded every day of my love for them. Praise God that even when we forget this message and forget to remind each other of this message, He delivers this to us in His Word and Sacrament. Praise God for His tangible "I love you" that He brings us today in those means of grace because of the ultimate "I love you" through His blood, death, and resurrection.

Robyn Strohschein

Shadow Savior

The solace of the summer sun is serenading you, as the sun begins to set on another school year. You can almost see the summer sun, feel its warmth, hear the surf washing across the shore, taste the refreshing libation of barley and hops, and picture the spectacular sunset as you dream of summer vacation.

Yet, your summer dream is darkened by shadows – the reality that final grades will soon be due. In this darkness, you now foresee only frustrated parents and frenzied students. The truth is that as you anticipate the solace of the summer sun, the shadows of the school year only seem to spread.

As a child, shadows were scary. As an educator, shadows can be downright deadly. Allow me to explain. As a child, many, if not most of you, were frightened by the unknown things that might lurk in the shadows. As an educator, we all know, even if we're hesitant to admit it, what lurks in the shadows is... nothing but the dark shadows of doubt and guilt.

Shrouded by these shadows, despair develops: "Did I do my absolute best this year?" "Could I have done better?" "If only I had..." "I probably could have..." "I probably should have..." You fill in the blanks.

Guilt is a dark shadow in which the insidious Satan lurks, always accusing, always condemning. From the dark recesses of the shadow, a whisper soon crescendos into a shout, "You're not good enough!" "You've failed!" "You're guilty!" The shadow-stalker's hellish accusations burn because they're true. I am guilty. I have failed.

Only True Light can dispel the darkness of doubt and absolve the deadly darkness of guilt.

"This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the Truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the Truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us" (1 John 1:5-10).

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, True Light dispels and displaces the darkest of shadows. That's Good News for you, for me, for all engulfed by the dark shadows of doubt, failure, and guilt. Jesus came to dispel your dark shadows. He is your Shadow Savior!

The Shadow Savior took all your shadows of doubt, failure, and guilt upon Himself on the cross. There He was darkened unto death for you. The Shadow Savior proclaims to you, this very day, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death"* (Romans 8:1-2). Grace is a marvelous light in which the merciful Savior abides, always absolving, always defending. From the brilliant nucleus of the light, a whisper soon crescendos into a shout, "Jesus is good enough!" "Jesus conquered!" "Jesus has pardoned!" The Shadow Savior's heavenly declarations console because they're true. I'm not guilty. I'm free.

The darkness of our shadows was forever dealt with on Good Friday, and the Light of Easter has dawned. We are an Easter people. We live and have our being in the Easter Light that overcame the utter darkness of Good Friday. *"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (John 1:4-5).

The solace of the Son is serenading you, as the sun begins to set on another school year. You can see the Son, feel the warmth of His forgiveness, hear His Words of baptismal grace washing across the shores of your soul, taste the refreshing liberation of His body and blood, and believe that the spectacular Son set you free to live on permanent vacation from the shadows of doubt, failure, and guilt.

Pastor Tim Dtviler

*One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." So, they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. **Luke 5:1-11***

It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus targeted fishermen to become His first disciples? Maybe He chose these men because they had to be **persistent** people to make a living chasing those elusive critters. Maybe He chose them because they had to be **innovative** or open to new ways or new techniques to increase their yield, as the old ways became outmoded and the old holes became fished out. In fact, Peter proved his receptiveness to new ideas when He went against a tried and true fishing fact that you can't fish at daylight, because the fish will see the nets. Peter flew in the face of that tradition and listened to his Lord. He gave it a try. He was open to a new idea and it paid off. The Lord blessed his efforts, even though it went against conventional wisdom.

Maybe it was a life lesson for Peter. Maybe Peter was being given permission to be creative in his new calling – fishing for men. Maybe the Lord was showing Peter that it was OK to do this new kind of fishing in a new kind of way. Remember it was Peter who received the vision that the Gospel wasn't just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles too! Talk about innovative! That was revolutionary! And it didn't throw him for a loop. He dealt with it and he went with it and it changed the church forever. Maybe it goes back to the permission the Lord gave him at the Sea of Galilee to do what he had always done...in a different way. Now he could do the same thing with the Gospel.

Times have changed. But some things haven't changed. The Gospel hasn't changed, and people's need to hear the Gospel hasn't changed. We just need to make sure that we are fishing where the fish are. That might mean flying in the face of tradition, abandoning old fished out fishing holes and looking for fresh, unfished holes. It might mean abandoning old worn out methods of fishing and trying creative new approaches.

Our Lutheran schools are doing just that. For the most part in the PSD we are fishing in areas, where the fish are teeming. And they are hungry. Some are so eager they are practically jumping into the boat. We have a spectacular mission field – both home and foreign -- right in the halls of our schools! What an opportunity the Lord is providing for us and what a tool He has given us: our Lutheran schools!

Why are we here? What is the bottom line? Isn't the bottom line to do what we can to get our students across the finish line? Our reason for being and our reason for being in Lutheran schools is yes, to provide an excellent education, but more importantly to win souls for Christ and to keep souls in Christ. Isn't that what our Lutheran schools are all about? That's why it is so important to avoid Mission Drift in our schools and keep the main thing the main thing. Jesus needs to be the main thing in our academics, in our athletics, and in our arts.

This may be the only opportunity that some of these young people will ever have to hear the Good News and to feel the love of Jesus. And to see their Savior. And they will be seeing Jesus through us. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our students would be able to say about us what the folks in Acts 4:13 said about Peter and John: *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that **these men had been with Jesus.**"*? Friends, you have been with Jesus. Not all of our students have been there just yet. Make it your goal that your students can see that you have been with Jesus. If you wear Jesus every day and share Jesus in every way, not only will your students benefit as the Spirit works in their hearts, but you will benefit as well: your own faith will grow. The amazing thing about sharing our faith is that when we do, we don't divide it, we double it. We have the privilege to be part of a very exciting ministry, a ministry where we can see the Lord's blessings daily!

It's OK to fish new holes with new methods. The Lord has given us permission to be innovative and creative in the way we fish. Such is the ministry in our Lutheran schools. Innovative and creative! He wants us to be persistent and He wants us to fish where the fish are. Friends, the fish are here! We've got the best bait in the world – the Gospel! We've got the Lord's promise of great blessings on our efforts! More than we could ever dream or imagine. The cool thing is that when we catch these fish, they don't die; they get to live forever. My friends, the fishing is gonna be good, so let's go fishing. Amen.

Dear Jesus,

You have given us the Great Commission to go to the world with Your Word, to be fishers of men and women and children. You have saved us the trouble of travel and brought the world to us in our PSD Lutheran schools. Help us to see the halls and the classrooms of our schools as our mission field. May we come to the understanding that if our world, our student body, is going to learn about You, they are going to have to see You in us and through us. May we wear You and share You daily. May we reflect the love that You have shown to us onto our students. Use us, Lord, to be fishers of people. Bless our efforts in Jesus' name. Amen.

Pastor Tim Unke

Rejuvenate! Renew! Rejoice!

“What are your plans for the summer?”

If you haven't asked this question yourself, someone has most likely asked you...right?

After all, summer is that wonderful time for rest and relaxation! It's a time to take a break to bask in the sun, play, and feast on our gardens' bounty. It's a time for vacation, picnics, ballgames, and celebrations. Summer gives us time to be with friends and family to enjoy, grow, learn, and make memories. The fact is...Summer *rejuvenates* us!

I am an educator who enjoys her summertime “reboot”. I use these couple months to catch my breath, reevaluate what I did well last school year, and what I need to do better. Summer is part of my ministry cycle which strengthens and nourishes me to do His work with my next crop of little ones. In a nutshell, summer *renews* me!

But “renewal” isn't just for mental health or professional growth. It is an important part of spiritual growth as well. In John chapter 4, we see Jesus do what he does best...the unexpected! Just read and see how much Jesus packs into this life lesson!

*When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” **John 4:1-26***

We see Jesus break taboo and speak to a Samaritan woman. Without judgement, He acknowledges her past and current sinful life. He offers her a “living water” which will forever quench her thirsty soul. Finally, he reveals Himself to her as the long-awaited Christ. Jesus has a conversation with this Samaritan woman that not only rejuvenates and renews her...it transforms her!

Just like this outcast woman, we too have felt the sting of judgement and failure, which makes us recognize a deep need of renewal. Jesus knew this woman's every sin, fear, and weakness; and he knows ours too. Yet, in the midst of it, He reaches out his hand and calls, "Come and drink from me, "the Living Water"- and you will never be thirsty again."

What a gift! Our loving God knows exactly what we need and offers it freely. He understands how hard the toil can be. After all, he endured the cross to quench our thirsty souls and renew our spirits. Our Father sent the "Living Water" to rescue us from sin, death and the devil, so we can be renewed through the Spirit to be... *"His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which He already has prepared for us to do."* Eph.2:10

Isn't it amazing? Our Father freely offers the remedy for exactly what we need. Through Christ the "Living Water", we are **rejuvenated** from our weakness, **renewed** to do His work, and respond by exuberantly **rejoicing** in His goodness!

Susan Brandt

Legacy

We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and His might, and the wonders that He has done. Psalm 78:4

Although I am not a big fan of the heat, as a teacher I cherish my summer and the change of pace it brings. I enjoy the mornings lingering with my coffee, newspaper, and uninterrupted devotion time. There are no papers to grade or lessons to plan. Very little, if anything, hangs over my head on Sunday evening. I have more relaxed time with family and friends. My bucket is refilled. It is a time to reflect, evaluate, and anticipate another school year.

