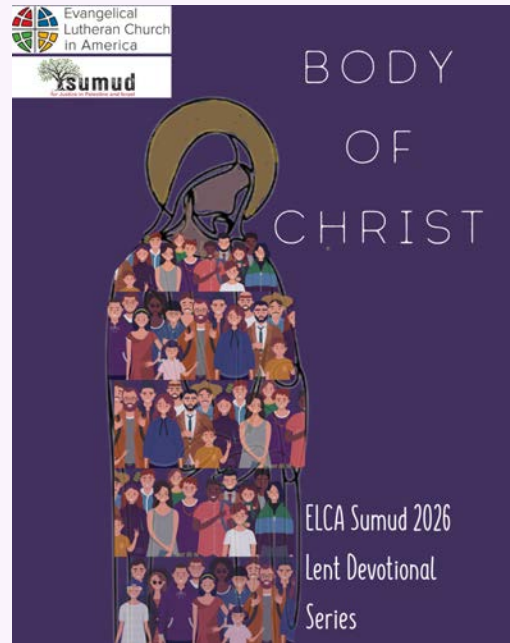


ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 1: "Now is the Time"

Passage: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

Bishop Stacie Fidler of the Northern Illinois Synod



Paul looked around at a similar time in the early church and made this proclamation: NOW is the acceptable time.

Even as the church was persecuted, hunted down, hungry, he boldly shouts that NOW is the time. It is a word of hard hope, shouting that our salvation and our call do not come from the realities of the broken world around us. They come from God, from the presence and sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. The risen Christ empowers all his followers for THIS time and THIS place because their salvation, their healing and hope, are secured.

There is no way that one could look around Palestine and say, "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" There are so few acceptable things in the everyday life of a Palestinian Christian. From the moment of rising until sleep, there are few certainties. Will there be water? Electricity? Work? Will checkpoints be open today? Randomly closed? Completely moved? Who do I know who will be unjustly detained? Attacked? Killed?

A life where nothing is reliable day-to-day, moment-to-moment, leaves people without hope.

But hope is one thing our partners in the ELCJHL hold tightly.

Hope that is deeply grounded in the very origins of Christianity, in the land where Jesus walked, in the clarity that Paul proclaimed. Our certainty is in Christ. Our hope is in Christ. Our mission is in Christ.

Our partners in the ELCJHL live that certainty every day amid the chaos and cruelties around them. They are ambassadors for Christ and for the Gospel in their expansive sense of service for all people around them. They live the righteous and love of God through schools, through daily and deeply loving their neighbors, through trauma care and medical care and community care.

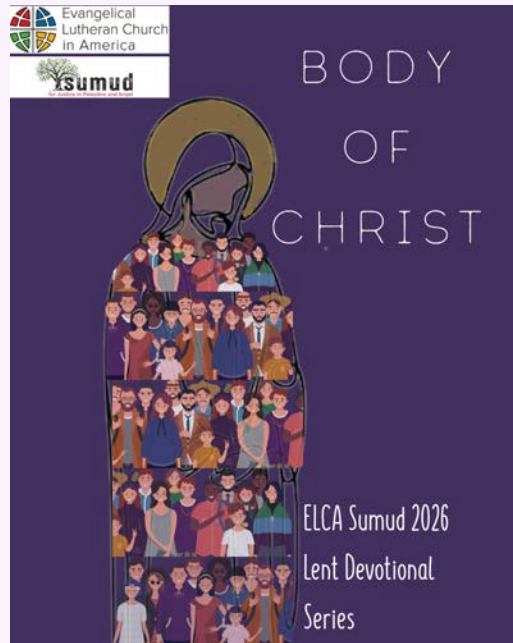
These words of Paul guide our partners in Palestine daily because the ELCJHL know this: that NOW is always the acceptable time to live the kingdom of God. That NOW is always the time to live the righteousness of Christ. That NOW IS the day of salvation.

ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 2: “Shared Life”

Passage: Romans 5:12–19

Bishop Tim Graham of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod



Paul reminds us in Romans 5 that through one, sin and death spread to all, and through one (Jesus Christ), grace and life are poured out for the many. This is not only about individual salvation but about a shared life that binds us across borders and histories. In Christ, we do not belong to ourselves alone but to one another.

