

Living in God's Amazing Grace



**A devotional guide for use by educators
in Lutheran settings**

2005–2006

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ELCA Interim Director for Schools

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Dear Partners in Ministry,

The Schools and Early Childhood Education Team of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is once again pleased to present this annual devotion guide to your school or center. As we all know, adults working in ELCA schools and centers are life-long learners. They share the ability to learn with the children and youth that they teach each day. This devotion guide will help to strengthen their faith and to be prepared to share that faith with their students. It will provide opportunity to come together for a time of reflection, prayer, and celebration before heading to the classroom each week.

The theme for the 2005-2006 devotion guide is *Living in God's Amazing Grace*. This was the theme used for Lutheran Schools Week and is the new tagline for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We ask that you widely use this guide in your school or center and in your congregation. It is valuable for staff devotions, opening board or congregation meetings, and for personal reflection.

We offer a special thank you to all who took time in their busy schedules to contribute devotions for use in our devotion guide. Your insights and reflections on the gospel are an inspiration for all. Thanks to Augsburg Fortress Publishers and those who contributed to making this resource a reality; Adrienne Ross, Patty Schultz, editor Connie Sletto, and designers Vandita Nayar and Sharon Klestil. Finally, we must thank our church for their commitment to ELCA schools and early childhood learning centers. Without their support this resource would not have been possible

May living in God's amazing grace bring peace and blessings to your life and to the lives of the children and youth you reach out to each day.

Donna R. Braband

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ELCA Interim Director for Schools

August 14, 2005 – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” (v. 22)

What parent at one time or another has not spoken some variation of that prayer? What mother or father has not pleaded with the Lord to heal a child of some malady? The demon might be a physical illness, a psychological ailment, an addiction, but is more likely one of the multiple everyday vices that plague us all: laziness, rudeness, inattention, anger, or selfishness.

Teachers often serve as the Lord’s surrogates—as the presence of Christ in the world. “Help me with my child,” is the parent’s prayer—often unspoken. Help make my child whole. Free her from her chains. Teach him to be a person of character, someone who loves God and neighbor. See that she reaches her full potential.

Lutheran teachers are called to convey not only the basics of reading and math, but also the fundamentals of life. And sometimes those lessons involve freeing children from their demons. It is work you dare not—and need not—do alone. For if Jesus calls you to serve as his heart and hands to students, he will surely give you the wherewithal to do it.

Think of a child who needs freedom from a demon. Call on the Lord to help you carry out that liberating work. Ask for the wisdom, guidance, and strength to be successful. And finally, trust in the Lord. Know that the Spirit will provide. Hear the Lord give to you the answer he gave the pleading mother: “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Question for the Week:

What child in your class needs to be freed from a demon?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for the child, and pray for the capacity to be an instrument of the Lord’s liberating work.

This devotion was contributed by Joe McTighe, executive director of the Council for American Private Education (CAPE).

August 21, 2005 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Romans 12:1-8

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us”.
(vs. 5-6a)

Within our text is that familiar list of grace given-gifts. Most of us, being educators, identify with the gift of teaching as being our personal calling. Consider, however, that no matter how great our primary calling and gifting in education, it does not preclude having additional gifts that we are also called upon to demonstrate. Do we focus only on teaching and refuse to minister, encourage, give to others, lead, or show mercy? Of course not. In our individual settings we use all of these gifts to a greater or lesser extent every day. Our challenges are to also recognize our secondary gifts, discover that others also have grace-given gifts, appreciate that there is overlap within our settings where each of us demonstrates our gifts and celebrate that, as members one of another, we belong to each other. Belonging to each other in God’s amazing grace leads us to supporting each other in our gifts, operating as team ministries with varied roles. We are not jealous of each other. Instead, the diversity within our unity allows our gifts to complement the gifts of others, creating a sum that is greater and more effective in ministry than its individual parts. We are empowered to “grace” others through God’s free and spontaneous love for us.

Identify your grace-given gifts. Identify the “secondary” grace-given gifts you also use every day. Share within your team the gifts you see and celebrate in your co-workers.

Question for the Week:

Using your individual and corporate grace-given gifts, how can you most effectively and efficiently “grace” others in Jesus’ name?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that your gifts and the gifts of your colleagues will be blessed with exposure, opportunity, and seamless complementary cooperation.

This devotion was contributed by Alan Feddersen, director of Lutheran Schools for Southern California and Hawaii, Glendale, California.

August 28, 2005 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Matthew 16:21-28

Doesn't the lectionary sometimes play delightful tricks on us? If someone had planned it this way we'd accuse them of being overly melodramatic, but here we are, only several months following the death and funeral mass of Pope John Paul II, and today we have before us the Matthean text which our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters point to as the foundation of the papacy and which we Lutherans point to as, as, well, think about it a bit, as, what? Hey, how do we non-papal Christians hear this promise of our Lord?

Luther's insistence was that the form of the church be shaped by the needs and demands of the church's function, to proclaim faith in the gospel, the good news that in Christ's death and resurrection God's new creation is upon us and within us and among us and around us and before us.

Perhaps what we do today is as simple as reasserting what the papacy was intended to be all along, what the popes of the Middle Ages forgot because of lust and greed, what the reformers of the Middle Ages forgot because of anger, what we have all forgotten. Perhaps it is as simple as saying it doesn't matter what form or structure the church has as long as that entire form and structure submits itself to the authority of Christ, subjects itself to the demands of the gospel before all else, lifts up before the world not the church itself, but Christ. John Paul II, the late bishop of Rome, spent his life and his ministry doing just that.

Don't forget, this pope is the one who worked doggedly to overcome the schisms and divisions between his church and so many others, including, you guessed it, Lutherans. Think of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" that Lutheran and Roman Catholics signed in Augsburg, Germany in 1999 (could you have found a more meaningful venue, I ask?) This is the man who nailed the forgiveness thing right on the head when he went to the prison cell of the man who had tried to assassinate him, and prayed with him for God's forgiveness.

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This is the man who wrote a brilliant devotion on the Easter mystery: “Rejoice in this paschal season at Christ the Lord’s victory over death. The victory of life, the victory of good over evil. It is from this Christian certainty of the victory over every fear of death that your march toward a more just and more human future should take its steps: a future of liberty for God’s children.” Hey, we Lutheran-Christians could do a lot worse than that.

Question for the Week:

How will you hear the promise of the Lord and share that promise with your students?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Lord Jesus, brave witness of God’s grace confronted by a world that destroys grace without hardly breaking a sweat, you set your face toward Jerusalem and did not stop until the world was renewed. In every generation you raise up people of faith whose lives make the same witness. Grant to us today the strength to set our faces toward that future to which you call us, that future in which the world’s renewal is completed in God’s amazing grace. Amen.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Robert Braband, senior pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Lombard, Illinois.

September 4, 2005 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Psalm 149:1

Have you ever had a song in your head that you couldn't get rid of no matter how hard you tried? If you have ever gone through a day with the likes of the Kit-Kat jingle ("Gimme a break"), "Who Let the Dogs Out," Queen's "We Will Rock You," the theme to "Mission: Impossible," "YMCA," "Whoomp, There It Is," "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" or "It's a Small World After All," you know what I mean. It seems the only way to get rid of the "curse" of the repeating song in your head is to pass it along to someone else. Although it is somewhat sinister, it is also fairly satisfying to hear someone else whistling or humming the song that has been tormenting you for five hours straight.

From now on, when I get a song stuck in my head, in between the repeating lyrics, I am going to think of Psalm 149:1. We are told to sing a new song unto the Lord. So many times, we get stuck in a cycle of doing the same things over and over again. Unfortunately, many of them are not the things that bring glory to the Lord. We recycle sins, committing them over and over like a bad song in our head. Fortunately, we have the love of Jesus that helps us change our songs. It should be our goal to discover the song of the Lord each new day. When we reach out to God, we are always heard. I am sure that God doesn't want to hear our old, sinful songs repeating time after time. We are so lucky that God allows us to change course along the way. I will sing unto the Lord a new song. We are so lucky to have a God who loves us and shows it everyday. I can imagine God's repeating song is: "I want my baby back, baby back, baby back..."

Sorry if that song is now in your head. As you attempt to pass it along to an unsuspecting person today, also pass along the good news we have in Jesus Christ and his abundant love.

Question for the Week:

What will you stop repeating in your classroom this week?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for Lutheran teachers around the world who provide Lutheran education in uncertain times.

This devotion was contributed by Jake Morrow, principal of St. John Lutheran School, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

September 11, 2005 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Romans 14:1-12

Islamic and Christian students are seated together in the same classroom learning about their respective faiths in religion class. Muslim parents, whose children constituted almost one-half of the enrollment in a particular Lutheran school, tell me that they chose this school because of the **Christian values** taught and modeled in the school. This is what I recently experienced while consulting with the schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land. In today's lesson, the apostle Paul writes: "*Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions*"(v. 1) and "*Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?*". (v. 4)

Four years ago we experienced a national tragedy that caused many in our country to pass judgment on those of the Islamic faith because of fringe elements within that faith. Therefore, what an uplifting sight it was for me to witness the respect and dialogue that is occurring among our Lutheran students and parents and their Muslim counterparts in the Holy Land. And, it is the absence of judgment that actually brings our Islamic brothers and sisters into our Lutheran schools!

Teaching and living out God's unconditional love of all of God's children may be the most important lesson we teach our students. It is certainly evidence of God's amazing grace present within Lutheran education.

Question for the Week:

How do we model on a daily basis God's unconditional love and acceptance of all children and families?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for peace in the Holy Land and that all knees may bow to our living Lord.

This devotion was contributed by Dr. Rod Schofield, chair of the ELCA Division for Higher Education and Schools board.

September 18, 2005 - Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Matthew 20:1-16

Someone once compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. "The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth. But the closer we get to one another, the more likely we are to feel the pain of another's barbs. And in the lonely night of the earth's winter, eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and risk freezing to death in our loneliness."

But here, in the community that bears the name of the Christ, in this body that is bound to Christ by faith, and to one another by love, we are called *to give up envy for Jesus' generosity*. And the way that happens is through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. As beneficiaries of the second birth of baptism, we are to hold this as our core belief: that the kingdom of Abba is the greatest gift there is. Furthermore, the kingdom of heaven is intended for all – regardless of deservingness or merit.

Christianity, in other words, is first about grace, about God's loving concern for all. Truth is, it's hard for us to focus ourselves properly because we live in a country that wants it to be unconstitutional to burn a flag but would not think of making it unconstitutional to be hungry or homeless or out of work. We live in a culture that puts our psyches under constant siege—analyst probings, political campaigns, and advertising blitzes. We abide in a world where terror's "other shoe" is poised to drop anytime. We live in a therapeutic haze that has elevated self-awareness into a religion.

Yet this is what the reign of God is like—to be more conscious of God than of ourselves. A Tao commentary says that, in the world of perfect peace, people do right but do not know it is called justice, are kind to one another but do not call it charity, are proper and do not call it honesty, look to one another for help but do not call it a favor.