This summer I have found my thoughts and reflections coming back to the word “legacy.” Maybe it’s because one of the last things I did before leaving my classroom in June was to look at a small stone that has been sitting on my desk all year. It is small and smooth, and the word “legacy” is written on it. It was given to me by my friend and colleague as a reminder of the impact we make on the lives around us. Though I left the stone at school as a reminder for next year, the word continues to pop up this summer. I drove past a whole new living and working development in progress nearby named Tustin Legacy...a new storage basket bears the name Urban Legacy... Legacybox.com offers to take your treasures and turn them into digital memories that will last forever.

Legacy is defined as something that is most important which is handed down from one generation to the next. When you think about it, we are each called to be in the business of legacy building. Besides teaching children to read and write and add and subtract, we have the privilege of sharing the truth of God’s redeeming love every day. Though we know it well, many of our students and their families have never heard the story of salvation. We need to tell and retell over and over again the story of Jesus and His work on the cross. We are called to tell and retell the importance of the Word and sacraments. We need to daily tell and retell the story of grace through our words and actions.

It all begins with the work of Jesus...by grace, through faith we are called to be His heirs eternally. That’s the legacy Luther rediscovered five hundred years ago. It’s the same story we share today.

We have been blessed to be called to the teaching ministry and to be in this place at this time. As we head back to school this fall, take joy in ministry and the legacy we nurture. Allow God to use the “cracked pots” that are our earthly lives to further His legacy. Delight in turning eyes and hearts to Jesus. Tell and retell the story of His work and love alive in your life to the next generation. Faith alone...grace alone...scripture alone—it’s the most important thing we teach and the legacy we leave.

Elinor Courvoisier

I do most of the grocery shopping for my family. Actually, I tend to go to the grocery store every single day, much to the dismay of my bank account. I just can't seem to organize meals well enough to get through a week, let alone a day, to avoid the store.

This weekend, my husband offered to stop at the store on his way home from his weekend round of golf. I was elated as I was still in my pajamas and knee deep in laundry.

"Just text me a list."

Easy enough, I thought, as I walked to the kitchen to come up with a satisfactory Saturday evening meal for the four of us. The kids mentioned that they wanted homemade pizzas on the grill. Sold. Always turns out delicious, and although it's a bit of work, everyone is happy.

My text to my husband is as follows:

"We just need tomatoes, basil, mozzarella, maybe a small bit of parmesan, we're out of olive oil so grab some and oh! We need peanut butter. And celery for the guineas. And Travis (our dog) is almost out of food so can you get some for him? Maybe sausage for the pizza? Or Canadian bacon, pepperoni? Whatever looks good to you."

End of text. What followed over the next half hour was absurd, and it really got me thinking.

"Do you want canned tomatoes or fresh? Fire roasted? Flavored with spices or plain?"

"Diced or crushed?"

"Are you going to make the dough from scratch, or do you want me to pick up the pre-made ones at Safeway? And if so, whole wheat or regular?"

"Do you want the parmesan shredded, grated or in a wedge?"

"Extra virgin or regular olive oil?"

"Canned or regular food for Travis?"

"Ugh WHAT KIND OF PEANUT BUTTER DO YOU WANT ME TO BUY?"

"Turkey sausage or regular sausage, and sweet or spicy?"

"Do you want the pre-washed celery or the bunch of celery?"

"I'm NEVER going to the store again!"

As I sat amongst my laundry receiving these text messages and answering each one, I started to think about all of the choices we have and the choices we make each day. Does it really matter if the tomatoes are fire roasted or filled with spices? Does it really matter if, for one day, Travis eats canned food instead of his regular brand? Will it honestly affect the quality of my pizza if the parmesan comes shredded instead of me shredding it? And truly, isn't peanut just peanut butter? (My husband would say no, but...)

We're inundated each and every day with so many choices, it's exhausting to think about. Whether it be the car you drive, the home you live in, or the brand of peanut butter that you buy. We live in a world that wants to create everything for everybody, and in so doing neglects the only one choice of truth.

There is only one Jesus.

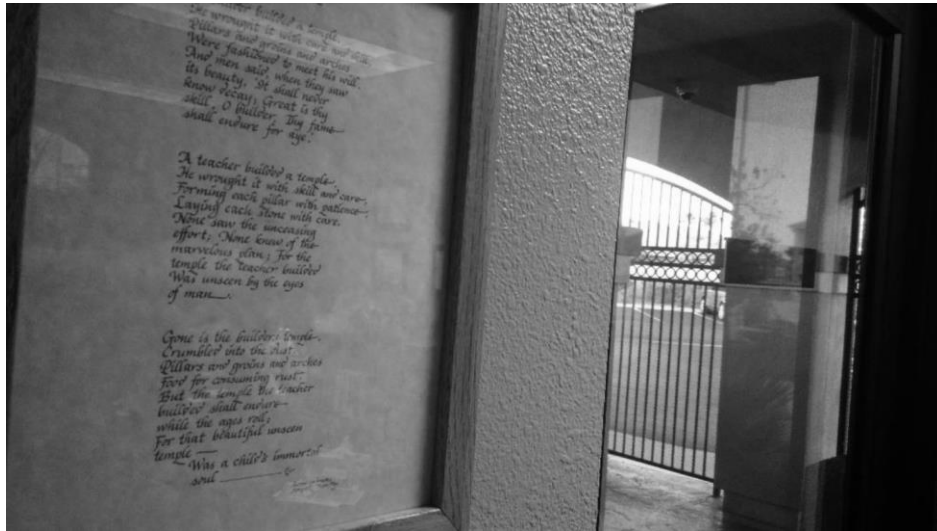
He made the choice to die on the cross for each and every one of us. He chose to suffer and carry our burdens straight to that cross to give us the true gift of everlasting life. There is nothing we need to do to earn His love and His grace. He has already freely given it, and all we need to do is receive it.

What an amazing blessing and honor it is to work in God's kingdom, proclaiming this gift with His children. Let us be bold in our faith and strong in our conviction to shamelessly share the only choice needed to insure our eternal life with God in Heaven. Word alone, Grace alone, Faith alone.

Jesus chose to bring Heaven to earth and is preparing an eternal room for you with Him there someday. Be bold in your choice to know and continuously learn about the one and only Savior. His gifts are free, and He did it all for you.

Heather Chapman

Two Temples



This poem was a parting gift from calligrapher and friend Helen. For 32 years it has journeyed with me from office to office in four states and on two continents. Today its place is by my office door to notice each time I step out.

The Two Temples (AKA “The Builder”) - Author Unknown

*A builder builded a temple,
He wrought it with care and skill,
Pillars and groins and arches
Were fashioned to meet his will.
And men said, when they saw its beauty,
“It shall never know decay;
Great is they skill, O builder, Thy fame shall endure for aye.”*

Solomon builded a temple. It was considered among the wonders of its time. I wonder what impression it made on the Queen of Sheba who visited with her retinue and train of wealth-laden camels.

Herod builded a temple. It too was considered among the wonders of its time. It must have been quite a sight when Jesus Christ visited with his retinue of disciples.

My congregation plans to build a church. We hope and pray it will be a wonderful base from which we can, by God’s blessing, lead people of our community, of our nation and of the world to follow Jesus.

*A teacher builded a temple,
He wrought it with skill and care,
Forming each pillar with patience,
Laying each stone with care.*

*None saw the unceasing effort;
None knew of the marvelous plan;
For the temple the teacher builded
Was unseen by the eyes of man.*

People who have not taught simply cannot understand what good teaching requires. Teaching is holistic: it takes the whole teacher. The poet mentions skill, care, patience, effort and planning. Teaching is physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Unlike building construction, nearly all that effort is unseen.

*Gone is the builder's temple,
Crumbled into the dust,
Pillars and groins and arches
Food for consuming rust.*

Solomon's Temple was in operation for 400+ years but then Nebuchadnezzar and his army of Babylonians arrived and put an end to that project.

Herod's Temple remained intact and in operation for 90 years. Just a few years after its completion, General Titus and his army of Romans arrived and put an end to that project. The duration of my congregation's building project...TBD.

*But the temple the teacher builded
shall endure while ages roll;
For that beautiful unseen temple
Was a child's immortal soul.*

Teachers get the point. It's your hope and confidence whether preparing in secret or proclaiming in public. Teacher, your efforts span the ages. Your results, by the blessing of God, are immortal; won't it be fun to see your students' immortal souls in heaven!

Together let's pray...

May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! – Deuteronomy 32: 2,3

Paul Brandt

A Devotion Based on Joshua 1:9

As pastors, directors, principals, teachers, teacher aides, secretaries etc., in our schools and congregations we have all had one of those tough school years, where life keeps happening and you wonder how much more you can bear before reaching your breaking point.

Life events like:

- One of your teachers handing in their resignation a week before classes are about to begin.
- Perhaps your congregation has had a number of people stricken with cancer, or a family/school has been affected by the many natural disasters that have hit this country. More recently perhaps your school/congregation has been affected in some way by the terrible Vegas shooting incident.
- Perhaps your enrollment is so low, you wonder how, if at all, you will be able to keep all your staff employed.
- Perhaps a staff member's wife/husband/child is terribly ill.
- That year where so many of your staff were getting sick and you didn't have the resources to cover them and you just want to yell out, NO MORE!

The list can go on and on, as we all know.

God tells us that He will be with us wherever we go, sometimes when we are in the middle of all the drama that is going on around us, we tend to forget this.

