

# BETTER TOGETHER



Devotions for 2021



## A RESOURCE FOR CONGREGATION COUNCILS

12 monthly devotions written by  
leaders in the Texas-Louisiana  
Gulf Coast Synod



Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

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# *Introduction*

Dear Gulf Coast Synod Leaders,

Thank you for your outstanding leadership in a very difficult year. Church leadership takes prayerful diligence even in the best of times. In times like these, wise, patient, thoughtful, and strategic leaders are more vital than ever.

This year we would like to offer you a gift to support your work. This devotional book contains a short devotion for each month of the year, whether for Councils, committees or homes. Begin with sharing highs and lows for the last week with the group. If you're using this for personal devotions write them in your journal as a reflection. Then read through the devotion.

I pray it serves as reminder that we are better together, planting churches, responding to disasters, calling pastors and deacons, doing campus ministry, or supporting a network of global churches.

Yours in Christ,



Bishop Mike





# January 2021

## 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-7

*But we have this  
treasure in clay jars, so  
that it may be made  
clear that this  
extraordinary power  
belongs to God and  
does not come from us.*

2 Corinthians 4:7



When I adopted this verse as “my own”, two images that mattered were treasure and extraordinary power, overlooking the fact that clay jars are unique in the scene—they could be cracked or broken to display said treasure. Not only am I vulnerable transport for the treasure, I am also being carried along by the Power that is moving the light into those places where it is needed. Here, the Japanese art of kintsukuroi comes to my rescue, shifting the image to my absolute dependence on the Potter. Being refurbished with a gold streak has its merits! With each application, the clay jar grows more distinct; broken and renewed so that the light of the gospel can endlessly invade new points in darkness. What a life!

*Teach us, O God, how to live fully inside your  
creative beginnings. Make us available to your  
story, and ever renewed with the telling, so that  
the luminous energy of your good news is not lost  
in translation. Amen.*

PASTOR ELE CLAY

# February 2021

## MARK 1:12-13

Many pastors rate Lent as one of their favorite church seasons, but I admit that it is a difficult one for me. In a world that often feels already like wilderness, and in a year that feels particularly like wilderness, this season feels hard. We're hungry for hope, and our reading from Mark doesn't feel so hopeful. Except... that line about angels. We don't know much about angels in Scripture - but here, Mark tells us that they are particularly known to Jesus during those hard 40 days. I find that intriguing and true in my own life -- there's something about wilderness that makes it easier to see God. What if our journey through Lent this year was an invitation to recognize hope in the hard places? Who has been God to you this past year? How have you seen angels?

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

Mark 1:12-13



*God of love, as we step towards Lent, turn our eyes toward you. Show us how to see your love, and show us how be your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

PASTOR MINDY ROLL



*"Remember Lot's wife."*

Luke 17:32

# March 2021

**LUKE 17:32**  
**HEBREWS 13:8**

*"Jesus Christ is the same  
yesterday and today and forever."*

Luke 17:32

Lot's wife is a nameless woman in scripture, known for her lack of judgment and her promiscuity. As Sodom and Gomorrah, the fabled wicked cities, were about to be demolished, Lot was told to take his family and run to the hills. Only one requirement: do not look back. Lot's wife couldn't stand it. She looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Why did she do it? Some say she enjoyed the party life there and didn't want to leave.

Some say she had such great memories she couldn't let go. She couldn't see that the future, apart from her beloved cities, would be worth living. She remains, to this day, chained to her past.

This can happen to us - making plans for the future with our eyes in the rearview mirror. Chained to what has gone before - the glory days, the memories, the good times. It happens in our personal lives and it happens in our churches. Think about the things that tie your church to the past.

Now remember that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. This promise gives you the motivation, the permission, the freedom to move forward in your planning. Jesus, who was Lord of the glorious past, is with you now and moves with you into a bright future.



*Lord Jesus, may the past be a secure foundation  
for the work you call us to do today and tomorrow.  
Amen.*

**PASTOR MARCIA KIFER**

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."*

John 20:19-22

## ***April 2021***

**JOHN 20:19-22**



What transformed the terrified disciples hiding in the upper room into globe-trotting apostles? In our gospel from the Sunday after Easter, the risen Jesus walks through doors "locked for fear" to greet the cowering disciples with words of peace.

Behind what doors of fear are you living today? You as individuals, and you as a congregation? Can you name those fears? Jesus walks through those doors with freeing words, "Peace be with you." Jesus brings peace amidst our uncertainty and anxiety. Then he sends us: "As the Father has sent me, now I send you." You are the continuation of Jesus' ministry in the world.

If that feels overwhelming, remember Jesus not only releases us from fear with words of peace and sends us to a hurting and needy world. He also empowers us with the Holy Spirit. Be of good cheer and great courage, for you are freed and empowered to serve in Jesus' name!

*Source of all life. Thank you for unlocking our doors of fear with your peace that passes all understanding. Empower us with your Spirit for the sake of the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

**BISHOP MICHAEL RINEHART**



# May 2021

## JOHN 20:20B-22

*After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit".*

John 20:20b-22

Breathe in..... breathe out..... breathe in.....breathe out..... Breathe in.....and out.