That is not a world we might build if we only got our corporate act together. It is, in fact, our present world – whenever we let God be God, whenever we let God be as generous to everyone else as God is generous to us. God leads us into a life that is shaped in the death and resurrection of Christ begun in Baptism, strengthened and renewed in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, nurtured within the community of faith, the church, then sent out into the world to change the world with grace and charity.

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God in Christ does not operate according to our concept of “fairness,” or “logic,” or “paying our dues,” and neither should we. Many centuries ago St. John Chrysostom preached on this Gospel text. In one of the most ancient Christian sermons known, he said: “Why is it that the householder seemed to give the workers, regardless of their labors, all exactly the same reward? It is because God has only one reward to give, a reward that has no measure in money or hours or days or years, and that reward is God himself.” We now stand within that same reward. Praise be to the God of love whose reward is that love which saves all humankind and renews all creation.

The hungry will find hope, the homeless will find shelter, those imprisoned unjustly will be lifted up, those who mourn will be graced with hope, those who are spiritual wanderers will hear an invitation to come and be rooted in Word and Sacrament, dignity and justice will be raised up. They will, right?

Question for the Week:

What will you do to encourage your students and yourself to advocate for peace and justice for the children of the world?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Open hearts, dear Lord, beginning with my heart, to the power of your generosity, to the strength of your grace, to the wisdom of your soul, to the faithfulness of your heart. Do not cease, dear Lord, until you have conquered all envy and selfishness within me and in all who dwell on earth. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Donna Braband, interim director for schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

September 25, 2005 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Exodus 17:1-7

I'm Thirsty.

Is there any parent who often only a few minutes after tucking a small child into bed for the night has not heard, "Mommy/Daddy, I'm thirsty"? Sometimes in spite of one's good parenting skills it becomes a pattern. The child cries, "I'm thirsty!"

Creative interventions or just maturity soon leads to a change in this behavior. However, at another level every child (and those who teach them) utters the cry, "I'm thirsty." Sometimes the cries are verbal; more often they are non-verbal.

There is within the soul of each of our students the spoken or unspoken "I'm thirsty." I'm thirsty for attention, for love, for friendship, for acceptance, for learning. Sensitive teachers discern the cries and attempt to provide the water to nourish the thirsty soul.

In today's text the cry reaches the ears of God. God had plenty of reasons to ignore the cry. Yet God responded. And God used Moses to play an important role in quenching the thirst of God's people.

Teachers, administrators, and care providers are still used by God to provide for the thirsts of those in their care. Jesus, who himself uttered "I thirst" has become the water of life. Jesus still provides the best possible response to children of all ages who lament, "I'm thirsty."

Question for the Week:

What are three things for which the children in your school are thirsting?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Teachers thirst, too. Have staff members list things for which they are thirsting. Pray for these matters.

This devotion was contributed by Mel Kieschnick. He has spent more than 40 years serving Lutheran schools nationally and internationally. Now retired and living in Carlsbad, California, he serves on behalf of Wheat Ridge Ministries.

October 2, 2005 – Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

According to Webster the word commandment means, “a law or order.” Why then do so many people treat the commandments as if they were simply guidelines or suggestions?

In Exodus, we are told that just before God gave the commandments to Moses, God spoke and said, “*I am the LORD your God.*” (v. 2) Ten laws have been given to all of us to obey and follow. The first three commandments deal with our relationship to God and the other seven commandments deal with our relationship with one another. If we were to truly obey the commandments, God’s kingdom would be a peaceable kingdom for everyone.

We teach the commandments to our students and expect them to love and obey the Lord by following each commandment. Yet there are times we all fall short. It is easy to pride ourselves on the fact that we never killed anyone or stole anything. But are we always so proud when we lose our patience with a trying child, talk about a particular family, or long for something that someone else has? What kind of examples are we showing our students in our daily life?

Teaching young people to obey God’s law is a huge responsibility, and a very important one. It is the responsibility of everyone our students come in contact with during their growing years to set a good example for them. This is the first step in helping our young people recognize the importance of obeying God’s commandments.

Martin Luther tells us that we are to follow these commandments and not disobey God. We are reminded by Luther that, “God promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore we are to love and trust God and gladly do what God commands.”

Question for the Week:

What things do you do that set good examples for your students?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that all may learn to love, obey, and trust in the Lord.

This devotion was contributed by Janet Greenleaf, member of the ELCA Division for Higher Education and Schools board and retired principal of Lehigh Valley Lutheran School in Whitehall, Pennsylvania.

October 9, 2005 – Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Philippians 4:1-9

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” (v. 8-9)

This litany of achievement goals reads like the character assessment section of a report card. But Paul reminds his beloved disciples that they are to continue doing everything they learned, received, heard, and saw in him—their teacher. Too often adults in positions of leadership forget that the most valuable lessons taught and learned are those traits observed in their own behavior every day. An administrator who is truthful, honorable, and just in dealings with staff will surely inspire that same staff with a desire to “go and do likewise.” Teachers who present themselves and their teachings in smiling, pleasing ways are remembered by their students and commended by their peers. Food preparation and building staff appreciate that the work they do is “worthy of praise.”

Perhaps Paul’s “things that we are to keep doing” should be posted in every office and classroom in our school to remind us how to receive straight A’s on our “report cards.”

Question for the Week:

What do you do to earn straight A’s on your “report card”?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that those around us may see the love of Jesus in our lives.

This devotion was contributed by Marjorie Myers, diaconal minister, ELCA and founding teacher in 1957 of St. John’s Christian Day School, Baltimore, Maryland, where she is currently teaching religion and serves as a congregational worship leader.

October 16, 2005 – Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Matthew 22:15-22

Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (v.21)

The Pharisees, failing to trap Jesus with a no-win question, were amazed with Jesus' response. Jesus' answer gives us a guideline with our responsibilities as citizens and as disciples. There are things that we must render to our country and things that we must render to God.

As God's servants, we should recognize and respect those who are appointed by God to watch over our country. By being good citizens, we ought to pay our taxes, which was the point of Jesus in our text. Paul also taught us to pay taxes (Romans 13:6-7a). We also ought to obey the laws as the text tells us in Romans 13:1-5, and to give thanks and pray for our leaders (2 Timothy 2:1-2).

Our duty to God is to follow what Jesus said, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). If we love God, then we will keep the commandments and we will always make God our first priority. "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Our duty as teachers and church leaders is to set an example to the young children entrusted to our care by showing our love to our country, the gift that God has given us. Let's be sure that our days are filled with praying, witnessing, evangelizing, serving, sharing, loving, and caring as we model Christ's life and lifestyle here on earth.

Question for the Week:

How do you honor those whom God has placed over you, in work and in government?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Let's pray for one another that we would be faithful in all things. Remember in your prayers our president and our country leaders that they may be filled with faith and wisdom as they lead God's people.

This devotion was contributed by Ghada Huleis, principal, Salem Lutheran School, Glendale, California, and board member for Lutheran Schools of Southern California and Hawaii.

October 23, 2005 – Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. (v. 8)

Paul indicates his commitment and love for the people to whom he spoke good news. This love was shown not only in the words that were spoken but also in how he and his associates shared themselves with the people. Paul was forced to leave the city for speaking the good news. Paul risked his life for the good news of God's graciousness for humankind.

There are many who give of themselves and risk their lives so that the gospel can be heard and experienced. I can remember hearing part of the life story of my one of my high school French teachers. She was raised in a Christian household in occupied Belgium during World War II although she was Jewish. The family had found her wandering the streets as a toddler and they rushed to take her into their home before the Nazis saw her to take her away. They raised her as part of their family at great risk of their own lives as well as hers. Their commitment to and care for the toddler went to the point of helping her to become knowledgeable about her own religious tradition as best they could in those occupied years.

Like Paul and that Christian family, those who are in the teaching ministry have the opportunity to demonstrate the love, care, and commitment to the gospel not only in the subjects they teach but in the care, attentiveness, and love for those students, young and old, who are entrusted to us by God.

Question for the Week:

Who are some of the people who demonstrated the love of sharing the good news of Jesus in their lives through their encounters with others?

Who would you consider a risk-taker for the gospel from your readings or experience?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Dear God, help us to remember to share the good news of your son Jesus not only in the words we read and the subjects we teach, but also in the love and concern we share with our students.

This devotion was contributed by Nelson T. Strobert, professor of Religious Education, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg; member of ELCA Division for Higher Education and Schools board.

October 30, 2005 –Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the week: Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples. “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.... The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (v. 1-3; 11-12)

Amazing! How contemporary is God’s word to us. As a teacher and director of early childhood education, the admonishment to “practice what we preach”, is not infrequently a necessary reminder. I overheard a young eight-year-old’s recent admonishment to his mom, “I am going to make you a chart, Mom, and when you remember to be patient with me about my piano practicing, I’ll give you a sticker!” Knowing this family very well, I know this mom is praying for patience as appropriate, just as we all need to seek wisdom and God’s presence in our behaviors and conversations.

How consistently do I follow the guidelines set out for me in the scriptures? Frequently, the word humility is prefaced with the adverb, “simple.” But the desire for honor and respect is hard to contain. I find it fascinating that the guidance recommended to teachers regarding the use of praise is so reflective of the Matthew text. Kathleen Grey, early childhood educator, writes: “Praise is external validation from someone designed to reinforce appropriate behavior. Encouragement is respectful and reflective communication that enhances self-esteem by placing the valuing of experience in the child’s hands.” Just so, Jesus admonishes us, “the greatest among you will be your servant.”

Question for the Week:

How may we seek to do what is respectful and loving to children, their parents, and our colleagues?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Lord, help me to practice Jesus’ example of humility and commitment to loving all whom we encounter.

This devotion was contributed by Marilyn A. Stalheim, director of Westwood Early Childhood Center, St. Louis Park, Minnesota.

November 1, 2005 – All Saints Day
Thought for the Week: 1 John 3:1-3

At a recent chapel service conducted by our kindergarten class, the students proclaimed to all of us, in great pomp and circumstance, what they were planning to be when they grow up. One child wanted to be a teacher, while another wanted to be a paleontologist and believe it or not, one even wanted to be a principal!

Most educators find themselves speculating on what they think their students will do when they leave school and go out into the “real world.” I have been caught up in the excitement myself when a former student comes back to visit and tells me what he or she has been up to.

Our thought for the week tells us that we are children of God, but what we will be has not yet been made known. Our future on this earth is unknown. We don't know what trials and tribulations or joys and triumphs await us, or our students, but we do know that as God's children, our future is bright and secure! What joy will be ours when Christ returns and “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” This hope we have in Jesus is not a mere wish but an unshakeable confidence about the future.

Question for the Week:

What concerns do you have for the future? Give them up to God in prayer.

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that God would continue to protect all of our students and we would continue to put all of our hope and trust in God.

This devotion was contributed by Tom Edelen, principal of First Lutheran School, Los Angeles, California.