In Joshua, God says: 9 *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."* Joshua 1:9 (NIV)

Joshua was called by God to lead the Israelites out of the desert into the Promised Land. The Israelites had grumbled about their food, water, Moses' leadership and many other things. The Israelites had also threatened to stone Joshua himself. Leading these people was a God-sized task.

Joshua took comfort in God's words and knew and trusted that God would be with him, every step of the way as the Chosen People took possession of the land that God himself had promised them, so long ago.

Joshua took on the mantle of leadership with courage and resolved to do what the Lord had commanded and chosen him to do. Joshua could do this for he had a lifetime of watching God promising His people and delivering them on those promises. God had delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh and delivered them from the Egyptian army; God had parted the Red Sea and allowed His people to cross on dry land.

We too know that God keeps His promises to us. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ into this sinful world to pay for all our sins; Jesus Christ, carried the sin of all humanity to the cross and paid the ultimate price for our freedom. His righteousness is credited to our account. Our debt has been zeroed-out; it is gone, finished for all eternity, when on that 3rd day Jesus Christ rose from the dead, ensuring that sin, the devil and death are not to be feared for in Christ we have our victory.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (ESV)

Many of these types of events can be life changing and we go to God with our prayers and petitions, however, many times we don't hand them over to God. In other words, we try to control what will happen next. Joshua teaches us to put our faith in God and let Him be in control.

In so many of these circumstances, after the dust dies down so to speak, we see how God has worked through even the toughest of circumstances. We are not always made aware of why certain things happen, but what we do know is that God will work things out according to His will. God asks us to trust Him in all things, not just the big things but in all things. Even when you don't see it, the hand of God is all over any and all situations.

So, when we encounter trials of any shape or size, whatever it may be, we can have absolute confidence that God is at our side and ready to handle any and all situations; just as God was with Joshua, He is always with us in all things.

God is with us and always keeps His promises.

Daily Prayer

Heavenly Father grant to me the spirit to think and always do those things that are right, that I, who cannot exist without you, may by your Spirit be enabled to live according to your will. Help me to remember that you created everyone and help me to love them the same way you do. Amen (author unknown)

Sheryl Grobelch

It's Still All About Jesus!!!!

It's December! What? How can it be December already? December in our Lutheran schools means practices for Christmas programs, preparation for Christmas gifts, throwing a Baby Jesus birthday party, and the list can go on and on! And, of course, we are still TEACHING!!!! Then add in all the extra family responsibilities – shopping, decorating, baking, and planning for those always successful family gatherings! How can we get everything done?

To answer that question – at least in part – may I share with you some lessons learned from an oft-repeated interaction with my granddaughters?

Setting - The playroom, complete with a teepee (the 'house')

Participants - Harper (age 4 years 11 months)

Sydney (age 2 years and 11 months)

Grandmoo (age irrelevant)

The Scene Begins

Harper: "Grandmoo, let's play HO HO!" (HO HO is Harper's name for Santa – a carry-over from when she was two.)

Me: "OK! Are you ready?"

Harper: "Yes, I will come to the store."

I proceed to sit on the floor, stretching my legs out. Harper takes several steps away from where I am sitting, then proceeds to take very slow steps toward me as she 'waits' her turn to sit in HO HO's lap. Sydney proceeds to sit next to HO HO, as she has chosen to be Santa's helper this time rather than another child waiting in line.

Me: (in my best Santa voice) "Well, well, who do we have here?"

Harper: It's me, HO HO. It's Harper!"

Me: "Ho, ho, ho! Harper, it's so nice to see you again. My goodness you are getting so big."

Harper: "Yes, I will be 5 on my next birthday!"

Me: "Ho, ho, ho! That's wonderful! Come and sit here on my lap and tell me what you would like for Christmas."

Harper: (settling on my lap and looking around the playroom) "I would like a _____." (Harper fills in the blank, based on the toys that are her current favorites.)

Me: "That's a good choice, Harper! I think we can make that happen. Now, I have two questions for you. Have you been kind to your little sister and to your new baby sister?"

Harper: "Yes, I am kind."

Me: "Thank you Harper. Santa is happy when we are kind to our family. One more question – Harper, do you remember why we celebrate Christmas?"

Harper: (with a big smile, knowing how the game goes) "Yes, Christmas is Jesus' birthday!"

Me: "Yes, Harper, you are right! We praise and thank God at Christmas time for sending Jesus to us! Christmas is Jesus' birthday! We give presents because God gave us the best present – JESUS!"

Harper: "I know!" (she's almost 5 you know!)

Me: "Well, Harper, there are other children waiting to see Santa. Merry Christmas to you Harper! I'll see you on Christmas Eve."

Harper: (getting up and giving Santa a hug) "Merry Christmas, HO HO!"

Harper proceeds to her 'house' and curls up inside and 'goes' to sleep.

Me: (looking to Sydney, Santa's helper) "Little Elf, do we have _____ in our toy shop? That is what we will be delivering to Harper's house."

Sydney: (proceeding to walk around the playroom and selecting the desired toy) "Yes, here it is! We can take it to Harper!"

Sydney and I 'travel' via sleigh (the couch cushion) and proceed to disembark at Harper's 'house'. We quietly open the fabric doors and slip the desired toy into the house. And then, quietly and with reverence, we kiss her cheek and wish her a "Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday Baby Jesus!"

One of the sweetest blessings of being a grandparent is the opportunity to engage completely with one's grandchildren!

Harper and Sydney will play this game all year-long and over and over and over again! The early childhood educator in me LOVES this creative activity – lots of language development, sequencing, social foundational skills, and imaginative play! And, of course, I am building priceless, irreplaceable memories with these special girls! More importantly is the FAITH FOUNDATION I have the privilege to build upon with these precious daughters of God!

OK, so the question is - how does this sweet story relate to you as you teach and lead in your classrooms this Christmas season? May I offer three thoughts for reflection –

- 1. In the 'busyness' of the season, are you taking time to talk with your kids about Jesus' birth and what it means to you? Is this TRUTH not only the 'reason for the season' but at the heart of all you do?*
- 2. Are you building in time to listen to the kids in your classroom? As adults, we know that Christmas can be a very difficult time of the year. This is also true for children. Christmas can present both real and imagined stresses to children, and sometimes the one thing they need is a caring, compassionate, Christ-centered adult to listen to them.*
- 3. And finally, will you take time to care for yourself during this Christmas season? Your own health – spiritually and emotionally, as well as physical – is central to your well-being and your effectiveness as an educator. Allow God to 'minister' to you as you celebrate the greatest gift of all?*

REMEMBER – IT'S STILL ALL ABOUT JESUS!

Lynne Rose

Productivity

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” 1 Peter 4:10

With a new year comes new goals, new aspirations. One common goal for the new year is being organized or being more productive. While typically we think about cleaning a closet or garage or finally digging out of our email inbox, productivity dwells much deeper than earthly treasures. How can we be productive with our heavenly gifts?

Think about the Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25. Jesus tells us that we need to use our gifts wisely and for the Kingdom, lest we squander the spiritual treasures He has given to us. In our schools and classrooms, we sow the seeds of God’s love and grace daily. We plant the Word and pray that it takes root in the hearts of our children. What a productive calling God has given us!

There are those times, however, when all our productivity seems futile. Children misbehave, families get upset and we see all the hours of productive planning and teaching seemingly wither away. How can we remain hope-filled and productive amid the murky times of life?

Whether you are a teacher, an administrator or another school staff member, you are a leader in God’s mission field. You are planting and sowing for the eternal harvest. You are a shepherd of God’s sheep here on earth! In Leman and Pentak’s (2004) *The Way of the Shepherd*, the heart of the shepherd is defined by this important characteristic: have a heart for your sheep.

The most productive thing we can do for 2018 is to have a heart for the sheep we serve each day. God has already put that desire in our hearts: That’s why we have been called into the ministry! Even in the murky days, He has given us the gifts we need to serve His Kingdom. As stewards of His grace (1 Peter 4:10) and recipients of His salvation, we have everything we need to be productive in our vocation and service to others, because of the great sacrifice Jesus gave on the cross.

Jake Hollatz

The Significance of 40

There are certain numbers which carry significance in the Bible. We have one God who exists in three persons which we define as the Trinity. The number seven reminds us of the gifts of the Spirit and is a number describing perfection. The prime numbers 1,3, and 7 carry meaning throughout the Bible.

As we begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of another significant number in both the Old and New Testament. The number 40 appears in the Scriptures at very significant times:

- It rained 40 days and nights when God sent the flood because of sin
- The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years because of their lack of faith
- After his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted
- Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples after Easter before he returned to his father

You will note that the number 40 is always connected with a time of preparation for something new

connected with temptation and repentance. After destroying the world because of sin, God created a new world for Noah and his family. After the wilderness journey God led the children of Israel into the promised land and a new beginning. It was the 40 days of temptation which Jesus resisted in preparation for the beginning of his ministry. The disciples needed 40 days of repentance and renewal in preparation for their mission to tell the world about what Christ had done.

It was the early Church Fathers who then determined that the people of God should have a time of confession and repentance in preparation for the celebration of new life experienced in the resurrection of Jesus. Following the Biblical example, they established the 40 days of Lent from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday as a time of reflection and repentance for the people of God. Sundays were not counted in the 40 days because every Sunday is to be a "little Easter" for the believer.

How appropriate that Ash Wednesday begins this year on Valentine's Day. On a day when we think about love, we are reminded of the greatest act of love, Jesus dying on the cross for us. God's valentine is not in the shape of a heart but a cross. As we begin our "40 days" may we reflect on our need for a Savior and a God who loves us beyond our understanding.