Our connection to Palestinians is, first and foremost, a human one. The brokenness Paul names—violence, fear, displacement—is a daily reality in Palestine. At the Lutheran Dar al-Kalima School which we visited as part of our Bishops Solidarity Visit, ninth-grader Hannah described to us her daily journey from the Dheisheh Refugee Camp. School, she told us, is not a chore but “a way of resistance.” She spoke with joy about after-school clubs and the library, where her love of reading is encouraged. Yet the road to this “second home” is often dangerous: raids and roadblocks delay or prevent students from reaching school, and some days buses are turned back. Still, Hannah will not let these obstacles keep her from learning or from her right to speak and create. In her determination, we glimpsed the steadfastness—in Arabic, “Sumud”)—of Palestinian Christians who cling to hope amid fear and constraint.

Our connection runs even deeper with our Christian siblings in Palestine. Through baptism, Palestinian Christians and we are joined to the same crucified and risen Lord. As the ELCA accompanies the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, we have witnessed grace in their steadfastness: in worship that proclaims hope amid injustice, in

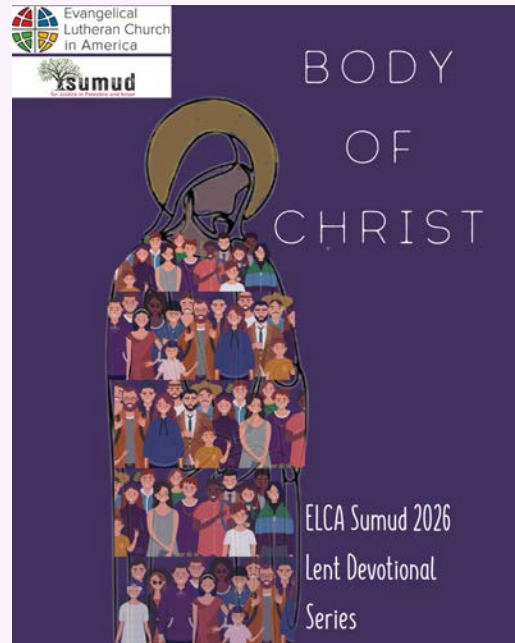
schools and ministries that serve children and families, and in leaders who keep showing up. Sharing this grace with our siblings in Palestine is to let Christ's reconciling love move us from distance to solidarity: to listen to their stories, resist indifference, and advocate for justice and durable peace for all who dwell in the land. In this Lenten season, we trust that where sin and suffering abound, God's grace in Christ abounds still more.

ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 3: "Land and People"

Passage: John 3: 1-17

Bishop Scott Alan Johnson of the
Nebraska Synod



I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?

My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

The Lord will not let your foot be moved

nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep.

Psalm 121.1-3

Psalm 121 was one of the readings at my grandmother's funeral. After marrying my grandfather she came to love the hills of our family's farmland in northeast Nebraska. I, too, love the land my family has called home for over 100 years. There's a hill just south of our farm from which, looking northeast toward my hometown, you can see miles of land that was all farmed by descendants of my great-great-grandparents for many years.

I thought of those hills as we traveled around the West Bank during our trip to Palestine this month, particularly when I met with Palestinians who have farmed their land for even longer than my family has farmed ours. They, too, can climb the hills and see their family history spread out across the acres they've stewarded for generations, each sunrise revealing a living reminder of the sacred toil to which God has called them. They know the faith that is needed to tend the land, not knowing if drought or flood or wind or disease or any of a thousand other factors will strike without warning and bring an entire season of work to naught.

There is one crucial difference between my family's farm and the farms of our Palestinian siblings. My family has been encouraged and supported in our stewardship of the land we've farmed. We've partnered with our neighbors, worked together through tough times, and received and given help as needed. My Palestinian siblings, however, have often been required to fend for themselves. They look to the hills and see illegal settlements encroaching on land their family has owned for decades. They are separated from their neighbors by barriers, walls, and checkpoints, which are erected with little or no warning. They are viewed with suspicion and misunderstanding, both locally and around the world, forced to fight for the right to farm land that has been in their care for far longer than the government that constantly threatens to take that land away.