November 6, 2005 – Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Matthew 25:1-13

There is a wonderful story about the Dalai Lama being approached by a student. The student asks, “Are you the Buddha?” The Dalai Lama says, “No, I am not the Buddha.” “Are you God?” the student asks. “No, I’m not God,” the Dalai Lama answers. “Well, what are you?” asks the young man. “I am awake,” his Holiness proclaims. “I am awake.”

Our lessons for today also point to the concept of being awake, especially Jesus’ story of the young women and their oil lamps. Both the Dalai Lama and Jesus are talking about wakefulness in the spiritual and emotional sense: being completely open and available to the empowering presence of God as God can be experienced both in our relationships and within ourselves.

At this stage of my life, I would venture the opinion that true meaning and happiness are totally dependent on *being awake*, and on our willingness to pay the price to be awake. The invitation and challenge is to be connected to our hearts and to each other, and to the God who invites us to meet God in the depths of our hearts. Most of us spend our lives running away from this truth. We don’t intend to, but we have been conditioned to believe that meaning and reality and peace of mind are all outside of us—out there in the world of striving and material success. We usually learn the hard way that this is not the path to joy and true life—that they are actually within us waiting to be discovered and rediscovered. To accept this is to go against the grain of our culture. Our students can’t help but believe that they need to prove their value every day—that it is their grades, their social groups, the colleges where they are admitted, etc., that define them. Just as it is our job to challenge our students to do their very best, we are also called to remind them, by our words and actions, that their worth is a free gift from a loving God who accepts them simply because they exist. Imagine the difference between a life lived in constant search for acceptance, and a life grounded in the deep conviction that we are creatures of the highest value created in God’s image.

Question for the Week:

How are you demonstrating to your students their inherent beauty and worth as children of God?

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Personal Prayer for the Week:

Oh God, open our eyes and hearts to behold your deep and abiding love, both in ourselves and in those we love and serve. Free us from inner doubts about ourselves so that we may dedicate ourselves to our vocations and relationships in joy and peace.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Peter G. Cheney, executive director of the National Association of Episcopal Schools, an organization serving over 500 schools and their leaders throughout the Episcopal Church USA.

November 13, 2005 – Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Psalm 76

“You indeed are awesome! ...to save all the oppressed of the earth”. (v. 7, 9b)

The abuse of power is something that really annoys our sense of justice. We condemn dictators, we are shocked by domestic violence and sexual abuse, and are agitated whenever we see someone with responsibility using authority to belittle, taunt, hurt, or destroy. We judge people by how they handle power and responsibility.

Our God is awesome with power greater than any country or any weapon of mass destruction, and it is power that our God uses to save those who do not place their confidence in their own strength. It is power that is used in the interest of the oppressed, the little ones, and the disempowered.

At times the power of sin, death, and evil seems to surround us everywhere, leaving us feeling helpless, despairing, and disempowered. However, the God who demonstrated awesome power on the cross through Christ to overcome the devil, death, and suffering comes daily to each one of us—especially when we are at our weakest, most vulnerable, or most depressed. Through the power of our baptism we daily experience the power of this amazing God.

God uses us in our ministry with children and young people to bring this power and grace to others so that they, too, experience this love. Whenever we reach out in love to the lonely, the unlovable, the hurting, the despairing we bring to them the love of the awesome God. Those who work in Lutheran schools have this privilege.

Question for the Week:

Think of those people in the school community this week who are really feeling the effects of sin, death, and evil. How is the awesome God using you to speak to them?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for the oppressed and suffering in your community this week that they may experience the saving power of our awesome God.

This devotion was contributed by Adrienne Jericho, executive director, Lutheran Education Australia.

November 20, 2005 – Christ the King/Reign of Christ
Thought for the Week: Ezekiel 34:15-16

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured... (v. 15-16)

I grew up as a refugee in Jerusalem. My family had lost its land and home in the 1948 Palestinian-Israeli war, and the church allowed us to live in a room inside the convent in the middle of the Christian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Lutheran school became a second home for me and the teachers cared for me like good shepherds care for their sheep. Because of their support and guidance, I became a pastor, and then a Bishop, of the Lutheran Church in the Holy Land.

The teachers were following in the footsteps of Christ our King. Our King is not an earthly king of power and might, but a Shepherd King of love and healing who leads us with the power of love away from the love of power.

As Christian teachers and leaders in the Holy Land, we shepherd and shape the young ones in our care to follow the Good Shepherd and treat all people with respect and dignity. In our land which is so filled with violence and conflict, we are called to be shepherds of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace, leading one another toward a better future for our children.

Question for the Week:

As a shepherd of your students, what are you leading them toward?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

We pray that the Good Shepherd leads and guides us in paths of wisdom and grace so that we can lead our students to faithful and abundant lives.

This devotion was contributed by Bishop Dr. Munib Younan, shepherd of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. The loving support he received from the Lutheran church and schools in Palestine shaped his Christian identity and now inspires him to make the ELCJHL a source of hope, reconciliation, justice and peace for all.

November 27, 2005 – First Sunday in Advent
Thought for the Week: Isaiah 64:1-9

“Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (v. 8)

Have you ever watched a potter at work? The artist uncomfortably hunches over a flat circular disc throwing a mound of wet clay in the center of her potter’s wheel. As the circle begins to spin, she delicately touches her thumb to the center of the clay, signaling the beginning of a new piece of work. After insuring a meticulous foundation, our artist appears to be dancing; she moves her body in circular motions and in speeds that mimic those of the wheel. Gradually, the piece takes on strength, structure, and form. Something beautiful from a lump of mud takes shape before our eyes! She controls the speed of the wheel, careful to keep her clay moist so that it is easily managed. At last the whirring motor of the potter’s wheel falls silent. The potter beams with pleasure, admiring the design.

Having performed the miracle of life, God steps away from the potter’s wheel and relinquishes the right of training to the educator. God trusts us to prepare God’s children with a solid foundation that will help them grow into Christ-centered, productive, happy adults. As teachers, we can directly influence the appearance of the finished piece of art.

God chose you as a partner. As God’s partner it is your special job to shape, nurture and detail the precious lives of the children you lead.

Question for the Week:

- God has given you control of the potter’s wheel. Do you ever feel like the wheel is going too fast? How would you help a student or child that needs to slow down?
- Share an experience when you partnered with God to shape a young person’s life. What are the results of your work?
- Why do you think God is portrayed as a potter?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Lord, grant us the patience to understand every piece of “clay” entrusted to our care. Help us explore character strengths and weaknesses and to build nurturing faith foundations in all children. Guide our hands so that they guide children to their greatest potential.

This devotion was contributed by Susan Wallisa Venskus, director of The Learning Center at Living Word Lutheran Church, Katy, Texas.

December 4, 2005 – Second Sunday in Advent
Thought for the Week: Mark 1:1 8

John the Baptist was a strange-looking guy. If you saw him in a parking lot, you might tell your children to run from him. His clothes were ragged and unconventional. His pocket was full of locusts, his favorite snack. And wild honey smears were down the front of his camel hair coat. He was a preacher, a loud and boisterous one. He delivered his message in the countryside, otherwise the good citizens might have asked to have him hauled in for disturbing the peace. Which, in fact, he did.

John disturbed the peace of his day, the complacency that had lulled faithful people into a kind of numbed spiritual slumber. John wanted to wake them up. Important news was breaking. God was coming among them. They needed to be prepared. He called them to repent and to be baptized, so that they could be open to God's redeeming love. He pointed to one beyond himself who would baptize with God's Holy Spirit. Changes were coming; things would not be the same. Jesus was on their doorsteps.

Change is hard for most of us. Changing from one grade to another isn't easy, especially when a favorite teacher is left behind. Parents struggle to let their children grow up. Change and challenge are all around. People didn't run from John the Baptist; they ran toward him to hear his message. It was about a change that they could embrace. Jesus was beginning to make all things new.

Question for the Week:

What would students say is something in their lives that needs to change and how might Jesus be part of that change?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that with the urgency and expectancy of those who heard John, you might open your life to the good news of Jesus.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Galen Hora, interim co-director for ELCA Campus Ministry.

December 11, 2005 – Third Sunday in Advent
Thought for the Week: John 1:6-8, 19-28

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” (vs. 6-7)

What a way to introduce a person! No fanfare. No pretense. He was just a common person who lived in the wilderness (a homeless person) and had a common name (John). Yet a man called by God to carry out a tremendously important task. He was to make people ready to recognize, receive, and listen to the coming Messiah.

People had certain expectations of the long-awaited Messiah. To the undiscerning eye, Jesus showed none of the characteristics that they expected to see in a Messiah.

Without John, people would have had little reason to pay special attention to Jesus when he arrived. However, with John laying the groundwork, many of *his* listeners were prepped and made ready to learn more from *Jesus* and to follow him.

Like John, we, as teachers, are perceived by many to be “common folk.” But, like John, we are called by God and sent by God to prepare people (through our Lutheran education settings) to open their hearts to receive God’s message of love and hope. Without us, God’s message might not be told in a way that prepares students to want to hear and learn more about it. Though we may not see immediate results, and though students and their families may not join our congregation, we can be confident that our efforts on a daily basis *will* make a difference in many people’s lives. At a given point in their lives, they will come to recognize, love, and follow Jesus based on the spiritual groundwork we lay now. God will bless our efforts and bless our students through us.

Question for the Week:

Do you feel unappreciated as a teacher in a Lutheran school or early childhood education center and think you might serve a higher purpose in life somewhere else or doing something else?

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Personal Prayer for the Week:

Bless all teachers in our Lutheran schools and early childhood education settings and fill us with a sense of calling. Help us remember that yours is the power and the glory, and that we are your instruments to bring others to hear, love, and serve You.

This devotion was contributed by Billie Navarro, who served as ELCA director for schools from 1988–1995, is a retired associate in ministry, living in Galveston, Texas.

December 18, 2005 – Fourth Sunday in Advent
Thought for the Week: Luke 1:26-38

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. (v. 38)

God's plan in your life and in your ministry of teaching are strengthened and nurtured in your faith as a Christian. We continually use our faith as a witness to those around us. As teachers we can always expect the unexpected, especially in the lower elementary grades. In our study of Martin Luther, I asked for a definition of faith. One student responded, "Believing in something you know isn't true."

What a wonderful opportunity to use my faith as a witness to my young students. Our mission statement at St. Paul's Lutheran School is "Committed to providing quality education in an environment where Christian faith is taught, learned, and lived." I am able to share with my students that faith is a growing Christian experience where we discover the new truth in our lives. It is by God's grace that we are forgiven and can faithfully follow God's Word and start believing in something we know is true.

What if Mary had said, "No!" to the angel? Jesus wants us to believe what his word says, and then we will see. When we believe, great things begin to happen. Like Mary, I accept this invitation to walk with God and use what God has given me to share my faith with others. It may take only one angel (student) to "ground" us, but God listens and extraordinary things begin to happen.