Pastor Larry Stoterau

A gift. Not so many weeks ago we celebrated the gift of a Savior who would take away the sin of the world. Peace on earth and peace with God.

A gift. We now are in the midst of the penitential season of Lent, when we contemplate the cost of our sinfulness and the grace we receive through the sacrifice of Jesus. *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and forgives our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* (1 John 1:9)

A gift. Jesus promised another gift as He returned to heaven. The Comforter, the Counselor who gives us the saving faith we need to recognize and receive the forgiveness offered.

I realize that the majority of readers of this devotion are well aware that they are forgiven children of God. I know that I sometimes get too complacent and comfortable in the shadow of the cross. I need reminders.

I am part Scottish, so I quote from a Robert Burns' poem "*To A Louse*", "Oh would some Power the gift gives us, to see ourselves as others see us."

Recently I had such an experience with someone who saw how forgiven children of God operate.

At my school, there are international students who are working hard to get into American universities, and they feel pressures from home to get good grades. Three of my students succumbed to that pressure and cheated. The students initially lied and denied. Finally, there was confession and forgiveness.

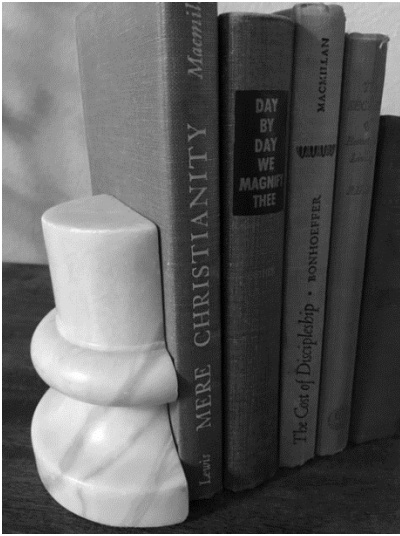
The mother of one of the students flew from China to deal with her daughter. She is not a Christian. She witnessed the forgiveness offered to her daughter by our administrator. After revealing her shame and many tears, she said she didn't believe in God but saw God working through that love, mercy and forgiveness.

It was a new phenomenon to her, but as Lutheran Christians we are blessed to live in the state of forgiveness, in our relationship with our Heavenly Father and relationships with family, friends and co-workers.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift. (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Mary Flett

Bookends



“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”.

1 Corinthians 13:7

Growing up in our home, we didn’t have many fancy things, but we did have fancy marble bookends from Italy that my parents received as a wedding gift. Many would consider these bookends objects to collect dust, but I admired these bookends. Even though I loved to read, I looked past all the great volumes of literature and ran my fingers over the smooth and shiny white and gray marble bookends. Once, I picked one of them up, and it was way too heavy for my little hands and I dropped it squarely on my foot! Yikes!

I have now inherited these marble bookends. The bookends are still white and gray and shiny and smooth and heavy... beautifully and artfully carved marble bookends. Very fancy! I use them in my home to hold up some of my favorite classics.

Bookends are used to “hold up” some great literature! Bookends are placed at the front and back of great words by revered authors! I’d like to suggest for further study that you look at the “bookends” in our selected Scripture from 1 Corinthians 13:7: “Love bears all things...” and “Love endures all things.” These are the “bookend” phrases that begin and end this brief verse.

Look more closely at what St. Paul is stating. Love BEARS all things. To bear, in this context, means to tolerate, to accept, to shoulder, to carry, to suffer, or to endure. Jesus, our Savior, out of his great love, bore our sins upon himself: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...” (Isaiah 53:4); and “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). Christ loved us so much that he suffered and carried our sins in our place. That is the first “bookend” phrase.

The second “bookend” is that love ENDURES all things. To endure also means to tolerate, to withstand, to experience, to suffer, to bear. Christ, our selfless Savior, endured death—even death on a cross—for us. “...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

In the middle of these two “bookend” phrases about love is sandwiched the words, “believes all things, hopes all things.” It is only because Jesus loves us so deeply and dearly to bear our sins and endure the cross, that we can believe and hope in that love of God in Christ Jesus! Only because we have a Savior whose love is unconditional can we even begin to live out the love St. Paul talks about in the “bookend” phrases.

As we love God and love others, let us demonstrate the bookends: “Love bears all things...love endures all things.”

Rachel Klitzing

Finishing Strong!



"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured

such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV)

As this school year comes to a close, time seems to speed by faster each week and I, once again, feel like I'm running toward the finish line of a very long and challenging race. Pressing on, even when exhausted and out of breath, wondering if I've prepared well enough to finish strong because there are days that I feel so very weak. It's at times like these I have to remind myself that it's not about what I can do ... it's about what God will do through me (*Philippians 2:13*)! We are all running the race God designed uniquely for us, and the course marked out isn't always easy. In fact, sometimes it can be pretty demanding. It is at these times we must focus on our goals with perseverance and commitment. We have to examine any obstacles that stand in our way and rid ourselves of those pesky sins that hinder us from living into God's call on our life. We cannot become weary and lose heart! And so, I fix my eyes on our mission to direct students and families to the truth of Jesus Christ and His Word. I know God is faithful and will provide me with what is necessary to accomplish His plan for the year and beyond (*Philippians 1:6*). As you near your own finish line, consistently turn your eyes to Jesus, knowing He will equip you to do more than you could ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work in you. (*Ephesian 3:20*). Consider, too, that you were the joy on His mind as He completed His race and exclaimed, "It is finished!" This truth should empower you to maintain your form, kick into high gear and finish strong!

Prayer:

Abba, Father... Thank you so much for all of the dedicated people you have placed into service within our Pacific-Southwest District. Please continue to strengthen and equip us all as we move toward the end of this year; help us to recognize and release anything holding us back from pressing on toward all You have in store for us and for the students and families we serve, in Jesus' name! Amen.

Stephanie Lynch

Dictionary.com defines the verb “lavish” with the following: “to bestow something in generous or extravagant quantities upon”

The English word *lavish* is derived from the French term, *lavasse*, which was the term for a downpour of rain.

The NIV translation of 1 John 3:1 state, “See what great love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him.” After looking at the Study Notes in the Lutheran Study Bible and speaking with my pastor, it seems that “lavished” is an appropriate term for the original meaning of “given to the fullest extent.” Note the exclamation points after each of those two sentences. Scholars estimate that John was in his 90’s when he wrote this. You would think that by this time he would take his place in the family of God for granted. But not John. You can hear the excitement in his words! He stood in complete amazement over the fact that God considered him His child and lavished His love upon him.

I love the imagery of God drenching us in the downpour of His love: the beautiful picture of us in filthy rags, our sins and guilt covering every inch of our bodies, being washed perfectly clean by God’s lavishing downpour of love. This cleansing was won for us on the cross and given to us at our baptism so that we become children of the Father and heirs of His kingdom. Isn’t that amazing?

Our Father’s ultimate gift to us is eternal life in heaven with Him, but He also generously bestows His gifts on us while we live on earth. That was never more evident to our community (Faith Lutheran MS & HS) than during this year. As many of you know, we had a laundry list of tragedies hit our school community. We had three members of our school community shot on October 1 and many more who still carry the emotional trauma with them. We had two teachers lose children, one a young adult from cancer, the other a 10-month old who died while taking a nap. Two other teachers lost parents. One of our directors lost his wife to cancer. We had a recent alumnus (and current coach) die on the same day as the infant, and we had a 14-year-old freshman killed when a tire from another vehicle smashed into the car in which he was a passenger. We had a student lose a parent and other students diagnosed with debilitating diseases.

Each of these tragedies caused the type of devastation and pain that does not go away quickly—either to the living victims or the loved ones of those who have passed away. But, in every instance, God sent His love, comfort, and strength to those who needed it. Of course, this primarily came from the assurance of the resurrection. What comfort it is to know that our lives on earth are temporary, but that our eternal life, already won on the cross, is waiting for each of us. What peace it gives us to know that we will be reunited with our loved ones in heaven someday. The broken-hearted were also comforted by scripture that promises God is walking alongside them through these difficult times, freeing them of their burdens, and giving them peace that surpasses all understanding. Surely, the Holy Spirit was at work easing the sorrow and fears of those who were affected.

The Holy Spirit also used the community of believers mightily to give comfort and support to all of those who were suffering. Christians from around the world, country, city, and from our own school community showered these families with God’s love. This came in many forms but most poignantly from our student body that poured out scripture, tears, gifts, prayers, and hugs for those who were hurting.

Although we wish that every one of these tragedies would never have happened, God overwhelmed us with His good gifts in our greatest time of need. Our students, some of whom rarely shared their faith before these instances, stood boldly and proclaimed the Gospel. Families who were either not Christian or who rarely attended church heard the message of salvation during funeral services and showed up in local congregations during the weeks that followed. Other gifts were given so that those who were affected are getting the help they need and are on the pathway of healing.

What an amazing God we have who continues to lavish His great love on His people! **Scott Fogo**

The Majesty of God

“For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In His hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him. The sea is His, for He made it, and His hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care.” Psalm 95:3-7

My husband and I recently completed a 3-day trek from Wisconsin to Nevada as we make permanent our move to Las Vegas. Having lived in Wisconsin our entire lives, we are very familiar with the landscape of the area—all the green fields and wooded areas, lots of lakes, and rolling hills. Traveling west, we were able to experience a myriad of landscape changes that surprised and thrilled us at each turn. The flat cornfields and pastures of Iowa and Nebraska that allowed us to witness a powerful thunderstorm rolling through. The beauty of the forests and mountains in Colorado imagining what it looks like in winter covered with snow. The unique rock formations in Utah that seemed “other worldly”. The canyons of Arizona rising steeply on each side and opening to the desert and red rocks of Nevada.