This is not a story many of us hear in the United States. We hear about checkpoints and security walls as a deterrent to violence, when in reality they are often the means by which land is stolen from Palestinians who have peacefully farmed it for generations. As people of faith who seek to walk in the light of truth, these are stories of our Palestinian siblings we need to share. Part of the body of Christ is suffering a slow genocide masquerading as measures to enhance security and prevent violence. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer, and we bear a holy responsibility to alleviate that suffering when we can.

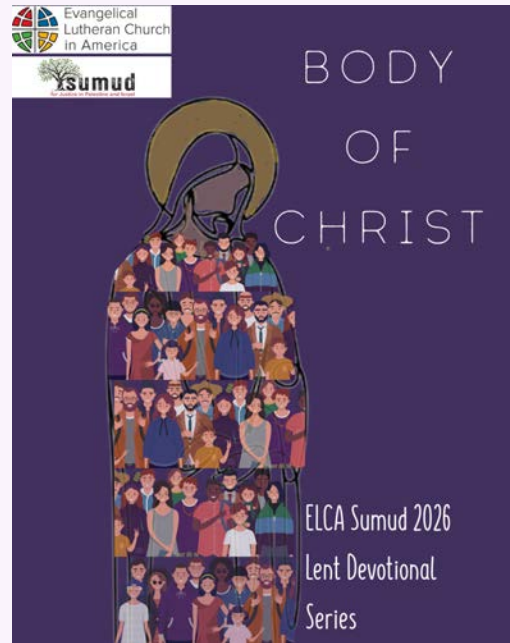
Jesus told Nicodemus, "*very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*" We often think of that rebirth as a spiritual awakening. Take a minute, however, and consider what Jesus says from a geographic standpoint. Imagine ascending to the highest point of an olive grove in the West Bank, with acres of trees that your parents, grandparents, and others have tended for decades, if not centuries. See how your place in God's kingdom is rooted in the soil with olive trees, wheat, alfalfa, soybeans, corn, or apricots. To see the land "from above" is to understand there is a holy connection between all who steward the land for the sake of feeding others. In meeting my Palestinian siblings who share a love a farming, I was reminded that we are truly one in Christ, united in God's kingdom across the miles between a West Bank olive grove and the rolling Nebraska prairie. I'm thankful to have been born from above yet again in these encounters, gifted with a wider perspective to see the church alive and active in people who lovingly look to the hills just as I do, trusting in the same God for help and guidance, living in the same body of Christ.

ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 4: "Living Water"

Passage: John 4:5-42

Bishop Greg G. Busboom of the
Central/Southern Illinois Synod



We had just finished worship with the congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Beit Sahour, the village near Bethlehem that contains the Shepherd's Field. A Palestinian woman from the congregation approached me to express her deep thanks for our presence with them. "Please go back and tell our story," she pleaded. "What is the story you would like to me tell?" I asked. After a few moments of intense silence, she looked me straight in the eyes, raised her finger to my face, and, with the utmost intention, said "I will tell you a story."

She told me of her husband who had been battling cancer. The only place where her husband could receive treatment was Augusta Victoria Hospital in east Jerusalem, a hospital run by the Lutheran World Federation. Because they were Palestinian, traveling from their home in the West Bank to Augusta Victoria required a permit that they would be required to show at the heavily guarded checkpoint. On the day of her husband's appointment, with the proper permit in hand, they drove to the checkpoint. The guards at the checkpoint told her that she and the car could pass through but, if her husband wanted to pass, he would have to walk across. Her husband, weakened by his cancer, barely had the strength to stand, let alone walk. She pleaded with the guards, but they insisted. With every ounce of strength her husband could muster, he got out of the car and crawled on his hands and knees across the checkpoint. All the while, the guards laughed. To these guards, this woman and her husband were not human. They were mere objects.