Question for the Week:

During Advent we pause to check our faith and prepare ourselves for the final coming. God sometimes makes miracles using ordinary people and events. How is God using you?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

God of miracles, open my eyes to see your hand in everyday situations.
Help me bring good news to those who need your love. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Lynn Brown, sixth grade teacher at St. Paul's Lutheran School, Waverly, Iowa.

December 25, 2005 – Christmas Day
Thought for the Week: Luke 2:8-20

On a grassy knoll outside of Bethlehem, a lamb named Max lay dreaming while his shepherds watched the rest of the flock. Max was dreaming about the sweet pasture grass of the knoll and how his shepherds were always there for the flock. They made sure the flock had everything they needed. Max knew that he would never be lost or hungry as long as the shepherds were watching. He knew that they would protect the sheep and lambs from eating poisonous weeds. Water that flowed swiftly down the mountain streams made gurgling, bubbling sounds that were frightening beyond belief to the sheep. The shepherds would take sticks and make a little dam to create a pool of still water from which their sheep could drink. What a relief!

While happily dreaming about tomorrow, Max was awakened by a great light. His shepherds looked scared as they stood in the light. Max began to shake as well. The light revealed an angel of the Lord telling the shepherds the Messiah for whom they had been waiting was born in Bethlehem that very night. Max watched as the shepherds' fear turned from fear to excitement and he began to anticipate this precious birth. As Max continued to watch the angels the sky became filled with a heavenly host singing praises to the newborn king. Immediately the shepherds gathered the lambs and sheep and headed for Bethlehem. Because Max trusted and had confidence in his shepherds he followed with anticipation to Bethlehem. There in the manger he saw the Christ child.

As teachers we are the shepherds that our little lambs trust and follow. We build a level of confidence with them that allows us to follow the Christ child together. We give them the excitement and love they need to take them with us to the baby in the manger. Through us and with us our children will experience the wonder of the gift of God's Son. It's always been that way.

Question for the Week:

How will you instill the trust and confidence your little lambs need to follow you to the manger?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

This week remember in prayer all of the children whose lives have not lead them to the manger.

This devotion was contributed by Donna R. Braband, interim director for schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

January 1, 2006 – First Sunday After Christmas
Thought for the Week: Galatians 4:4-7

Just another Christmas? No way!!

Are you still in recovery from another hectic Christmas? Were your “*fa-la-las*” sounding more like “*bah – humbugs*” than ever before? Was your New Year’s celebration lacking in enthusiasm? Do these holidays seem to come and go more quickly each year? If so, a quick visit to the Scripture lessons for the first Sunday after Christmas may be just the boost you need...

The Scripture writers can hardly contain themselves...

- “I will not keep silent,” says Isaiah “I will not rest until her vindication shines out like the dawn!” (Isaiah 62:1)
- The Psalmist calls on all creation to praise the Lord. Praise him angels! Praise him sun, moon, and stars! Praise him fish and animals and birds and kings and persons young and old, he cries! (Psalm 148)
- Simeon, upon seeing for himself the Christ child, responds joyfully “My eyes have seen your salvation!” (Luke 2:30)

They are responding to God’s amazing grace. The message is just as new and amazing today. We have life because of God’s amazing grace. God sent the Son! We are no longer slaves! Christ has made us God’s own! It’s Christmas Day every day! January, 2006 is the start of a new 365-day adventure into the experience of God’s amazing grace. Wow!

Make each day of 2006 a day to praise God for God’s amazing grace. Make your classroom or workplace an amazing grace place. Tell the story to someone new each day. It’s a new year! Christ is born! God continues to say “Yes! Yes! Yes!!”

Question for the Week:

With whom will you share your excitement about living in God’s amazing grace today?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Praise God this week for the gift of the Christ Child and for the gift of energy and enthusiasm to share the story of God’s amazing grace with a new person each and every day.

This devotion was contributed by Richard Herman, vice-president of Wheat Ridge Ministries, an international ministry dedicated to seeding new ministries of health and hope, in the name of the healing Christ.

January 6, 2006 – The Epiphany of Our Lord
Thought for the Week: Matthew 2:1-12

“Go and search diligently for the child.” (v. 8)

King Herod’s recognized that the magi at his doorstep were lifelong learners. Before the arrival in Jerusalem, the magi had searched skies, delved into ancient writings, consulted sky charts and desert maps, and refused to let the star slip from their gaze. The calculating Herod hid his dismay at their story and encouraged them, “Go and search diligently for the child.”

“Go and search diligently.” Even for us today, Herod provides good advice. Curiosity and love of learning lies at the heart of the schools of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Schools of the church use every tool to understand how God’s world works and are not afraid to ask tough questions or to go where those questions lead. In this story from Matthew, the magi’s pursuit of knowledge leads them to God’s greatest gift, not in a palace, but in a house in Bethlehem. That wasn’t at all what they expected, yet in their worship and in their giving, they learned that the God of Israel is the God of gracious surprise. Our learning also leads ultimately to Jesus Christ, to worship, and to the giving away of precious gifts.

Yet the story might have ended with Jesus’ death. Herod’s plan to eliminate a potential royal rival was thwarted by a divine warning. Heeding the warning, the magi “left for their own country by another road.” (v. 12) Discoveries made in Lutheran schools shape individuals to serve God along many different roads in worship, word, and deed.

Question for the Week:

How would you contrast Herod’s promise to worship with the worship of the magi?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for enlightenment for those who use knowledge and technology in destructive ways. Pray for spiritual wanderers who may be full of knowledge and facts but never discover the joy and certainty of discovering God’s grace in Jesus.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Curt Schneider, head-of-staff pastor at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Waverly, Iowa. St. Paul’s School has operated since 1872 and continues to attract both Lutherans and non-Lutherans to a vibrant learning environment.

January 8, 2006 – The Baptism of Our Lord
Thought for the Week: Acts:19:1-7

Christian educators, in many ways are like all other educators, often searching for methods, strategies, or styles of teaching that are most effective with youngsters. Often overlooked, but increasingly substantiated by research, is what has only recently been acknowledged as the most effective method of teaching of all, **teacher modeling**. The late recognition and identification of “modeling” by a teacher by educational researchers on the scientific side of the profession of education, is somewhat surprising in that the model has been available for centuries in the Gospel accounts of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the text used for this devotion, Paul is being the example learned from Jesus’ ministry in his dealing with the “disciples” he encountered at Ephesus. Imagine being one of these disciples, having been baptized through “John’s Baptism” and being informed that they needed to be baptized (again) with the Holy Spirit. Using a direct approach, and the model of the Gospel message (Jesus being baptized with the Holy Spirit), Paul appropriately convinced them that the previous baptism was insufficient or incomplete.

Modeling is something teachers or caregivers can do **all the time**. Modeling also can be especially effective when transmitting skills in how to learn. Jesus, the supreme Model, used virtually every modern teaching technique while modeling. Search the Gospel accounts to determine for yourself whether that is true. Look for using an object lesson (e.g. mustard seed, sparrow, wheat and chaff, etc.), concept lesson (e.g. love, service, patience, sacrifice, dedication), a “hand’s on” approach (e.g. laying on of hands, drawing in the dirt, evicting demons), field work or trips (e.g. sending the disciples out “two by two”), in fact “discipleship” was a three year internship or “student teaching.”

As Christian teachers model what they teach, and model what they learn, they need to remember that students, whether young or old, need time to practice the learning that was modeled. A favorite story used by teaching professionals to illustrate this point is about a young nine-year-old who was, in the late 1930s, brought to a concert in Philadelphia by his mother. The youngster had just begun to learn to play the piano and the mother desperately wanted him to hear the great Paderewski who was giving a concert there for Polish refugees. The mother brought the youngster into the concert hall and quickly found the assigned seats. Seeing some friends on the other side of the hall, she told the young boy to sit tight while she went to say hello to her

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friends. “Don’t move,” she admonished him, “I’ll be right back.” She did come right back, just in time for the lights to dim and the raising of the curtain. To her horror, the young boy was not in his seat and nowhere to be found. She began to panic, not knowing what to do, as the curtain kept rising to a thunderous applause. Then she spied, on the stage, seated at the Grand Piano near center stage her young son, who was busily plunking out “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” on the piano, oblivious to anything but the keyboard. Horrified, she froze and could do nothing but watch her son continue playing. Suddenly, Paderewski strode onto the stage and quickly walked behind the youngster at the piano. He bent over from behind and whispered “Keep on playing.” The maestro reached both arms around the young boy and began to play chords and arpeggios, weaving a magnificent tapestry of sound around the simple melody played by the child, all the while whispering, “Keep on playing.” The audience was mesmerized by what was taking place and when Paderewski finalized the exhibition by a tumultuous crescendo of sound concluding in a grand finale, the audience arose as one in a thunderous, standing ovation. Paderewski extended one arm to the boy indicating he should take a bow and then bent over whispering one final time, “Keep on playing.”

Albert Schweitzer once commented, “One thing I know: the only ones among you who will really be happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” Christian teachers, follow the admonition of our Lord when he indicates in Matthew 5:16 “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” You cannot lead without first learning how to serve. Every teacher needs to be a servant-leader, using that Model that will be here for us throughout eternity, our Lord and Savior, who first loved and served us.

Question for the Week:

Which teaching style, method or strategy is most effective in any Christian educational environment? Which has been effective for you?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Help us become the Christ-like model to most effectively reach children and young adults in and through Christian education (this includes most importantly “modeling what you teach” and “being the example you teach”).

This devotion was contributed by Dr. Jeffrey D. Daley, principal of Luther High School North, Chicago, Illinois. Dr. Daley has served 39 years in parochial education, having taught at all levels of Lutheran Christian education from preschool through graduate programs.

January 15, 2006 – Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Thought for the Week: 1 Samuel 3:1-10

For most of you this is the middle of the school year. After five months with your cherubs, some of you are asking yourselves, “What in the world am I doing here?”

In this week’s lesson, both Samuel and Eli are sleeping when the Lord summons Samuel. In his confusion Samuel thinks that Eli is calling for him. After several times, Eli realizes that God is calling Samuel and tells the boy to respond, “Speak LORD, for your servant is listening.” When Samuel opened his ears to the Lord, amazing things started to happen.

Teachers in Lutheran schools are also called by God. You are called by God to teach and to proclaim God’s love to families and children on a daily basis. You are called to provide a strong educational foundation so that our students may become productive members of their communities. Sometimes it’s hard to hear that call and to remember why we do what we do, especially when the children aren’t quite as obedient as Samuel. Sometimes we forget that when someone calls us they are also listening. God calls us, but provides for our care as well. May you hear God’s call and respond as Samuel, “Speak LORD for your servant is listening.”

Question for the Week:

What things do you believe God is calling you to do in your classroom or in your school?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that God would give teachers in Lutheran schools wisdom and strength to hear and acknowledge the call.