As we drove, we discussed the beauty, majesty, and diversity of this earth—one created by God in His infinite wisdom and power. We talked about how difficult it is to understand the belief of some that this world just came into existence entirely by chance over millions of years. As Christians, we believe that God created the world according to His perfect plan and purpose. And all He had to do was say the word! Each animal, plant, landform, celestial being, body of water—everything—was created with a divine design in mind. Each creation is unique and declared by God to be “good”.

When God created the world, it was perfect. And man, His most perfect creation, was gifted the earth and all that was in it to rule over and enjoy. Unfortunately, we know all too well, the story of man’s Fall into sin. How one poor choice that went against the will of God, changed His perfect creation forever. God could have easily turned His back on mankind, but in His grace, mercy, and love He deigned to save each one of us through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

As Christ followers, we thank and praise God for this gift of forgiveness and salvation. But it is not just this gift that we are grateful for. Each and every day, we need to come before our Lord and worship Him for the gift of this beautiful world. We want to declare His majesty just as His awesome creation does each and every day. In the midst of our busy lives, it is so easy to take for granted and overlook the wonders that fill our world, beauty put here by God for us to take delight in. We are God’s children and just as He loves and cares for us, we need to do the same for our earthly home.

One of my favorite songs is Chris Tomlin’s “Indescribable”, a beautiful testimony to the wonders of God’s creation and majesty. Words often fall short in describing the uniqueness of this earth and all we can do is fall to our knees and declare, “You are AMAZING God!”. Whether your travels this summer take you across oceans, across country, or just across your own backyard, I encourage you to take many moments to marvel at the beauty surrounding you and to give thanks and praise to God for this indescribable gift.

“I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station through which God speaks to us every hour, if only we will tune in.” George Washington Carver

Diana Bartholomew

“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” Philippians 3:13

Opening a new box of shoes. A blank sheet of paper. A sunrise. All these signals a new beginning, a fresh start, a promise of things to come. One of my favorite things about being a teacher is getting a reboot. What a perk of our job to begin anew each school year! We can forget the student discipline issue we had last year, the conflict with a certain parent, the frustration of a lesson gone wrong. Last school year is over. Dust off the cobwebs. Wipe the slate clean. We have a new beginning, a fresh start!

It's nice to have the reminder that as Christians we, too, have a fresh start every day. Our past sins are gone, wiped away by Christ's blood. God looks at us as new creatures, forgiven and loved. What a joy to know that God doesn't hold a grudge or judge us according to what we've done wrong in the past. He looks at us through Jesus and sees only his beautiful, blessed creations. We have a new beginning, a fresh start!

August is exciting! Look forward to opening fresh school supplies, discovering novel ideas on Pinterest, creating a vibrant classroom learning environment and planning innovative lessons. Be thrilled to meet unknown students who you have the opportunity to mold, shape and mentor. Embrace the meeting of new parents who you will guide through the year ahead. Be thankful for a fresh start in your classroom. Rejoice in the knowledge that you are forgiven and new in the eyes of our Savior. The 2018-19 school year has begun. You have a new beginning, a fresh start!

Lisa Ellwein

Identity Crisis

Hooray! You are on your way for the 2018-19 school year! The classroom has been meticulously prepared, the bulletin boards are up, the curriculum has been studied, and the lesson plans are complete! Whether you are a veteran teacher or a first-year teacher, you feel the same excitement mixed with a little anxiety all rolled up in one! But this is what you have schooled for, trained for, and are now ready to do! You are a teacher! This is what you were made to do! This is your identity!!

Or is it?

Do You Have an Identity Crisis!!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAil_Vbt5V8

Although it is true that God creates us-with special gifts and abilities to further His Kingdom, these gifts and abilities are **not** our identity. Far from it! As Christians, we receive a new identity, a better and perfect identity, when we were baptized into faith and the Holy Spirit began His work in us. As Christian, we do not lose our identity as a teacher, a mechanic, a doctor, or whatever it is we do. Instead, we become our *identity* in Christ Jesus. When we really understand who we are in Christ, it changes the way we think and live.

So, what does it mean to have our identity in Christ?

1. We get new name: “Child of God!”

John 1:12 NIV

“Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, HE gave the right to become Children of God.”

1 John 3:1 NIV

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

2. We are redeemed!

Galatians 3:13 NIV

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”

3. We become transformed into a new creation!

2 Corinthians 5:17

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

4. We become righteous in God’s eyes.

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin^[a] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

5. We become rich in His grace and mercy.

2 Corinthians 8:9

⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

6. We inherit an eternal home called- Heaven!!

Colossians 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

As Christians, we don't have an "identity crisis", we have our "identity in the cross". Because of the great love our Father lavished on us through Jesus, we can live our lives joyfully, proclaiming what He has done for us, and say in all confidence...

"I have my identity in the one who redeemed me and calls me by name.

I am His!

I am a Child of the King!"



Susan Brandt

Separation Anxiety

As a human being, I am sure you have felt it. As an educator, I am sure you have witnessed its effects on students in your classroom and school.

Most teachers have probably dealt with the heartache that separation can bring to their students. I experienced it in my own classroom especially during the “deployment years” of the Gulf War. Military fathers and mothers going on extended deployments and many students and spouses dealing with the emotional consequences of their absence. Even for the well-adjusted, well-prepared child, these were indeed difficult times!

Separation: The word comes from the Latin “*separatio*” meaning disjoined, severed or divided. Not too pleasant of a definition, and not too pleasant of a feeling it produces.

We have all seen the bumps, bruises, and scars caused by family separation. In fact, whether caused by distance, deployment, divorce, or even a death, it is heartbreaking to witness the strain and suffering that human separation can cause.

This human separation is tough enough, but an even more devastating separation is that feeling one experiences when one realizes a growing distance that separates themselves from their loving Father. Maybe, over many years, we’ve slowly drifted away, or maybe we’ve sprinted away or maybe we simply feel that our sinful self is no longer worthy of God’s love and presence. No matter what the circumstance, the feeling of being estranged from God can be an extremely lonely and disheartening one. Adam felt it in the garden after sharing some fruit with Eve. Peter felt it after denying Christ three times one dark and lonely night. Luther felt it as he punished himself for thinking that he was not good enough for God and desiring to gain God’s favor. And we all have probably felt that crushing loneliness at some time, or times, in our lives. But that pain, that trauma and that anxiety is totally on us! It is our perception of being left alone, but the reality is that God has gone nowhere!

“For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’” Hebrews 13:12

Even in our darkest and remotest times, God hasn’t gone anywhere and isn’t going anywhere. When we feel that distance widening between us and God, remember, it’s not God who is moving away from us, but rather, we are moving away from God.

“For all we like sheep have gone astray.” Isaiah 53:6

And when we feel that our sins are too big, our distance from Him is too great, or our hopes have all but evaporated, St. Paul, who, before his own conversion, was light-years separated from Christ, reminds us that, God is ALWAYS right there with us and for us! (And please notice that he did so with a rather lengthy, all-inclusive list of possible separators),

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38-39

That’s right, there is **‘nothing’**, (Please, underline it, circle it, highlight it!) ... **“NOTHING ... in all of creation”** that can separate us from His love! What a promise! What comfort! What love! The “prodigal” in us might cause us to drift, but the grace-filled arms of our heavenly Father are ready to pick us up, dust us off and bring us home.

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” Isaiah 41:10

Share these promises with those around you! Live your life confidently in His love! May our lives shout of His love and compassion! And may we never feel the pangs of separation again knowing that He is always waiting for us!

Dear Father in Heaven,

There are so many times in our lives that we feel the darkness of separation from You. Forgive us for the times we have strayed. Forgive us for the times we have not trusted Your promises and forgive us for the times we may have even turned our backs to You. Strengthen our faith so that we may daily live in the confidence and the knowledge of Your never-failing love. Help us to share this assurance with those we meet each and every day, especially with the children You have placed before us in our classrooms. In your loving name we pray, Amen.

Marsha Wittig

A Forgotten Day

Halloween is tomorrow. It's hard to forget.

For the last week parents have been posting proud photos on Facebook of the elaborate costumes they've created for their kids . . . and themselves. (Some of them are quite amazing – and this from a guy who'd rather take an ice pick in the eye than put on a costume!)

If you look closely, you can still see the remaining signs of Halloween in the stores as Christmas decorations loom over the bags of candy no one really likes and the few, very boring, remaining costumes.

Today at the Houston airport some of the gate attendants were already dressed. I wanted to yell, "Hey people, it's tomorrow, not today!" (Tomorrow I get to have a root canal! Nope, not joking. Really! The appointment is at 9.)

I'm just NOT a big fan of Halloween.

Now, don't misunderstand me, I'm good with the candy part . . . especially a KitKat right around 2 PM at the office. . . everyday. (In case you missed that, I repeat - a KitKat bar – in the afternoon.)

I think this aversion has something to do with my childhood. At the age of three I was playfully chased by a clown at the old California State Fairgrounds in Sacramento as my family watched and laughed. (My grandpa spent his career working at the fairgrounds and the clowns all knew us – lucky us, huh?).

Ok . . . so, over the years I've decided to give my parents the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they really didn't understand that my screams were actual terrified cries for rescue. (Yes, you're right, some therapy along the way would probably have helped too.) Halloween will be over soon. Have no fear.

But I'm here to tell you about a forgotten day, November 1st, that is way cooler: All Saints' Day!

It is a day set aside to remember those who have died in the faith and give thanks to God for the blessing that they were in our lives and still are in our hearts – all with the incredible anticipation of seeing them again in Heaven.