In her book *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans discusses breath and the Spirit. She notes that we don't often think about breathing until someone points it out to us - and then we become acutely aware of our breath. She speaks of all of the things the Spirit is - breath, fire, a seal or emblem, wind, a bird, and finally a womb. After each description she states that we must PAY ATTENTION and that if we do, we will find the Spirit.

Breathe in..... breathe out..... breathe in.....breathe out..... Breathe in.....and out.

When we were born the first thing we did was take our first breath. When we die the final thing we do is exhale our final breath. Breathing is one of those essential physiological actions that is necessary for us to live, and we do it every day without even thinking about it.

Breathe in..... breathe out..... breathe in.....breathe out..... Breathe in.....and out.

In John's Gospel, after Jesus is resurrected, he spends time with his disciples. Before he departs from them for good, he breathes on them. The final act Jesus performs before leaving his disciples is that normal act that we all do each and every day. Breathing.

But the breath that Jesus breathes is no ordinary breath. It is the Spirit. He is empowering them for the work that they are being called to. He is brandishing them with an advocate and companion to help them on their way.

*continued*

# *May 2021*

## *continued*

Theologians have noted many times that the Hebrew letters that make up God's name are actually not letters at all. They are punctuation... breathing marks to be specific. *Yad He Vav He*, or *Yahweh*, is God's name and the sound of breathing.

So, Jesus not only breathes on the disciples and shares the Spirit with them - but also speaks the name of God at the same time.

Breathe in..... breathe out.... breathe in.....breathe out..... Breathe in.....and out.

God has done the exact same thing for each one of us. When we were born we began speaking God's name. At Baptism, we are reminded of the Spirit's presence in our lives. Each time we share the Lord's Supper we are acutely aware of the Spirit's presence at our table.

We all have been gifted by the Spirit and enabled to use these gifts to expand God's kingdom. To continue Christ's work. So today - I encourage each of you to do just that. Speak God's name and prepare yourself for the work that you are called to do. With each breath you take spread God's love, peace, & grace. Work to promote God's justice and equity and to make our world a better place.

*Breathe in..... breathe  
out.... breathe in.....  
breathe  
out..... Breathe in.....  
and out. Amen.*



PASTOR ARIEL WILLIAMS



*"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*  
John 16:33

## *June 2021* **JOHN 16:33**

As most of us living on the Gulf Coast know, June begins hurricane season. And for many, it is the beginning of a period of anxiety and PTSD caused from previous storms. And

yet, it comes with living in this beautiful part of the country.

Even if you don't live here, there are still earthquakes, tornados, floods, avalanches, wildfires, pandemics, civil unrest... there will always be disasters and tragedies that strike. And churches are not immune.

Your congregation may have financial troubles, major conflicts, or staff transitions. There may be the sudden death of a long-time member.

One of the constitutional roles of church leaders is "to promote a congregational climate of peace and goodwill" and "to endeavor to foster mutual understanding." Or in other words, even during anxious times, leaders ground the congregation's life in Jesus Christ, who demonstrates what shalom—God's peace—means for our lives and for the world.



*Even as storms and tribulations toss us about, teach us your way of peace, O Christ.  
Amen.*

**PASTOR CHRIS MARKERT**

*“The one who is more  
powerful than I is coming  
after me; I am not worthy to  
stoop down and untie the  
thong of his sandals. I have  
baptized you with water; but  
he will baptize you with the  
Holy Spirit.”*

Mark 1:7-8

**July 2021**  
**MARK 1:1-8**



John the Baptist will never grace the covers of Vogue or Sports Illustrated magazines. His clothing and diet indicate he is not tied to this world's values. He does not bow to people's opinion, not even to the King. He takes his cues from God. John is the voice crying out: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" As I yearn for John's courage to speak without fear of consequences, he calls me to pay attention to "the One who is more powerful than I" - so powerful, John declares himself unworthy to untie Christ's sandals. What humility! John is faithful to his vocation. He is the bearer of the message - not the message. He points to Jesus - not to himself. He trusts God's Word - not society's empty promises. O, that today we would be like John - humble yet courageous, non-anxious before people, aware of God's presence even in the wilderness. I want to emulate John and keep my eyes on Jesus and receive from Jesus the promise of the Spirit's fire and power.

*Gracious God, fill us with John's courage and singleness of purpose to prepare the way of your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

**PASTOR RODWELL THOM**



# August 2021

## EPHESIANS 4:1-16

*But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*

Ephesians 4:15-16

### *Building Up and Working in Cooperation*

As summer ends and we begin to regather our communities, remember where we left off, reassess our priorities, and restart our ministries, we enter August with a helpful reminder from St. Paul about how we should align such efforts: "Promot[ing] the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Paul's vision, and indeed, our vision, for our communities of faith are not that we are the same, but rather that we work cooperatively with one another, with every member of the body bringing their unique gifts to the table and using them in service of the whole and for the building up and betterment of the entire congregation. Paul's charge to us is to use the unique gifts we have been given by God to equip others for the work of ministry in turn. Building up the Body of Christ is an exponential exercise.