This devotion was contributed by Marlene Lund, executive director of the Lutheran Schools Association which serves the schools of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. She has been a Lutheran educator for 31 years serving as teacher, guidance counselor, and principal.

January 22, 2006 – Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Thought for the Week: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12;
1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

I Can't Wait 'Til...

"I can't wait 'til..." You've heard the children in your classroom. "I can't wait 'til I'm in first grade; ...'til I get my drivers license; ...'til I graduate; 'til I'm a grownup and don't have to ask for permission and can do anything I want!" They often lose sight of today and have a keen sight on tomorrow when they believe life will be so much better.

For us, we always seem to run out of time. Just don't have enough of it. And, we want everything now. FedEx and Brown get that. Shop in a catalogue or on-line and have it shipped overnight, because three days from now just doesn't cut it for us. We grumble about the long line at Starbucks when it takes ten minutes to get that vanilla latte (skim milk, of course). Around March, we can't wait 'til the end of the school year, and sometime during the summer can't wait 'til the new school year begins.

Jonah told the people of Nineveh they had 40 days to straighten up and fly right. Paul said, "Time is short." Jesus tells the fishermen, "The time has come." The kingdom of God is at hand. It is the here and right now. Every morning we wake up in the grace of God with a new life. We don't have to work for it or anticipate wondering "if." The psalmist sings, "trust in him at all times...my mighty rock, my refuge." All times, no lines, no waiting for tomorrow. We never have to wait or look forward to the kingdom of God, grace, or forgiveness. These are gifts from God we receive every day and every moment.

So, what are you waiting for? No Lines!! Rejoice in your new life today. Celebrate this presence with your colleagues and the children you serve.

Question for the Week:

How is your life new each day?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Precious Lord of today, in your kingdom we give thanks for your always present gifts and your certain promise for tomorrow.

This devotion was contributed by Dr. John J. Scibilia, executive director, Lutheran Disaster Response of New York.

January 29, 2006 – Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Thought for the Week: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” (v. 15)

This passage commonly refers to Joshua, who becomes Moses’ successor, who God named as the leader of Israel before Moses’ death. But Moses doesn’t tell the Israelites in Chapter 18 who the new prophet will be—just that God has told him that a prophet will be raised up who will speak in God’s name and everyone is to heed his words.

Picture it: After forty years of living in the desert and eating manna for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the Israelites were finally about to enter Canaan. But before they do, they have to be patient as Moses reminds them of where they have come from, what God has done for them, and all the laws they have to continue to obey. Now he tells them there will be a new prophet whom they have to listen to, probably with a whole new set of rules, but they don’t even know who it will be!

Think of our typical reaction in today’s world when someone says they are a prophet sent by God. We assume they are a “nut case,” we warn our children not to be swayed by their teachings, and we secretly hope they will be arrested or move to another country, far away. But God gives us a test referred to in verse 22: “If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken.”

Question for the Week:

Does God still send prophets? Are we open to the possibilities?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for discernment to be able to listen and know the voice of God through others.

This devotion was contributed by Gayle Denny, executive director of the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association, Goodyear, Arizona.

February 5, 2006 – Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Thought for the week: Psalm 147:1-12; 21c

“Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.” (v. 1)

As young children arrive at preschool each day their voices are clearly heard as they come down the hall toward the classrooms. Their voices are full of enthusiasm and eagerness as they anticipate their day at school. They are eager to greet their teacher, eager to begin their mornings “work,” eager to attend chapel, eager to play with their friends. A young child’s joy is intrinsic; their trust and unconditional love for those who love and care for them is strong and unwavering.

Oh, how God longs for God’s people to freely offer praise with that same kind of enthusiasm, eagerness, and joy. But it may become more difficult for us as we grow up and experience difficult challenges, responsibilities, and burdens. Our praise of God may become less and less frequent as we become weighed down with our “grown up” lives.

Let us remember that God never stops giving us unconditional love; God never gives up on us. It is our privilege to take time each day to thank our Lord for this goodness in our lives; to devote time each day to praise our Lord as a young child freely offers praise to those of us who are blessed to serve in our Lutheran schools.

Question for the Week:

How can we better praise our God each and every day?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Dear Lord our God, we do thank and praise you for all that you give to us. Show us how to spend time praising you each day. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Julie Peck, director of Our Redeemer’s Lutheran Preschool, Helena, Montana.

February 12, 2006 – Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Thought for the Week: Mark 1: 40-45

Pa and Cody

Cody came to our preschool.
Cody's family did not go to church.
Cody was born with severe health problems and delayed speech.
Cody loved preschool, his classmates, and his teachers.
His beautiful smile, sparkling eyes, and joyful attitude spoke volumes even if he couldn't.
Cody loved his family, especially Pa (He's not grandpa – he's Pa)
Their love for him was evident in their faces as they watched him play, sing, and interact with the other kids during school.
Cody learned about Jesus and his love at preschool.
Cody wanted to go to church.
He asked Pa to bring him.
Pa did.
Pa came again and again (Grandma too) and God touched Pa's heart!
Soon, Pa not only knew who Jesus was; he knew and loved Jesus.
Pa was baptized – Cody was, too.
Pa was very sick, he was also very lonely.
His old friends didn't understand this new "changed" Pa; they liked the "old" Pa better so they didn't visit as often as before.
Pa found comfort in knowing God loved him and spent the last four years of his life praising God and witnessing to everyone he came in contact with.
Pa is gone now, and Cody misses him.
When we run the race in our schools and centers we must invite others in.
We must be bold in our faith and teach the truth, so that others like Pa and Cody will see the Lord's glory in us and come to know and love Jesus. This will assist all to run the race and win.

Question for the Week:

What will you do this week to be bold in your faith and to invite others to know Jesus?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

This week remember in your prayers all those families in your school or center and community who do not yet know Jesus as their personal Savior.

This devotion was contributed by Pat Garrett, director of Trinity Lutheran Preschool, Enumclaw, Washington.

February 19, 2006 - Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
Thought for the Week: Isaiah 43:18-25

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (vs. 18-19)

How many times in our schools do we turn away when we see the needs of children that are not being met because of the overwhelming challenge or because of past history? You know, we really like to pat ourselves on the back for caring about children and our community in our Lutheran schools. But can we do more? Should we do more? And if we do not, then who will?

These are important questions to ask as state and federal educational funding is on the decline and the needs of children, and most especially children from economically challenged families, are not being met. More parents call me looking for financial help with their child care and education needs.

In this passage, we are promised the Lord’s help. “I am about to do a new thing...I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” I ask you in the Lutheran educational community to look deeper. Look into the problems of today...to find the way the Lord is providing and to drink deep of the water...to meet even more needs of children.

Question for the Week:

Do you know the greatest challenges of the children in your community?
What can you as a faith community, do to help meet their needs?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Help us, Lord, to understand what more we might do in your name for others.

This devotion was contributed by Kris Finley, director of Trinity Lutheran Preschool and Kindergarten, Lynnwood, Washington.

February 26, 2006 – The Transfiguration of Our Lord
Thought for the Week: 2 Corinthians 4:6

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (v. 6)

Philosopher and theologian Soren Kirkegaard once wrote, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” I have been having difficulty lately living life forwards. In order to make sense of life, I desire that knowledge which can only come in retrospect. We have all had the experience of looking back and seeing how God worked good out of situations which at the time seemed impossible. But we probably wondered how we would ever make it through those impossible times.

The passion of Christ is a good example. From the perspective of the 21st century and all of the history and wisdom of Christendom, we can *understand* (at least in our limited human capability) why Jesus had to suffer and die. But for the disciples and the early church, living the turmoil and tribulation forward must have been both frightening and confusing. As often as Jesus attempted to explain to the disciples what the future held in store, he knew well that they could only understand the tribulation of the cross from the perspective of the resurrection. The crucial point, however, is that, without that understanding, they were still called upon to live through the tribulation. And this is where faith is born—living forward without understanding but with hope in a future which is ultimately in God’s control.

God commanded the light to shine out of darkness, and that light which shines in our hearts is evidence of the hope that allows us to live life forwards.

Question for the Week:

In what ways can we instill the hope of the gospel in the hearts of our students?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for the hope of Jesus Christ to guide all those in our care to follow him.

This devotion was contributed by Noel Laird Hesser, principal of Gloria Dei Lutheran School in Sacramento, California, and vice-president of the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association.

March 1, 2006 – Ash Wednesday
Thought for the Week: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent with ashes on our forehead in the form of a cross. This cross is an echo of our baptismal anointing, when we were buried with Christ. Ashes, a sign of our humanity, together with the cross, a sign of our hope, set us on our Lenten pilgrimage. We receive this sign on our forehead, hearing the words that recall Genesis 3:19 “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

“Where does pastor get the ashes?” asks a first grader. “Let’s invite pastor to tell us and talk to us about Ash Wednesday,” replies the teacher. The pastor invites the children to join him outside on the playground where he explains that the ashes come from burning the palms used in the previous year’s Palm Sunday. He places the palms in a large coffee can and begins burning them. During the burning he talks about how the ashes are a sign of being sorry for our sins. That as our sins are burned up, they are taken away. He finishes by explaining that ashes on our foreheads remind us of Jesus. Ashes are for all who want to remember Jesus’ story. Ashes mark us as followers of Jesus and are for all the children of God, regardless of age. We are marked with the sign of the cross on our foreheads at the time of baptism. Today the ashes remind us of our death with Christ, just as Easter will remind us of our resurrection with Christ.

In the scripture reading for Ash Wednesday, Matthew sets forth a vision of genuine righteousness: giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. Jesus does not denounce these acts, rather, he criticizes those who perform them in order to have a sense of self-satisfaction or gain of public approval. For now, our Lord gives us the gifts of giving to the poor, prayer, and fasting. By using these gifts during Lent, we allow our lives of faith to be conformed to Christ and his cross.

Question for the Week:

Will you fast this Lenten season? For whom will you pray this Lenten season? For whom in need will you give of yourself during this Lenten season?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for the children in the areas in Southeast Asia whose lives were affected by the December 2004 tsunami.

This devotion was contributed by Robert Federwitz, former director for schools, ELCA.

March 5, 2006 – First Sunday in Lent
Thought for the Week: Psalm 25:1-2a

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.

When our students arrive at school they do so with open hearts, open minds and open arms. They are ready to receive our love and nurturing. They put their trust in the teachers and staff, assuming that they will be cared for, nurtured, and taught in a safe environment through Christ-centered learning.

Parents leave their little ones with us because they have come to trust us with their most precious children. They put their faith in the promise we make to always remember the precious life they have trusted us with. They trust that we all do our best to model for their children, care for their children and create a Christ-centered environment in which they can grow.

Question for the Week:

What will you do this week to instill a deeper trust in parents and students for your school or center?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Lord God, guide us so that we may accept these children with open hearts and value each and every one of them. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Joann Montez, Good Shepherd Day Care, San Antonio, Texas.

March 12, 2006 – Second Sunday in Lent
Thought for the Week: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham (v.5a). As for Sarah, your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name (v. 15).