God thinks this is amazing. *"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."* Psalm 116:15

He's the one who made it happen.

Because of His Son's cross and empty tomb, sins are forgiven, and death is defeated. That means: Heaven isn't a fantasy for which you get dressed up – it's a real destination! Real baptized people believe it, live it, share it, hold on to it, and in time, die confident in it. It's the "full package" of faith.

Here's another cool part: Every time we gather for worship, every time we share the Body and Blood of Jesus, we, the saints on earth, are united with all the saints in heaven. Where else does that happen?

Take a few moments today to remember. (It's ok to shed a tear, I usually do.) Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the ones who brought you to the waters of Baptism, who taught God's Word to you, who modeled worship for you, who lived a faithful life, and with whom you will be reunited in Heaven. Then, thank God for those you are privileged to influence today: your family members, coworkers, students, neighbors, and more. Ask God to make your influence one that will last for eternity too.

See, I told you that this is a cool day. "For all the saints who from their labors rest . . ." Happy All Saints' Day.

Pastor Mike Gibson

God With Us

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). Matthew 1:23

This is one of my most favorite Christmas passages. I love the name Immanuel and what it means, God with us. When Jesus came into this world as a baby, it was the greatest evidence of God being with us.

The world throws so many expectations at us during the Christmas season. We have the expectation to have the best Pinterest decorations, the best tree with lots of presents, family gatherings that look like Norman Rockwell paintings and baking dozens of Christmas cookies that create the most awesome aromas. So, what do we do when these Christmas expectations let us down and don't measure up? Our budgets don't support all the latest and greatest toys and presents. We don't have time to decorate our homes to make the next issue of Home and Gardens. Our families fight and don't get along, and don't look anything like that beautiful portrait that hangs on the wall. Children get over tired and over stimulated and melt down. Where does our Christmas love, joy, and peace come from?

The things of this world and human relationships let us down, but Jesus and all His promises are always with us. When our houses are a mess, Immanuel. When Christmas shopping becomes stressful, Immanuel. When family relationships let us down, Immanuel. When the Christmas to do list gets overwhelming, Immanuel. When our children throw temper tantrums, Immanuel. When ministry stresses overwhelm, Immanuel. When a health crisis attacks us, Immanuel. Immanuel brings joy, hope, love and peace. He brings forgiveness when we forget the real meaning of Christmas. He brings forgiveness for broken relationships. Immanuel—God with Us!

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for sending Immanuel into the world to bring forgiveness, hope, joy and peace. During this Advent and Christmas season help us remember Immanuel--God with us. As your servants in ministry, guide us and direct us as we share the message of Immanuel with a world that so desperately needs to hear the message of love, joy, hope, and peace. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Donna Lucas

Teaching Like a Disciple

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6

What does it mean to teach like a disciple? To answer this question, we have to first look at the way Jesus taught. One lesson we can learn from Jesus is that he knew how important it was to have relationships with his students. What we can take from that is in order to be effective in our classrooms it is vital to have relationships with our students otherwise it will not matter what we teach. You can see the importance of this when Jesus meets Mary Magdalen outside of the tomb. Mary was despondent and heartbroken, and we know from the Bible that Jesus mattered to her. That's not really a shock to us as Christians, what does shock us as sinners is how much we and Mary matter to him. He had just saved humanity from sin, the most important act in all of history and yet Jesus took the time to assure her and show her just how much she mattered to him. In doing this Jesus teaches us another lesson, that valuing the individual is important.

Jesus never focused on the weaknesses of his students, he focused on their strengths and used them to guide how he delivered his messages. You could say that Jesus was the first to differentiate. He used many different methods of teaching, stories, parables, questions, discussion, lecture, object lessons, and debates to communicate His message depending on his audience. Jesus adapted His teaching to fit the specific situation. We can see this in Matthew 5, Jesus was lecturing to the crowds on the mountainside. However, in John 13:5 we can see that when He was alone with the disciples, He used object lessons, such as the washing of their feet to demonstrate servant leadership. Jesus also matched His teaching method with the message He needed to communicate. In His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, He used questioning to lead her to truth of His message (John 4:7–30). Jesus used the Lord's Supper, His final lesson as a way to help the disciples visualize His Teaching. (Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20).

Jesus led His students in moving from concrete experiences to abstract principles. He did this by using stories to connect common life events to spiritual truths. In the story of the Good Samaritan, He taught what it meant to be a good neighbor (Luke 10:30–37). In the Parable of the Sower, He demonstrated how the kingdom of God would develop (Matthew 13:3–23).

Another lesson we can take from Jesus is that the mission is to transform lives rather than to impart information. He did this by using mentoring assignments to teach His disciples how to share their faith (Luke 10:1–20). Though his work was the most important work of all time, Jesus never became anxious about trying to cover too much information in His short 3-year ministry. As teachers we have to avoid the temptation of focusing only on how much we can cram into a student's head and then having them regurgitate that onto a piece of paper. Jesus understood that receiving information was not as important as seeing lives changed (see John 16:12–13). Jesus was concerned with the needs of His learners. He understood their culture, their traditions, and their needs. All of those things were taken into consideration in His teaching. As Christian teachers we are called to teach the Gospel, in order to teach like a disciple, we must not take a one size fits all approach in our ministry.

Teaching is one of the most demanding professions we can choose, but also one of the most rewarding. We are called by God to instruct and encourage students in the ways He has called them to live. Because you never know when you might have a Mary Magdalene, a Peter, a Martha, a rich young ruler, or even a Saul sitting in front of you. You also cannot find a better guide than the Master Teacher himself.

Let's pray: Jesus you truly are the Master Teacher, please guide us in being able to focus on the needs of our students and continue to help us to teach like disciples.

Tammie Wright

You are miserable comforters, all of you! Job 16:2

It is so hard to know what to say when someone you love is suffering. It's also hard when someone you only kind of know but really like is suffering. And it is really hard and awkward when someone you don't know well or maybe have a history of conflict with is suffering.

Oftentimes we don't know what to do and so we just make it weird.

We succumb to the pressure of feeling as though we need to speak on God's behalf, and we wind up spouting the kind of Christian comfort found on flowery greeting cards. Or we get even weirder and start avoiding the person in need.

We can take a lesson from Job's friends here. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar loved Job dearly and watched him suffer to a degree that few humans will ever experience. Chapter two of Job sees them kind of getting their roles of comforters right; they showed up to be with him, sympathized with him, and spent days with him. In Job 2:11-13 we see that they were by his side for seven days, weeping and tearing their own robes.

I have to give these guys some credit here. While I have comforted many people in my career, I have never upped my comfort game to a robe tearing level.

But after seven days of comforting in silence, Job's buddies were ready to speak and here is where they get everything wrong. While they still loved Job and wanted to see his suffering end, they started desperately reaching for reasons why he was suffering and eventually drew the condemnation of God. While much of the speeches they offered up are easily dismissed by us today, how often do we fall into the trap of trying to make sense of tragedy in an attempt to comfort a friend?

I've heard many a grieving person repeat in disbelief some of the well-intended statements made by loved ones. I've done plenty of fumbling around myself trying to find the right words in hard situations. Relationships get weird when people just don't know what to say.

We fall into the greatest traps when we feel like we have to explain things for God. Even though we know that people don't hurt on earth as a punishment for shortcomings and we also know that God's plans are bigger and more complex than we could ever hope to explain, it is hard to find the right words.

So how do we help those that hurt? Romans 12:15 tells us that we should "mourn with those who mourn". We should sit with those who hurt, acknowledge their pain, be prepared to admit that we on Earth have no idea what God's plan is, and continually turn the focus back to greatest comforter, our heavenly Father.

Maybe we can draw the line at robe tearing for the sake of empathy.

But try not to make it weird, ok?

Courtney Burns

Young orphans are one of the most powerless people groups on earth. We are grieved when we see images of children scavenging in garbage for food, dodging bullets in war zones or exploited in a trafficking ring. Our hearts break. That is the Spirit of God in us connecting us to how our Father feels. Throughout Scripture, we see God's heart for the oppressed as He displays His concern for all His precious creations, especially the most vulnerable. *"...and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday."* Isaiah 58:10.

We know that regardless of our own earthly family history, we also were orphans, spiritually, totally alone and lost, powerless to save ourselves apart from God's mercy and grace. We see this powerful adoption in Romans, *"For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."* God has restored us unto Himself.

This ministry of restoration resounds in our hearts. In Isaiah 58:6-12, we see that God emphasizes wholeness, permanent change and bringing people back into complete health - mind, body and spirit. Changing the lives of those devastated by poverty, illness and other issues mean more than offering temporary solutions, as helpful as they may be. It means ministering in both word and deed. It means looking at deeper issues, that when addressed, bring lasting changes. This type of change demands much time, prayer and resources versus the quick fix that brings instant gratification for our efforts. In Isaiah, God tells us we should spend ourselves on behalf of the poor. Just as Jesus spent Himself on our behalf, may our response be to join in His suffering by doing likewise for the most vulnerable and lost.

Every single man, woman and child was born with a unique gift that can be used to build His Kingdom and bring glory to God. As Christians, it is our calling to help empower and restore those around us. Jesus came to give each of us *abundant life*. May we be His instruments of restoration in our communities, nations and world!

Loving Lord, thank You for the wonderful example of Your life, which was lived in spirit and truth – a life that demonstrated love as well as justice – a life that cared for all humanity, especially those that are weak or hurting or vulnerable.