And it is an exercise done in love. This is the piece that is often forgotten when passions run high. At this beginning of the ministry year, be reminded that the decisions we make together are done out of love for God, one another, and this congregation. May your leadership serve to build up one another and the Body of Christ in this place.

- What unique gifts do you bring to this table? What ministry passion has God gifted you with more than anyone else?
- What steps can you take to remind yourself and this Council throughout the year that your decisions should be made from a place of love and care, and should serve to build up this congregation?

*Loving God, you gift each of us with unique passions and gifts and call each of us according to those gifts. Make us mindful of the love and care you have for us, that we would extend that same love and care to our partners in ministry in this place. Amen.*

PASTOR CHRIS MICHAELIS

# September 2021

**JONAH 3-4**

*The word of the Lord came to  
Jonah a second time, saying,  
“Get up, go to Nineveh, that  
great city, and proclaim to it  
the message that I tell you.”*

Jonah 3:1



## *Forgiveness*

As Christians, we know the answer to this question; however, we struggle with compassion.

Who are the people that come to mind when you think of sinners? For Jonah, Nineveh was full of immoral, sinful, rebellious people who surely didn't deserve God's grace.

When God showed mercy to Jonah, Jonah praised God for his goodness, but when God showed mercy to Nineveh, Jonah got angry with God for going soft on sin. In Jonah's mind, forgiveness was for worthy people—not for “sinners”.

Grace, by its definition, is for undeserving people and compassion for those who don't deserve mercy.

This is a question for all of us. We all know of someone in need of forgiveness— people who have made a mess of their lives, people who don't deserve God's love.

The book of Jonah ends with a piercing question: “Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh...?”

*Loving God, keep us mindful of your  
compassion and forgiveness; that we may  
share it unconditionally. Amen.*

**PASTOR ANTHONY CHATMAN**

# October 2021

JOHN 1:14

Almost every aspect of popular Christianity pushes us to focus on ourselves. We're encouraged to forsake the world and get our souls ready for judgement.

SAVE YOURSELF, we are told, with the matter-of-fact pragmatism that also tells us to put on our own oxygen mask before helping others. However, this short verse from the beginning of the Gospel of John reminds us of the troublesome nature of Jesus.

Jesus didn't come to rule the world from above. Jesus became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. That means our work as Christians isn't to focus on the sky, but on the ground, on the people around us who are struggling with the miseries and oppressions of this life. Together, let's be the people who put on our neighbor's oxygen mask before our own!

*O God,  
Help us look to our  
neighborhood as the  
place we find you, and  
help us always to be  
generous, inside and out.  
Amen.*

*The Word became flesh and blood,  
and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes,  
the one-of-a-kind glory,  
like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out,  
true from start to finish.*

John 1:14 (MSG)



PASTOR BEN GROTH

# *November 2021*

## **2 CHRONICLES 20:5-30**

*We do not know  
what to do, but our  
eyes are on you.*  
2 Chronicles 20:12b



How often do we show up for a Church Council meeting and find ourselves making decisions and perhaps not being sure of what the right decision is? Leadership includes just such moments. Even your educated, loving, and faithful pastor sometimes feels this same way. What are we to do? First, name it.

We are humans and this is part of being human. Second, dare to trust God. Third, live into what will yet be by faith.

King Jehoshaphat (say that quickly three times) was in just such a spot. The people of God were trusting God yet now their enemies were positioned to attack. What are they to do? The King beseeched God – “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” God is ever faithful, and God’s response dared them to trust: “Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s.” The people then watched as God did what God would do...and the people then joined the king in giving praise to God.

As you evaluate the ministry of 2021 and dream and envision what lies ahead. Name your uncertainties. Trust God. Live into what will yet be by faith. And together give thanks.

*Holy God, we do not always know  
what to do, but our eyes are on  
you. Amen.*

**PASTOR RICHARD RHOADES**



# December 2021

**GALATIANS 4:4**

*But when the  
fullness of time  
had come, God  
sent [the] Son...*

Galatians 4:4

In this season of the year, there is an emphasis on time. The Advent wreath helps us mark time as we near the festival and celebration of Christmas. We ask ourselves questions related to

time. Is it time to put up the Christmas tree? Is there enough time to get our Christmas shopping done? How many worship times should we offer for Christmas Eve?

We tend to think of time as something that is orderly and predictable, something for which we can plan. One of the words for time, *chronos*, relates to the kind of time we track on our calendars. In the Bible, we often encounter another word for time: *kairos*. This refers to God's time. It is less chronological, and it is harder to track or measure.

God sent Jesus "when the fullness of time had come," which is to say that we could not have predicted or measured or planned for such a wonderful gift.

*Giving God: help  
us to plan and  
predict what we  
can, and open us  
up to the wonder  
and mystery of  
your work among  
us, to be made  
known in your  
time. Amen.*



**PASTOR TRACEY BREASHEARS SCHULTZ**



**Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.