God arrives uninvited in our lives—interrupting, imposing, commanding, transforming. And that’s a good thing!

A few years ago during my seminary training I was gifted with the opportunity to serve a congregation as its interim youth minister. My predecessor had enjoyed a 27-year career and legacy. “Just follow the footsteps,” I was advised.

Well, know one told me specifically which footsteps to follow. And so it was after our first youth gathering’s Bible study that a student and his parent made sure to inform me that things had never been done like this before. Suddenly, it was clear: I was expected to follow in my predecessor’s footsteps not Jesus’ footsteps. “Who asked you to do this, anyway?” she charged.

None of us are ever wise or brave enough to actually ask God into our lives, for when God does show up, that means we no longer have a life of our own. Sinful people are not prone to laying out a welcome mat for God. In the same way that God showed up uninvited to Abram and Sarai—audaciously changing their identities!—so, too, has God showed up in your life for the same purpose—to make you exceedingly fruitful (v. 6). In the waters of Holy Baptism you were given a new name—Child of God. And with that new name comes your new life! And that’s a good thing, for you and for the world!

During this season of Lent, return to God’s baptismal promises to you that you might faithfully follow in Christ’s footsteps, footsteps that take peace and healing and justice to the world.

Question for the Week:

When and how did God show up in your life, and with what results?

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Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for our school workers to trust in the promise that God will bear much fruit in all the world through the people God has called to the vocation of education. First transforming you, God will use you to give away peace and justice and healing that all the world might know God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Luther Martell, pastor at First Lutheran Los Angeles, a multi-cultural parish setting which includes a congregation and school (K-8) experiencing the joyous pains of what it means to be called out by God to do God's work God's way.

March 19, 2006 – Third Sunday in Lent
Thought for the Week: Genesis 12:1-2

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

God Gives Us a Nation of Children

God invited Abram to go on a journey to unknown place. It was a challenging task. But it was a challenge that came with the promises of God. The promises were that God would bless Abram to be a great nation and to be a blessing to others.

Abram and his wife took the challenging journey. God led them to the place. When Abram arrived he built an altar and worshipped God. God had told Abram that God would give this land to Abram's children.

Abram had no children except for his brother's child, Lot.

God spoke to Abram again, telling him to look at the stars in the sky; he would have children and those children would have children, and those children would have children.

God's promises are fulfilled through us blessing children in our nation who will in turn be blessed.

Question for the Week:

God's promises are fulfilled through you by _____?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Let us pray that God would use us as instruments to fulfill God's promised blessings to others.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Rayford Grady, pastor of Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit, and Holy Spirit Lutheran Academy and Early Childhood Center, Chicago, Illinois.

March 26, 2006 – Fourth Sunday in Lent
Thought for the Week: Numbers 21:4-9

And the People Complained

Poor Moses had to put up with complaints as soon as he had helped free the Israelites from slavery. In one year our day care had three directors, the city condemned the building, the state cited us, and finances were more rotten than usual. Then the architect informed us that we needed lots of new support to the building as the roof was sagging. There were big complaints, especially in a congregation that doesn't have much cash.

It wasn't just grumpiness by anyone—there were serious problems that had to be fixed in our staffing, building, and relations with our Hispanic neighborhood. We were also aware that as a church we had not treated our day care as a ministry.

Like Moses on his journey in the wilderness, we wondered why God had brought us out into this place. Anyone who works with day care can make a huge list of problems that confront the programs every day. It's easy to fall into a pity party with a day care.

Like the Israelites, we soon learned that God was with us on the journey. Much sweat, money, prayers and volunteer labor later, we're doing fine. We go forth into the future, confident and ready to confront the next mess. But we also learned that, when you are down, or walking in the desert, you have to lift up your eyes or you only see the burning sand before you.

You have to look far ahead, or you will stop in your tracks and sink into complaints. Each day as I cross the parking lot, I lift up my eyes. I have to, because the kids are hollering "Hello, pastor." They remind me every day to look ahead—to look years ahead and know that we have had a tiny part in forming an adult's life. Then I look up and thank God for the opportunity to be involved in this day care ministry.

Question for the Week:

Why has God brought you to the place you are in today?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for all Lutheran schools and centers facing times of crisis that they might go forward with confidence to continue to fulfill their missions.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Steve Behr, pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in San Antonio, Texas, who is privileged to help in the church's day care ministry.

April 2, 2006 – Fifth Sunday in Lent
Thought for the Week: Psalm 51:1-12

He doesn't mean to spy on her, but there she is—the woman next door—bathing. She is beautiful and lust takes over. He has to have her. He lures her to his home and secretly sleeps with her, with no regard for her husband, who is away serving in the military. Soon the news arrives that she is pregnant, and it is his child. He has to somehow make it look like the baby is really her husband's, so being the powerful man that he is, he arranges for the husband to have leave and urges him to go home to his wife. Only the plan doesn't work, and the husband returns to battle all too soon. There is only one thing left to do—pull a few military strings and have the husband killed. And he does.

An episode from “Days of Our Lives”? A real life mystery from “Cold Case” files? No, actually it is the story of David, Bathseba, and her husband, Uriah from 2 Samuel. Psalm 51 is David's lament; his urgent pleading with God for mercy, forgiveness, and restoration after God sends Nathan to help him see the error of his ways. Only our gracious God can take someone like David, with all of his selfishness, disregard for human life and conniving ways, and not only forgive him, but actually create in him a new heart. God transformed David then and continues to transform us today. All we have to do is ask.

Question for the Week:

Can you think of new ways to help the children you serve (and yourself!) learn about repentance and God's forgiveness?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that all might know the freeing power of God's love and redeeming grace.

This devotion was contributed by Gayle Denny, executive director of the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association, Goodyear, Arizona.

April 9, 2006 - Palm Sunday
Thought for the Week: Mark 14:1-15:47

We stand with Jesus and the befuddled disciples at the gates of the holy city, and sense that something BIG is going to happen, that we will be swept up in events that we cannot control and will bring us to the very edge of what we can bear. It will be big enough “to change everything about us—our fear, our sin, our guilt, our untruthfulness. But to receive that change in the actual circumstances of our lives asks of all of us such a revolution in our hearts that we are stunned and frightened at the thought. ‘In his death is my birth, in his life is my life,’ as the song says; but the new birth is for us a kind of dying too. Remember this morning’s epistle: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (Donald Armentrout in *Synthesis*)

That mind is the mind of peace. Marcus Borg writes: “The meaning of the act [riding into Jerusalem] becomes clear when we realize that (*Jesus*) was intentionally enacting a passage from the prophet Zechariah which spoke of a king of peace riding ‘on a colt, the foal of an ass.’ He...chose a known symbol from his tradition in order to say that the kingdom of which he spoke was a kingdom of peace, not war. If the language is not too modern, his entry was a planned political demonstration, an appeal to Jerusalem to follow the path of peace, even as it proclaimed that his movement was the peace party in a generation headed for war. It also implied that the alternative of peace was still open.” The peace of Jesus is planted in Calvary, blooms in the Resurrection, and is harvested at Pentecost. How **WE** live out that peace in the twenty-first century is still in play, isn’t it?

Question for the Week:

How will you help your students live out this peace in the twenty-first century?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

May the cross carry you through every pain and suffering that assails you. May you go forward with Christ in faith and courage. The blessing of God Almighty, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, be with you now and evermore. Amen. — Adapted from *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, 1989.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Robert Braband, senior pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Lombard, Illinois.

April 16, 2006 – Easter Day
Thought for the Week: Acts 10:34-43

There seems to be an underlying idea in our culture that the youngest children in the family are allowed a bit more latitude when it comes to doing things. Parents are really nervous about the first child so they read all the right books and curfew is set at 5:30 P.M. The middle child comes along and there is no more film in the camera. He or she is allowed to do a bit more (curfew at 9:30 P.M.), but often feels overshadowed by the older sibling. Then a third child comes along. To the older siblings, this new arrival gets all the perks, including no set curfew. My parents always said they loved my brothers and me the same. I believed them and I still do believe them. To a kid though, favoritism always goes through your mind. I never felt that my youngest brother received any more love than my other brother and me and to my parents' credit, they did an excellent job of showing love equally to their three sons. This is not always the case, though.

As humans, we show favoritism all of the time. We may pick some students over others based on our own criterion. Luckily for us, God doesn't like one person more than another person. God wants our love, first and foremost. If you have favored something over God, pray and ask forgiveness. God will be up. He doesn't have a curfew.

Question for the Week:

What area in your life may you have favored over God? This may be as simple as favoring your sleep rather than worship.

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Lord, help me to love you above all else. Thank you for loving me as much as you love everyone else.

This devotion was contributed by Jake Morrow, principal of St. John Lutheran School, a grades K-8 ministry of St. John Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

April 23, 2006 – Second Sunday of Easter
Thought for the Week: John 20:19-31

The setting for this Sunday's Gospel reading sounds as though it might have been borrowed from a murder mystery; ten men in a locked room; once they had numbered thirteen, but now two are dead and one is missing. Darkness falls. It seems only a matter of time before the rest of them will meet with similar fates.

But the power of Easter is also present. The story goes on, but not as they expect.

Despite the locks, despite the darkness, despite the fear, Jesus takes his place once more there among them. He speaks his peace upon them, casting out their fear. He shows the wounds that killed him, even as he stands in their presence and breathes new life and the Holy Spirit upon them. He tells them they will be sent in his place.

As teachers and administrators in our Lutheran schools and centers, we are sent in his place. We are the ones who bring hope and love into an otherwise dark and cold classroom as we share the Easter message and Jesus' peace to the children and their families.

The murder mystery is solved. Jesus, the risen Christ brings life, salvation, and peace to an otherwise dark world. Help the children understand that when we share the peace on Sunday morning, we are sharing Jesus' peace with others.

Question for the Week:

Think of ways in which hope, love, and peace are shared in your classroom.

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Almighty God, with joy we celebrate the festival of our Lord's resurrection. Graciously help us to show the power of the resurrection in all that we say and do. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Robert Federwitz, former director for schools, ELCA.

April 30, 2006 – Third Sunday of Easter
Thought for the Week: Luke 24:36b-48

To begin a discussion of forgiveness, the question posed to the four- and five-year-olds in school chapel was “How many of you are perfect?” Numerous hands shot up into the air. After a few follow up questions were asked about sharing with siblings and classmates and listening to parents, no hands were in the air. Thankfully for the disciples and their companions gathered on that first Easter evening, Jesus didn’t ask the same question about perfection. They knew too well how they had fallen short. Rather Jesus comes into their midst and says, “Peace be with you.” In those few words Jesus says, “I know what the past few days have been like for you, your doubts, fears, and failings. I forgive you.” Because of Jesus’ words, the disciples are able to begin anew, fresh. He also gives them the gift of himself by showing them the wounds of the crucifixion. And Jesus doesn’t say to them, “I want you to be perfect from now on.” No, rather he tells them that his suffering and resurrection mean that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Jesus’ name to all nations. And then he adds, “You are witnesses of these things.”