When the Samaritan woman approaches Jesus in the gospel of John, Jesus sees her not as an object to be ridiculed or manipulated but rather as someone who is fully human, someone

with human agency, someone with a story to share and a gift to offer. “Give me a drink,” begins Jesus, honoring the fact that not only did Jesus have something to share with her, but she also had something to share with Jesus. Jesus, in all of his humanity, was just as dependent on her as she was on him. Jesus needed physical water. The Samaritan woman needed living water. Before serving her, Jesus recognizes that he needs to be served by her, not in a subservient kind of way, but in a way that honors what she brings to the well, even in all of her brokenness.

As members of the body of Christ, we recognize that all people, regardless of who they are, have been created in the image of God and are, therefore, not objects, but rather subjects, each with their own story, each with their own gifts, each with their own God-endowed dignity. Serving our neighbors, including our neighbors who are in need, begins with recognizing that they have gifts to share with us. Only when we recognize our dependence on others can we, with Christ-like love, share our gifts with them. Only when we are willing to receive from our neighbors, including those who are different than us, a drink of water, can we authentically share with them the living water that is Jesus.



Prayer

Let us pray.

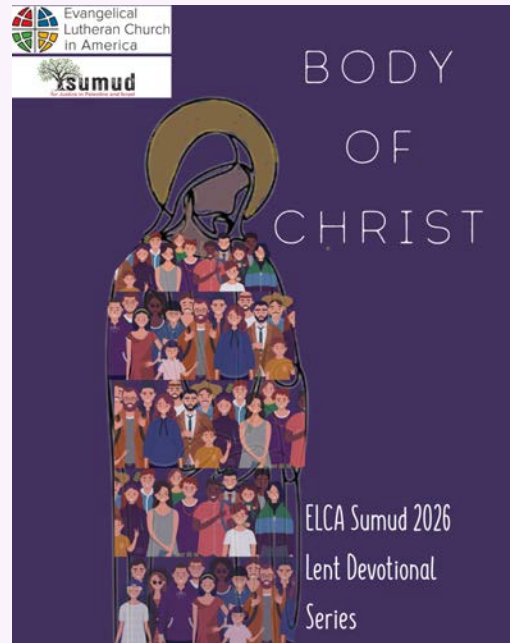
Lord Jesus, our Living Water, open our hearts to see and honor the stories of all God's children, including our Palestinian siblings, so that our thirst might be fully quenched in you. Amen.

ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 5: “Cry of the Cross”

Passage: John 9:1-4

Bishop Meghan Johnston Aelabouni of
the Rocky Mountain Synod



“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The disciples’ question to Jesus here is misguided in a way that may tempt us to feelings of superiority: we all have sinned and fallen short, but at least I’ve never said something like that out loud. Of course the human diversity of the body of Christ, including disability and differences of ability, is not a sign of sin. Thank you, Jesus, that we know better.

If we’re honest, however, we can recognize in the disciples our own human tendency to rationalize what seems to us like misfortune. If we can tie life circumstances to preventable causes, we might insulate ourselves or others from sharing such a fate. A similar process occurs when we do not want to believe or accept that someone in a position of trust and authority would abuse their power. When we ask, out loud or in our hearts: “Who sinned, this person or their parents, that they have been detained, shot, bombed in their home?”

As a former ELCA missionary pastor in Jerusalem from 2019-2024, returning to Palestine and Israel this January with colleague bishops and leaders from the ELCA and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada was a joyful homecoming. Yet, only eighteen months after leaving the Holy Land, I was deeply troubled to hear how the pain of our Palestinian colleagues and their neighbors had only deepened in the intervening months. We heard of the ongoing destruction of human life in Gaza despite an official ceasefire; the aggressive multiplication of gates and checkpoints making West Bank residents increasingly isolated and fearful; and the growing boldness of violent settler attacks on Palestinian farms and villages that comes from knowing the Israeli military is likely to defend the attackers and to

arrest the victims—simply because the attackers are Israeli and the victims are Palestinian. One of the pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land asked us: how can people look at what is happening in Gaza and deny it is a genocide, when genocide scholars and human rights organizations in Israel and around the world have stated that it is? How can Christians look at what is happening to people in the West Bank and say that it is justified? How can so many ask: Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born Palestinian?