Be close to all who are living in scarcity and uphold them with the warming breath of Your love and grace. Give us a wider perspective on life and a heart of compassion and kindness, especially on those that feel alone, unloved or uncared for.

May we become Your eyes and ears and may Your heart of love and grace flow through us to those that are in need. Look down in pity on all who are suffering loss, poverty or unjust discrimination at this time - and we pray that in Your best time Your justice will prevail in each of their lives. Thank You Lord – we ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen

Linda Kurtz

And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Acts 18:7

Strange text, somewhat inconsequential and yet, not so much. This was the house that Paul went to after he was preaching and testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. The Jews in the synagogue were angry with Paul, became abusive and reviled him. So much so, that Paul shook his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” And so, he (Paul) goes next door. Not only does he do what he says he is going to do. This defines his ministry. And he goes to the home of a man named Titius Justus. This is the only place where Titius Justus is mentioned.

When I read this text, and I do so often, I think of all the students God has blessed me with in my years of ministry. Most of the students, after graduation, I don’t hear from again. This is typical for the teaching profession. We may never hear about how our students are doing 10 or 15 years after they leave your school. That’s one of the reasons teaching is considered a thankless job – the lack of immediate gratification.

But the immediate gratification is there. For we all have had a Titius Justus in our class. The student who learns, grows in faith, graduates and BELIEVES. The student may attend church regularly, and to our surprise, may even help in the body of Christ with the expansion of ministry in his neighborhood.

Whenever we wonder, “Why do we do, what we do, day in and day out?” Remember our student, Titius Justus. Thank God for His Holy Spirit and the opportunity to be a part of this, yes, exciting ministry called, “Lutheran Education.”

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for this wonderful ministry called, Lutheran Education. Thank you for sending us Your Holy Spirit in allowing us to preach, teach, talk, and act as the ministers You want us to be in proclaiming Your saving love to our students and families. Forgive us when we miss those opportunities to proclaim and help us to always live a life of gratitude in serving the Titius Justuses, You put before us in our classes.

In Your Name, Amen

Dennis Jacobson

Jesus Broke the Mold

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful; I know that full well. Psalm 139:14

Have you ever heard from a stranger; I recognize you from somewhere, or you look just like someone I know? Most of us in our lives have heard that from someone or maybe even said it. Maybe, you do resemble somebody out there, but the truth is there is no one in the world that resembles you inch for inch. Not even identical twins are 100% physically identical. That honestly doesn't even begin to touch on what truly makes you who you are. Each one of us has a unique brain, background, and influences that make us who we are. None of those things can be duplicated. This makes you truly a unique person in the world.

Jeremiah 1:5

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew^[a] you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

God knew you before the world did. God knew your strengths and your weaknesses. He knew the things that would make you quirky. God knew and He still created you EXACTLY the way you are. That might be hard for some to accept. I, for one, hate that I get lost easily or that I can't seem to find the words I need when I get nervous. Why would such a perfect God make me so flawed? However, He made me this way for a purpose. The truth is, who am I to judge my God and King? The Bible tells me that I fill a place in God's perfect design. I don't understand the why or the how, but HE does. Perhaps, you wish that you could paint like Picasso or had more athletic ability. Instead of wishing to be something you are not, focus on the qualities that make up you as a person, the qualities that God blessed you with. God loves variety, you can see that in the way He created us. Tall, short, people of all different skin, eye, and hair colors. When God looks at you, He rejoices in your differences and broke the mold you came from. The same God that created mountains, oceans, and star filled galaxies, looked down and decided the world needed one of you too!

The same holds true for the students in your classrooms; each one is a unique design of God's. Understanding what makes up our students can help us not only relate to them but, instruct them as well. God has entrusted us with making sure they know His promise. Part of that is helping them to rejoice in what makes them unique. After all, Ephesians 2:10 tells us: *For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.*

Show them with actions that we are loved with our perfect imperfections.

Let's pray: Dear Lord, thank you for making each of us a unique wonder, wonderfully made by You. Help us to rejoice in our differences and help us to communicate to our students how important their uniqueness is in your eyes. Amen

Tammie Wright

End of the Year! Are You Blue or Celebrating?

The end of a school year brings about many emotions for teachers. Some teachers may be excited for summer and are celebrating. Some teachers may be coming off of one of their toughest years in ministry and are struggling and tired. Teachers also could be feeling inadequate as they feel they may have failed their students and did not feel that the year went well. There are those teachers who may be celebrating their retirement from the ministry. I recall a certain year that I had a particular student who I worked very hard with. She was challenging to say the least but for some reason we had a great connection. I remember that last day of school making me feel somewhat sad to say goodbye to her. I know she was struggling with this feeling as well. I was able to attend her high school graduation a few years ago and I was proud of the young lady she had become.

Regardless of how you are feeling know that God was with you through the journey this year. You should remember that our lives are a work in progress, and there is no failure as long as we are striving to become more Christ-like and perform in ministry in a way that brings God glory.

Paul says in I Corinthians 9:24, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So, run that you may obtain it." This is fulfilling promise for us, a choice that will leave a lasting impression on your students. Know that you did finish strong and you used intentional moments to bless your students. In ministry we have the ability to encourage fruitful discussions and to interject as many life lessons as we can. We get to praise successes; lovingly challenge those students that God has entrusted into our care and give our heart to every one of our students.

Did you finish strong? Maybe the real question is did I ask God to help me do my best every day? Did I look to Him for strength and wisdom? Did I grow closer to Him this year? Did I actively seek out ways to become less self-centered and more giving to my fellow teachers, students and families?

"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." 2 Timothy 4:7. You made a difference in your students' lives. Now go and celebrate the impact you had on your students, families, and staff.

You fought the fight and won! Your class was blessed by your service.

Kristin Fink

My Favorite Day

The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Exodus 33:14

Ah, summer. As educators, summer means a time of rest. A time where you can sleep in, drink your coffee slowly, catch up on a book, and some have time to get to those projects that are pushed aside during the busy school year.

I recently had the opportunity to travel to Montana for a week of family time and fun. What a blessing it was to see beautiful things, have amazing experiences, and spend unhurried and uninterrupted time with my family and friends. Each day was my favorite and I loved every minute of it. It was truly a special vacation for us.

But I couldn't help thinking, this is going too fast! Instead of enjoying each moment I started to count the days that had already passed, realizing that the days were passing so quickly!

And all of sudden, I had those Sunday night blues. You know that feeling you get when you realize your weekend is almost over and Monday is looming? You start thinking about all that needs to be done in the coming week and the fun memories of the weekend start to fade away. All too often, we get in the trap of rushing through our days and tasks, so that we can check off what has been completed.

So it happens with our faith. Maybe that extra time you reserve each day for prayer, studying scripture or even worship gets forgotten or pushed to another day. While the past is remembered, and the future is hoped for, the present is the most important in our walk with God. Jesus calls us to repent and believe each day of our life. *Now* is the moment of salvation! Don't push that time with God to the next day.

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Matthew 6:33-34

Don't let your summer, or your school year, be one long Sunday night. Embrace the busy, embrace the rest. God wants you to enjoy this life he has blessed you with, but don't forget to take Him with you. Focus on God in the present and take the opportunity each and every day for prayer and praise.

I think Winnie the Pooh and Piglet said it best:

"What day is it?" asked Pooh.

"It's today," squeaked Piglet.

"My favorite day," said Pooh.

This is the day that the Lord has made-let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Meredith Binnie

Humor, a Gift from God

Do you like a good sense of humor, a good laugh, the feeling of joy? When I met my husband 31 years ago, one of the first things that caught my attention and made my heart leap was his crazy sense of humor and how he could make me laugh in almost any situation. On this side of heaven, we all suffer trials and tribulations, and at times we don't feel joyful, happy, or like having a good laugh. Even in some of our most difficult times my husband has found ways to make me laugh and lift the heaviness. Many people think humor has no place in hard or challenging times, but I would argue that is when we need it the most!

Humor is an important catalyst for releasing God's rejuvenating joy into our souls. Humor is God's weapon against worry, anxiety, and fear. It's a powerful salve for the skinned knees of the spirit...healing, revitalizing, protecting us against toxic infections like bitterness, defeat, or depression.

He will once again fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy (Job 8:21 NLT). Laughter is our lifeline when we're sinking into the pit of rigidity, when we're so absorbed in the stressful details of our lives that we're missing the fun. The sun hasn't disappeared just because it's temporarily obscured by clouds.

You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:11 NIV). Experiencing joy during our best times is no difficult feat; however, experiencing joy in the throes of hard times is something that many explain away as impossible, but it is truly possible with the Holy Spirit. He fills us with the joy of the Lord, and when you focus on that joy, commit to it, and welcome it, suddenly you will be overflowing with His warmth and love and hope. Watch for the Holy Spirit working in your life and allow the laughter to come, for God is sovereign and whatever happens to us is all part of His plan, for one day we will certainly be belly laughing in heaven right alongside our Savior!
AMEN!

Michelle Hines

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Galatians 6:9–10

Beginning in the second week of August, my school is on the early side of the national spectrum. As I’m writing this, we’re about 2 weeks in and some of the excitement of the new year is starting to wear off. The catching up with fellow teachers and returning students has reverted to the comfortable norm. The new bulletin boards and posters are now just part of the decor. If you have a new schedule or classroom, perhaps you are settling into a groove. It’s not that things are bad. But they are getting familiar. You may be able to operate on a sort of autopilot at times. That can certainly be a good thing, but sometimes when the adrenaline wears off a little, when the emails and assignments begin to pile up, and when you check the calendar and realize Thanksgiving break is weeks away, it’s easy to become weary.