The disciples and their companions weren’t finished with mistakes or doubts or fears, and they certainly weren’t perfect, but they were forgiven and empowered to be witnesses of God’s love and grace. And so are we. We can be honest and authentic about being human and about the gracious love of our risen Lord. For preschoolers or college students, administrators, teachers, and parents this is good news! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Question of the Week:

What difference does it make to you that you are forgiven and empowered to share God’s gracious love with your students and their families?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

For those who struggle with perfectionism. For those whose fears, doubts and failings threaten to overwhelm them. For those who are able to affirm the worth of another human being. For an awareness of God’s forgiveness in your life.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Timothy W. Spring, Lutheran campus pastor at Montana State University–Bozeman.

May 7, 2006 – Fourth Sunday of Easter
Thought for the Week: John 10:11-18

Each morning, as we are absorbed in the set up of our plan for the day, we must remember to take each opportunity to share our love of Jesus with the children. On one morning, a preschool child came to me crying that another child would not share or play with her. This particular child often came to the teachers and my initial thought was “How can I fix this quickly so I can finish prepping for the morning?” Something made me stop and remember that this was one of God’s children that I had been trusted to “shepherd” and she was coming to me for love and understanding. I could have sent her away to play but she would have walked away feeling very alone and frustrated. Or I could stop and listen to her and offer her my attention and acceptance so that she could find the confidence to work out her problem and could walk away feeling the love of Jesus in her heart.

We have been entrusted by the Father to show the same patience and devotion to each child that Jesus showed to those who came to Him in faith. We must let the Holy Spirit shine through us to the children so that we are not the “hired hand” who cares for himself and runs away. By taking the time to focus on the immediate and individual needs of the children, we can teach the most important lesson: to lead the children to accept Jesus into their hearts. As Jesus served as our shepherd, so must we serve as shepherds to the children.

Question for the Week:

Which child in your program needs more of your individual attention?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray this week for the time and patience to give to every child when they need you.

This devotion was contributed by Gail Holdbrook, director of Amazing Creations Preschool, St. Luke Lutheran Church, Sunnyvale, California.

May 14, 2006 – Fifth Sunday of Easter
Thought for the Week: Acts 8:26-40

“Get Up and Go!”

To be effective teachers and caregivers for children, we need plenty of “get-up-and-go”! Philip found that to be true for everyone who wants to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in the 8th chapter of the book of Acts, we can see where the “get-up-and-go” comes from ---- God’s Holy Spirit.

I just love hearing verses 26 and 27. Listen to them now, and then read them again several more times this week: *Then the angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza”... So [Philip] got up and went.”* (emphasis added)

Isn’t that refreshing and invigorating? Philip is told to “get up and go,” so, “he got up and went.” It didn’t matter that it was a “wilderness road” (verse 26b). It didn’t matter that Philip had just completed an exhausting tour through Samaria where he had proclaimed the Kingdom of God, exorcised devils, cured many who were ill, baptized large crowds of people, and even converted a magician! Philip “got up and went” at the invitation and urging of the Holy Spirit (a Spirit who is mentioned seven times between verses 14 and 40).

Wherever Philip “got up and went,” his work was blessed by the Spirit. The promise to us is that the same Spirit will bless the efforts that we make in Jesus’ name as well. So what are we waiting for? Let’s get up and go, empowered by the Spirit!

Question for the Week:

Where (or how) is the Holy Spirit calling you to get up and go?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that the Spirit directs you and your staff to a clearer understanding of God’s direction for your school and its ministry.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Gerald Schaar, pastor, teacher, and principal of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and School, Los Angeles, California.

May 21, 2006 – Sixth Sunday of Easter
Thought for the Week: John 15:9-17

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (v. 12)

One of the first Bible lessons taught to children is to love one another, yet it is still one of the hardest things for Christians to do. Jesus was, and still is, the ultimate teacher; one we could all take lessons from. His love is diligent and resolute as he helps us through life’s challenges, blesses us, and forgives our sins. In fact, his love is so great that he laid down his life to save us. Being a positive role model for your students like Jesus was for us will likely be your most effective teaching strategy.

Faith can be taught, but sometimes it is more effectively caught. Seeing the joy in my pastor and others who willingly and enthusiastically live out God’s word has had a large impact on my faith. I look up to those people and want to exhibit the same qualities in myself. Hopefully my future students will see a consistently faithful and loving person in me. If children can see God’s love and how it benefits others through the actions of their elders, they are more likely to follow. May you live out your calling to love everyone you come into contact with!

Question for the Week:

Are you a good role model for your students like Jesus was for us? Who will you make a difference for today?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray to grow so strong in your faith that you exhibit the same caring qualities as our loving God and influence those around you to do so as well.

This devotion was contributed by Kimberly Arntzen, a member of the American Lutheran Church in Winifred, Montana, and a Junior Elementary Education student at Montana State University–Bozeman.

May 25, 2006 – The Ascension of Our Lord
Thought for the week: Ephesians 1:15

Edith Olsen was one of the most effective teachers I have ever known. Her most memorable role in education, however, was defined more in the hallways between classrooms than her presentations within them.

In fact, Edith had one reoccurring phrase that will stand the test of time. It is a phrase that will echo in many learned minds and influence their attitudes and perspectives toward anything else they perceive.

Whenever someone would greet Edith in the halls, the following pedagogy would occur.

“Hi!”

“Hello there!”

“How are you?”

“I’m grateful!”

“I’m grateful!” she would say, “and you?” Her phrase just seemed to set a different pace for the day as she inspired us to look beyond ourselves—to see God’s presence as master teacher, designer, and provider of all and for all! Her words planted seeds of hope and wonder as we strived to make the grade, to be accepted, to pass a class, to live through the consequences of unfinished assignments and to see life beyond the moment.

Edith set a context for learning that affected our confidence, motivation, and desire to succeed. Her comments intrigued us to join with her in displaying and expressing attitudes of gratitude.

Question for the Week:

Beyond the information you impart in any given subject or activity, what will you be most remembered for? Of all the insights you share, what phrases or impressions will be most remembered by your students?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Prayers for a presence and presentation that will shine with authentic and nurturing phrases and impressions that will echo and shape learned minds throughout the years.

Prayers for sensitivity to the inner needs of children that will nurture their interest, motivation, and ability to succeed.

This devotion was contributed by Mim Campbell, associate director for Christian Education, Children and Family Ministries of the ELCA.

May 28, 2006 – Seventh Sunday of Easter
Thought for the Week: John 17:6-19

The Gospel lesson for this week comes from what are known as the farewell discourses. This particular passage from John contains a portion of what is called Jesus' high priestly prayer for his disciples. While the words "high" and "priestly" may conjure up images of something lofty or inaccessible, what we find here is a very intimate one-way conversation from child to parent which speaks not only of the relationship that Jesus had to his followers then, but to his followers today. It is a prayer that offers affirmation and seeks protection for those who "have kept your word."

As another school year draws to a close, this is a time when those of us whose lives so closely follow an academic calendar are engaged in some farewell discourse of our own. Some of our good-byes are short term as we wish students and co-workers a relaxing summer break. Some of our good-byes have more lasting significance as we bid a classroom of children farewell or send colleagues on their way to another position or to retirement with our blessing. What a wonderful model we have here in this prayer of Jesus of how we might best go about saying our good-byes. Let us think of the ways in which we can offer gratitude to God for the ways in which these fellow pilgrims have enriched our lives and kept God's word. And let us also ask for God's protecting guidance, mindful that even though we go our separate ways, in God's name we are one.

Question for the week:

What are the ways in which you say good-bye in your community?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray for those whose lives are in transition at the end of this academic year.

This devotion was contributed by Sue Rothmeyer, interim executive director of the Division for Higher Education and Schools of the ELCA.

June 4, 2006 – The Day of Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Romans 8:22-27

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” (v. 26)

Each day, when we arrive at our schools or other workplaces, we carry with us a mixture of emotions and experiences. This is true for children and adults alike. We bring feelings of joy and gratitude. We feel the burden of doubt, sorrow, or anger. Rarely is it solely the good or the troublesome; often it is a measure of each. This is the human experience.

Our life in Christ encourages us to lay all these feelings before God. So we pray with thanksgiving to God for the gifts of life, friends, and community, and with hope for relief from our burdens. The good news of Pentecost is that God’s Spirit is with us in a profound and personal way as we pray. Imagine this! The Spirit of God sighs in our behalf when we pray.

God invites us of all ages to open our hearts in prayer and seek God’s gracious, intimate presence in both the best and most difficult times. God promises to be there. This invitation is a wondrous gift of God. In this invitation is the reminder that God is not only the mighty creator of all that was, is, and is to come. God is present also, loving, forgiving, and comforting us, in the most personal, individual dimensions of our lives this very day as we pray.

Students, teachers, and administrators in our schools are joined together daily in a whirl and spectrum of human emotions. Thanks be to God that in these communities of learning, we can be confident of God’s amazing grace being ever present to guide and support us.

Question for the Week:

How can we support one another in prayer?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that all may experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, especially as we pray.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Charles Miller, executive for administration of the church-wide organization and executive assistant to the presiding bishop of the ELCA.

June 11, 2006 – The Holy Trinity
Thought for the Week: John 3:1 17

God's Amazing Love

This is a text amazingly rich in the themes of our faith. References to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the wonder and mystery of the Holy Trinity—flow through these verses from beginning to end. So do references to Holy Baptism, our need to be born “from above” (or “anew” or “again”), the kingdom of God, the power of the Spirit, the sign of the cross, and the call to believe.

At the core of this text, however, is that profound, yet simple declaration that Martin Luther called “the gospel in a nutshell,” John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* For many of us, this is the first verse of Scripture we committed to memory. And for many of the children in our schools it continues to be so still today. It is easily memorized, and its message is clear: God gave us Jesus to show us God’s love, a love that will last forever.

Children—just like those of us who are adults—might have a difficult time trying to understand how God can be three persons in one. The analogies of water, clover leaves, apples, triangles and masks sometimes help. But in the end they can only point us to the Triune God, who still remains a mystery. The experience of love, however, that is something all of us, whether children or adults, can experience. It is still a profound wonder, but it is the core of the good news that as teachers we seek to believe, teach, and live: In Jesus Christ God loves us forever! And how amazing is that?

Question for the Week:

How does the cross of Jesus help us to trust God's amazing love even in the midst of sorrow or tragedy?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

“What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this
That caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul?” Lutheran Book of Worship #385

This devotion was contributed by Bishop Dean Nelson, bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA.

June 18, 2006 – Second Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Mark 4:26-34

We Know a Patient God

As a college student, I considered myself a patient person, a patient person that is, until I worked as a counselor at Camp Chrysalis in Kerrville, Texas. After only four weeks of campers, I was desperate for a break. The campers had endless energy and that energy didn't always find a constructive action end. As the youngest of four siblings, I had no idea how to patiently redirect it or wait it out.