Jesus declares: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” What does this mean? In the gospel of John, the miracles of Jesus are signs: not merely proof that Jesus is “magic,” but actions that reveal who Jesus is and why he has come. As the man born blind regains his sight, religious leaders attempt to obfuscate the facts and discredit Jesus; and it is the man blind from birth who offers clarity of perspective: “one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see... if this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” What enables the man born blind to “see” Jesus more clearly than the so-called spiritual experts?

Martin Luther’s theology of the cross teaches that to find God and the presence of Christ in the world, we should look not to the powerful and privileged but to the places and people of the cross. Like the religious leaders in John’s gospel, our desire for things to make sense, our longing to feel safe and secure, can sometimes lead us astray: so that we side with the powers of this world and fail to recognize the power of God at work on the margins, among the vulnerable and suffering. Luther might caution us against a Christianity that sees Jesus hanging on the cross and asks, “well, did he do something to deserve it?”

The God who “so loved the world” sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it. Jesus’ response to the question of how the man was born blind was not a theological treatise on divine punishment: it was an act of care that healed the man, called him into belonging, and recognized him as a witness to the Gospel. As I return from the Holy Land to the lands and communities of my own synod, I am renewed in my call and pray for wisdom to listen for the cry of the cross, wherever it may be—and to seek and find Jesus there.

PRAYER

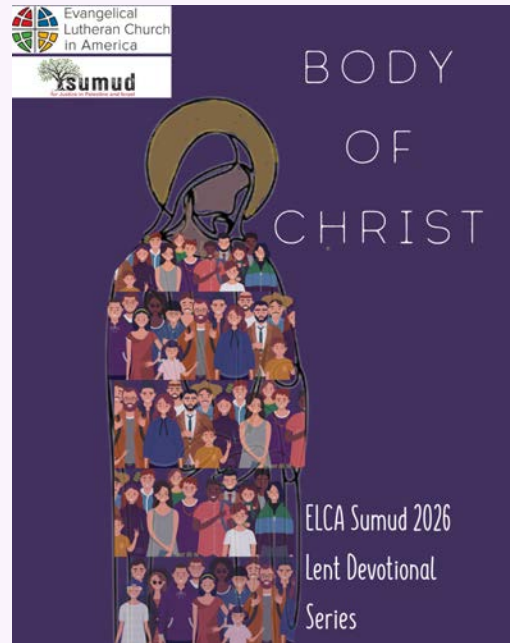
God of justice, your son Jesus revealed to the world a way of love that recognizes your image in all people and treats them with dignity and compassion. Heal the people of Palestine and Israel who are suffering; strengthen the church in the Holy Land as your body of Christ for its neighbors. Help us, wherever we are, to be faithful to the Gospel in our accompaniment and our advocacy: that with your help and by your grace, justice might be restored to all people in this land, and in all lands. Amen.

ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 6: "Breath of Life"

Passage: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Bishop Meggan Manlove of the
Northwest Intermountain Synod



If people know one passage from Ezekiel, it's the Dry Bones passage. It is one of the Easter Vigil salvation history texts, so it is often reflected on, as here, or preached during this liturgical season of Lent. All that is to say: this vivid and layered story has its own rich history of interpretation.

The bones, of course, signify loss of human life but also the loss of a collective identity, ("these bones are the whole house of Israel," v. 11), aspirations for liberation, and the loss of a homeland. As the passage unfolds, as Ezekiel goes on his tour, what we experience as readers is hopelessness and despair. Scholar Michael Chan says the real question is, "Can hope take root and bloom again in the aftermath of such violence and loss?"