Paul encourages the Galatians not to grow weary of doing good. This is a common theme in his letters. This same Greek word, sometimes translated as “lose heart,” is used in Ephesians 3:13, twice in 2 Corinthians 4, and verse 9 of our text is just an expanded version of 2 Thessalonians 3:13. Similar language is even used in Luke 18 to preface Jesus’ parable of the persistent widow. It seems that growing weary or losing heart is a common issue for Christians across time and space.

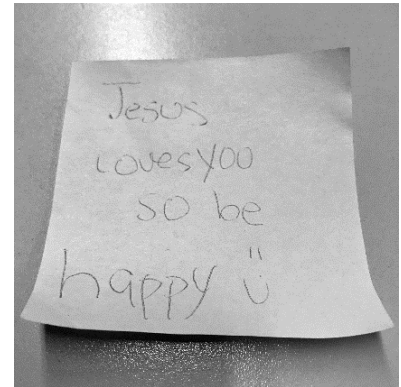
It’s so easy to grow weary when things are hard or when don’t go the way we anticipate or hope for. Paul uses an agricultural analogy here, pointing ahead to the harvest and reaping in due season. It certainly helps us to forge ahead when we are able to keep the end result in mind. What is the harvest we have to look forward to? Among other things, fruitful fellowship with other believers and growth in body and soul (you may only need one of these, but your students need both!). Some of your students may hear the Good News of Jesus’ love for the first time this year. Some of them may be baptized. Others in our school communities will face difficult times including divorce or other broken relationships, physical or emotional struggles, mental illness, or even death. Even through these things we know that God works good in all things for those who belong to Him (Roman 8). God has given us opportunities to do good to our neighbors in these situations, and to point to Christ in all of them. Let us not grow weary but know that Christ is strong enough to be our refuge in times of trouble. He has given us His Word and even His very body and blood to strengthen us. He is with you today and every day. Amen.

David Pratt

Back in the early 90's there was a movie called *LA Story* starring Steve Martin. Throughout the movie, the main character would receive personal messages from freeway traffic signs. It wasn't God sending the messages, but I remember thinking, "how cool it would be if God did send us such direct messages?"

In staff Bible studies, I frequently talk about my desire for God to send me "billboards". I have no doubts that God is real, but my stoic Lutheran heart doesn't always feel God as much as my head knows Him. It might sound silly, but I sometimes wish God would take over a freeway sign or billboard to tell me personally that He loves me, even though my head is certain He does.

After one such staff Bible study, I arrived at my classroom where I saw a Post-It note on my desk that read "Jesus loves you so be happy 😊". I HAD RECEIVED A BILLBOARD!!! I explained to the student who wrote it that she had no idea how important her simple note was to me. I totally believed God had used her to send me a message.



Psalm 46:10 tells us to "Be still and know that I am God". Instead of taking "be still" as a gentle suggestion to rest and relax in God, I think it's more of a wake-up call! A reminder to stop looking for God in signs and just *know* that He is there in all things. There's no need to search for something you already know is there! We don't need a billboard to find Him. He's everywhere! The first verse of Psalm 46 tells us that "God is our refuge and strength an *ever-present* help in trouble." Isn't it nice that God does send us little messages sometimes? He might not use freeway signs, instead, I think He sends us messages through other people. He places specific people in our lives on purpose. How cool is it that we can be used as God's messengers and be billboards for other people?! I think sometimes we just need to do a better job of realizing those messages are from Him and take comfort in the fact that He is *always* with us.

Dear Lord, thank you for always being with us, in good times and in bad. Thank you for placing people in our lives who might say or do something at just the right time. Whether it be with our students, our colleagues, our friends and family, or someone on the street, help us to be willing messengers for You. Always help us remember to be still and know that you've got us. Forgive us Lord when we don't see You as easily as we should. In Your Name, Amen!

Amy Blain

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Corinthians 4:7



One of my favorite things about teaching 7th grade science is the opportunity to go with the 7th graders to Catalina for a week for outdoor education. It is amazing to be able to step beyond the four walls of the classroom and directly into God's beautiful creation to experience His intelligent design first-hand.

A definite highlight of the trip is the night snorkel. It is a fascinating experience to swim in the ocean at night with only the moon and underwater flashlights to lead the way. On the night snorkel we typically see things that we do not see during the day such as lobsters, octopus, and horn sharks. Often times, the instructors will catch these animals and bring them to the surface for the 7th graders to observe more closely. Students get to pet a horn shark or be crowned with a lobster on their wetsuit hooded head. The overall experience is unique, however, the memory that most will remember for years to come is when each instructor leads their small group into the dark ocean away from other groups and tells the students to turn off their underwater flashlights. Nervous and hesitant, but trusting their instructor, they follow the directions. Once it is completely dark in the water, the instructor tells them to look underwater and to wave their hands to make glitter... yes, glitter! The water sparkles as the students move their hands and flippers up and down in the water creating a magical experience in the dark sea. The instructor takes advantage of this magical experience as an opportunity to share some knowledge about bioluminescence. What the 7th graders are seeing is plankton. When the plankton receives pressure on its cell walls, chemical reactions take place and causes bioluminescence. These organisms are microscopic and can produce a powerful light 100 times greater than its size!

I can't help but make a connection between this experience and the theme verse for LEC this year. Our theme for LEC is Spiritually Charged as we focus on God's all-surpassing power that is within us through Christ Jesus. Paul shares in 2 Corinthians 4:7, *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us."* I find it interesting that the plankton gains the energy for bioluminescence from the sun and always has the ability to shine up to 100 times greater than its size, however, they only shine when they are agitated. The plankton shine brighter in the midst of challenges and adversity.

Can we say the same for us? When we are faced with challenges and adversity, does God's power shine through us? Our power comes from the Son as we worship together, dive into the Bible, praise God, and pray. I would imagine that some days God's power does shine through us in the way we love others, in the unexplainable peace that we have during hard times, and through our words and actions. Other times, we may fall short. God knows this, forgives us, loves us the same, and refuels and recharges us to move forward as His mercies are new each day!

In 2 Corinthians, Paul compares us to clay pots. It was customary at that time to hide treasures in jars of clay that had little value or beauty and were unassuming. What is different with us is that God put His

treasure in us, not to hide His power, but so His power shines through our imperfections. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:10 that *“we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”* We see throughout the Bible where God works through ordinary people to accomplish the extraordinary. He worked through real people like Moses, David, Abraham, Sarah, and Paul so that His power was made known.

God is working through you too! He works through you during your good days and rough days. Sometimes He even shines brighter on your rough days. Lean on Him, lean on your fellow Lutheran educators, join in His presence through worship, the Word, song or prayer. Stay connected to God through Christ Jesus and he will keep you **Spiritually Charged**. *“For (you) are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for (you) to do.”* Ephesians 2:10. If God can make the microscopic plankton shine 100 times greater than its size, imagine the possibilities of His power working through you to accomplish His will and share His love with everyone that you come in contact with and serve! May you continue to be **Spiritually Charged** with God’s all-surpassing power as Christ Jesus shines through you!

Yvette Stuewe

Read the Christmas story as Matthew tells it:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

And they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Only God could have thought of Christmas. Christmas turns our attention from the usual to the unusual, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the holiday to the Holy Day: **"Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."**

Only God could have thought of Christmas. Think of what happened on Christmas: Majesty came to a manger. The King came to a crèche. The Creator became a creature. The Omnipotent came among the impotent. The God who gave us everything **"made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."**

Only God could have thought of Christmas. Think of His timing. We would have said: *"sooner rather than later."* But God was in no hurry. At just the right time He sent His own Son into this world to be its Savior: **"When the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law. That we might receive the full rights of sons."**

Only God could have thought of Christmas. Think of how it happened! Had Hollywood choreographed Christmas it would have been filled with pomp and pageantry. There would have been official proclamations and mass celebrations. There would have been trumpeting troubadours and parading politicians.

That may be the world's way, but that's not God's way. God made His own arrangements. Only heaven seemed to be aware of or interested in the events that unfolded on Christmas Evening. Suddenly on a lonely hillside an angelic choir was heard by snoozing shepherds. And just like that the mystery of the ages was revealed: Immanuel -- God was with us. Divinity combined with humanity. Through this tiny Baby God had come. Not in might and majesty, but in humanity and in humility: **"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."** So, what is it all about? What is the message of Christmas? The heart of the mystery goes to the heart of God, a heart that loved us when we were unlovable: **"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.** Only God could have thought of Christmas!

Dear Lord, Christmas was Your idea. We never would have thought of it. The whole idea of it would never have been conceived in our simple minds: You came here...among us. And You didn't just come for a visit. You came to live and then to die. As our Substitute. You came among us as a Baby and did what babies do. Then You grew to be a child and did what children do. As an adult You did what adults do. All the while You did what we couldn't do – You obeyed Your Father. You walked a perfect path. As our Substitute. Then You did another thing that we couldn't do – You chose sin, our sin, took it on Your shoulders, and paid a horrible price for it...as our Substitute. You paved a path to heaven for us. And it all started one chilly evening in an innkeeper's stable in Bethlehem. With straw for a pillow and a feeding trough for Your first bed, You made Your grand entrance onto this planet, unnoticed by anyone but a few shepherds, who received the birth announcement. Wow! We never would have done it that way, but because You did it Your way, we now have the hope of spending all eternity with You at Your side. Bless this Christmas, Lord, as we celebrate Your birth. Remind us that You did it Your way and as a result became the only Way to heaven. Our only Way home. Keep us walking Your way always. Thank You, Lord, for thinking of Christmas. Amen.

Pastor Tim Unke