Since that camp experience, I have often wondered how God can stand being God, acting on our behalf but often waiting patiently/impatiently for us to get our act together. Does God beg for a break from being God? Are there days when God would rather work in the kitchen than be the one who is supposedly in charge? Surely there are decades of time when God wants to run away, go on vacation, or give the work away to someone else.

Like a mother waiting for her young son to learn how to tie his shoe, God doesn't forge ahead, but waits for the job to be completed. And like a savvy farmer God knows better than to pull out everything in the garden in an effort to keep it weed free. God is patient and wants to grow and nurture life, not simply "get the job done." God knows from experience, that loving, growing, nurturing isn't a "job" that is ever "done" but a life that is lived in relationship to other people and the earth.

There are times when God's patience tries my patience, especially the times when I can't understand why God doesn't take action as quickly as I believe it should happen. There times when God's patience is a welcome relief, especially when I am faced with my own choices that are less than godly. I am grateful that God is more patient than I will ever be. I pray that God's amazing patience with us will help each one of us, and all of us together, become more patient and loving.

Question for the Week:

Who is the student for whom you need the most patience?

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Personal Prayer for the Week:

God, in Jesus Christ you patiently draw all creation to yourself. Draw me close in your saving love and make your grace my own. Give me patience enough for love. Make me and all your people impatient with injustice of all kinds. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Ramona S. Bouzard, director of church relations, Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa.

June 25, 2006 – Third Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Mark 4:35-41

As we live in God's amazing grace, we hear this stunning story of Jesus Christ's stilling the storm. The disciples set out with him to go across the Sea of Galilee. Some kind of tremendous storm occurs and they are scared that Jesus, even though he is with them, will let them perish. We know how the story ends. Jesus stands up, rebukes the wind and waves, and says, "Peace! Be still!" and there is a great calm. But perhaps for those of us who work with children every day, who teach the faith, it is interesting to hear at the end of this story Jesus' comment, "Have you still no faith?" It is important for us to hear those words clearly.

So often as we go about the task of educating and shaping young people for service to God and the world we feel as if we are in the midst of a storm that rages about us. Indeed there is no peace to be found, no final blessing in all that we do. Some days we feel only sheer frustration. When we feel this way as educators, as those who are called by Jesus to serve and to shape others for ministry, we need to hear him say, "Peace! Be still!" We need to understand that what we do has ultimate value. What we say instills faith. Some days we may think our students have little faith, and we have failed at our job. We then need to remember that even Jesus said to his students "Why do you have so little faith?" At such times, *the* teacher, Christ himself stands by us. Our confession of faith is renewed because the spirit of Christ never lets us down. It is always with us.

We live in God's amazing grace, a grace that on a June 25th long ago was poured out on those who confessed the faith at Augsburg, Germany. We think of Martin Luther, Philip Melancton, and all those who have given us a rich heritage. They have shaped and formed us in God's amazing grace. We now, as inheritors of that great tradition, shape and form others. Each day we pray that grace might abound, faith might grow, and, in the midst of every storm, we might know Christ's presence and peace.

Question for the Week:

Is it possible that we are like Jesus' disciples, fearful and with failing faith? Do we fall back on Christ as the one who gives us the gift of faith each and every day?

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Personal Prayer for the Week:

O Christ, as you once stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, still every storm that we encounter. Let your amazing grace, hope, and peace shine brightly in all that we do and say, so that we might grow in that grace and in knowledge of you, our Lord and our Savior. Direct all who teach and all who learn in classrooms everywhere around the world, that being drawn closer to you, our creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, we may know that peace and that power that passes all human understanding. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

This devotion was contributed by Rev. David G. Abrahamson, pastor of Saint Luke Church and superintendent of Saint Luke Academy, located on the northside of the city of Chicago in the LakeView neighborhood.

July 2, 2006 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Mark 5:21-43

Fear is a scary thing—seems like quite the oxymoron doesn't it? In our society we are taught to be afraid of so many things, some ridiculous, others not-so-ridiculous. Just watch the news one night to see how so much of our lives revolve around fear. Sure, we know we're supposed to fear terrorists, bombs, evildoers, etc. But what about the news report stating that certain cars have seat belts that "might be" unsafe, or that there's some kind of bad ingredient in a common food that "could" be cancerous. While these reports and others like them claim they are trying to help us, all they really do is create fear!

Jesus tells us in Mark 5:36, "Do not fear, only believe." If only that weren't so difficult to do! It's pretty hard to "only believe" when so many things we "should" fear are thrown in front of us every day. As a child I never understood why I always heard that we were supposed to "fear the Lord." Being the thoughtful yet stubborn child that I was, I refused to believe this. I thought of the things I feared – the dark, birds, bees, my parents ☺...but fear the Lord? I didn't fear the Lord, I *loved* the Lord!

One day I whipped out a dictionary and looked up "fear." Defining words included "dread, agitation, anxiety," but then I discovered this other definition, unbeknownst to me for so many years: "Extreme reverence or awe, as toward a supreme power." I finally understood. To *fear* the Lord means to hold our Lord in extreme reverence. *This* is why we should just believe! Because the Lord our God is wonderful and awesome and has provided so much beauty in this world! Instead of fearing all these things that our society is trying to instill in us, we need to "*only believe*." It's what our God calls us to do.

Question for the Week:

How are you helping your students to believe, rather than to fear?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

As the United States celebrates its 230th year of independence, pray for all those in the world who live in fear; fear of not having enough to eat, fear of dying, fear of those who hate them...that they would be given the courage to believe.

This devotion was contributed by Becky Sorensen, Intern for Lutheran Student Movement-USA 2004-2006.

July 9, 2006 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Mark 6:1-13

Are we closed to learning? Are we open to learning? Actually, we are learning all the time whether we think we are or not.

It is amazing to watch little children learn. Before you know it, they are walking. Before you know it, they are talking. Before you know it, they even act like you. Sometimes we are embarrassed to hear them say something we said or maybe act like us.

Sometimes there is resistance to learning. Maybe we learn differently. It may be that we have a teacher who does not teach well. Maybe we just don't like the teacher. Maybe there is something going on that is distracting us in life. Perhaps we judge the teacher as having nothing important to teach.

Jesus was treated with resistance by his own people from Nazareth. "This guy grew up in our town. We know his parents and siblings. What could he give to us?" So the people were closed to him. Sometimes as teachers and learners we feel that there are students who are closed. But you know what? Jesus spent time there anyway and some were healed. As a teacher you do the same.

Then Jesus called together his disciples and prepared them to go out and do likewise. It almost seems like they had more positive results. The text says many had demons cast out and others were cured. There were those who were open. We hope for this to happen more often.

What is important is that whether learners are closed or open, God will work to engage and change us. What grace!

Question for the Week:

Has there been a time when you felt that no learning was happening and then you were surprised?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that the learning that happens in all brings glory to God our creator.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Bill Kees, director for Youth Ministries of the ELCA.

July 16, 2006 – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Psalm 24

“The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it....” (v.1)

The living room window of my childhood home looked west—west across Iowa corn fields to splendid sunsets on the horizon and west, just across the road, to the country school I attended with my siblings. That scene is one of my earliest and sharpest images of this world that belongs to God with all who are in it. The cornfields were our labor, sometimes hard labor, and our livelihood. The sunset was beauty that drew me in and gave me joy time after time. The other students were co-learners and questioners, friends and playmates, sometimes enemies and agonies. Always they were an experience of God’s creative imagination and the complexity of relationships. The books were windows that took us farther into beauty and problems. The teacher, Miss Gunderson, was our guide and guardian in finding our place in all of it—in work, wonder, words, separation and connectedness. All of it, in experience and in reflection, was an encounter with creation and the fall and with the God of earth and people.

There are many such windows in each of our lives, windows for learning about God’s world and God’s people. Lutherans celebrate and reflect on all knowledge in the context of faith. Let us thank God for the privilege of celebrating and reflecting and for the challenges of being a guide to those who are learning to do so.

Question for the Week:

What do you see from your windows on God’s world and its people?
What can your students see?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray in celebration and for open eyes to see God’s world. Name some things to celebrate and name the challenges. Ask for understanding in the context of faith.

This devotion was contributed by Rev. Stanley N. Olson, executive director of the Division for Ministry of the ELCA.

July 23, 2006 - Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

It is not hard to see ourselves in this story. Mark pictures Jesus and the disciples as exhausted teachers, too busy and too bothered to stop even for a few minutes and eat a meal in peace and quiet. Having just returned from the missions on which Jesus had sent them, the disciples are reporting “all that they had done and taught.” Seeing the disciples’ weariness and probably tired himself, Jesus proposes that they go away for some rest. But before they can reach their hideaway, crowds of people are already there, waiting for them and wanting things from them. We have all been in that place: a week that has been too full of needy people, piles of papers for grading that never end, one more person with one more request on a Friday afternoon. So we can really understand what Jesus and the disciples might have been feeling as their time for refreshment was suddenly joined by hundreds of uninvited guests.

But, instead of getting angry or turning them away, Jesus looks at the crowds and has compassion on them “because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” (v. 34) Jesus teaches them and gives them what they need, food for their spirit.

And what about those weary disciples? Jesus tells the disciples that they should give the hungry people what they need, but the disciples have no idea how to do that. So Jesus feeds everyone, the teacher-disciples and the crowds alike.

When we are exhausted, when we hear the command, “You give them something to eat,” (v. 37) rest assured that Jesus will teach us and feed us so that we can do the work of teaching and leading that he has given us to do.

Question for the Week

Where can my students and I go to be fed by Jesus the teacher?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

God, be our shepherd, teach us and feed us so that we can have compassion to teach and feed others.

This devotion was contributed by Dr. Ruth E. Hamilton, executive assistant to the secretary of the ELCA for official documentation.

July 30, 2006 - Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Thought for the Week: Ephesians 3:14-21

POWER! This is an often sought after thing in our world today. From the home, to the office, to the community, to the world, POWER is a “hot item.” Everyone wants to have POWER over someone else. That is worldly POWER, not the kind that we hear about in this reading.

St. Paul in this text is praying that you will be strengthened in your inner being by the Spirit’s POWER and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. This is spiritual POWER coming from God.

St. Paul is praying for you to receive POWER to understand the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ’s love. With that POWER we are able to share our faith and God’s love with children of all ages. For St. Paul tells us that with that POWER within us we will accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine for Christ.

That’s the kind of POWER we want in our life. The POWER that the Lord gives is different than what the world gives. With God’s POWER the Holy Spirit will dwell in our hearts through faith and love which will be ours to share with others.

Question for the Week:

How are you helping your students to receive the POWER from Jesus?

Personal Prayer for the Week:

Pray that you and your students will receive God’s POWER to be strengthened in faith and be able to share it with others.

This devotion was contributed by Marge Robison, Director of Children’s Day Out at Abiding Love Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas. She also serves as secretary and Network Five representative to the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association.

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