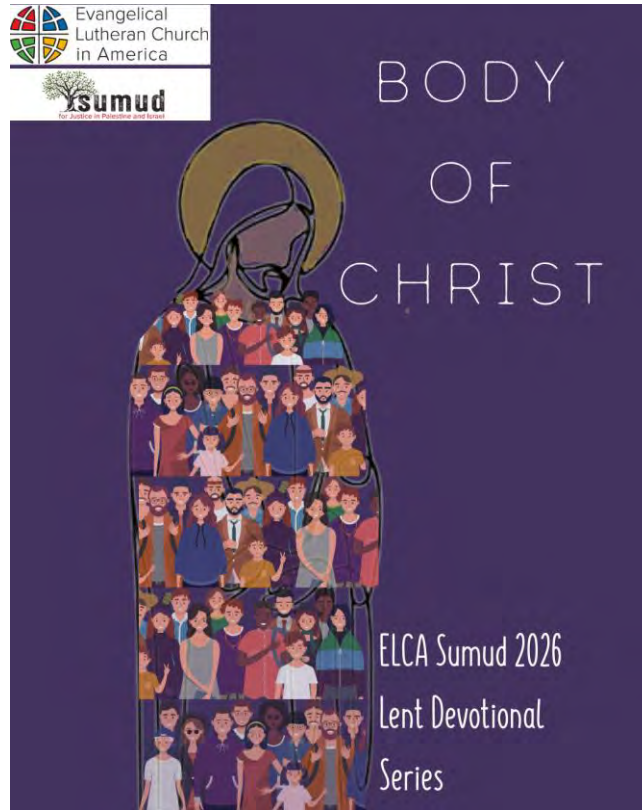
This year, I am bringing to this well-known text to my recent participation in the Bishops Accompaniment trip to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) in January. As prominent as Ezekiel's and the bones' roles are in the story, we might lose sight of the fact that God is the primary actor, and God is doing nothing less than bringing life from death. When I read this text with my former congregations in Iowa and Idaho, I always emphasized the communal character of the story--it is an entire community being resurrected!

Can breath from a global Lutheran church body like the ELCJHL blow through the atmosphere and give life to the rest of the church? If it could, the breath would whisper about six congregations plus schools and other ministries who are giving life to their local communities. The Palestinian Lutheran Christians we met are serving everyone in their

midst in need—school children trying to learn whenever they can get through gates and checkpoints and make it to the classroom, a new diakonia ministry which gives mutual aid and walks with people of all religions and all backgrounds, an environmental learning center banding birds and creatively leading others in water conservation, and of course the congregations themselves equipping people to love boldly and without fear. Bishop Imad told us that the ELCJHL is not there to stay behind closed doors, but to be sent out.

Undergirding this ministry and witness is a language of faith that is ongoing. Under the weight of occupation and oppression, God is both present and talked about. God's Holy Spirit is their breath, their sustenance. Perhaps because I have lived in spaces shaped by agriculture most of my life, I was most attuned to the breath and story of the Tent of Nations, a farm run by the Lutheran Nassar family for 100 years near Bethlehem. Despite incredible documentation of the farm's history, the Israeli government continues to battle with them in court, trying to take the land. Despite this ongoing struggle and encroaching settlements, the Nassars are committed to nonviolent resistance, faith-based community building, and connecting other people to the land. Their faith and hope is palpable—new oxygen, at least for me.

Might this breath somehow give new life to the church in the United States? Can these bones of our church live? I echo the prophet Ezekiel, "O Lord God, you know." Only God knows. Only God can bring life from dry bones. But my imagination and vision were helped by our trip to the ELCJHL and the words and witness of those we met, just as my imagination is helped when I visit congregations in the Northwest Intermountain Synod who are boldly walking in solidarity with their neighbors, guided by Jesus's command to love.



In ELCA Sumud’s 2026 Lenten series, “Body of Christ”, we are invited to reflect on Paul’s proclamation that “we who are many are one body in Christ” (1 Corinthians 12). In the body of Christ, no member can be dismissed or deemed expendable. This series lifts up especially Palestinian Christians as an inseparable and equal part of the Body of Christ, whose witness and oppression demand our attention and solidarity. Through prayer, scripture, and devotionals, we will explore how each member of Christ’s body has distinct gifts and responsibilities, yet is bound together in mutual care, accountability, and love. ELCA Sumud was honored to accompany the 2026 Bishops Solidarity delegation, and throughout this series you will hear reflections from ELCA Bishops on their experience in accompaniment, conversation, and relationship with our partners and siblings in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. In a time of profound injustice and violence in Palestine, this series calls the church to repentance from indifference, to listening across borders, and to faithful action, trusting that when one part of the body suffers, all suffer together. God calls upon the whole body of Christ to work together for justice, dignity, and peace.

This series of six devotionals will be available FEBRUARY 1 on the ELCA Sumud webpage.