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



**October 2010 – December 2014**

***Essential Piece***

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

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

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

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

*“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” 2 Corinthians 9:15*

***Rachel Klitzing***

***Christ and My Time***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Dr. Carolyn Sims**

***CHRISTmas Spirit***

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

*Mrs. Howland,*

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

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

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

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

***Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.***

**James 1:17**

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

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines ***gift*** (n) 1. something given; present 2. the act of giving. Okay, we all understand that. Now let’s look at a few of the definitions of the word that gift is derived from - ***give*** (vt) *(gave, given, giving)* 1. to make a gift of 2. to hand over in or for payment 3. to devote or sacrifice 4. to inflict (punishment, etc.) Hmmm…interesting, so is that why *you* give a gift? I think you know where this is heading – God’s most precious gift, the gift of His Son, Jesus born of a virgin, born for you, for me. Who took on all our sin was bruised and condemned, died, won over sin, death and the power of Satan, and rose in quiet awe and wonder for all, ensuring eternal life for all who believe. Why, isn’t that really what Christmas is all about?

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

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

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

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

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

…God so loved the world that He had His one and only Son *inflicted with our punishment* …

…that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life!!

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

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

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

***Someone special, Who would give,***

***His own Son that I might live,***

***And by Him would set us free***

***From all sin and misery.***

***Someone special I must be,***

***Since you gave your Son to me!***

J. J. Vajda

Hope, peace, joy and love in Jesus  
***Beth Howland***

***Come and Worship****Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. Matthew 2:2*Do you know where you are going? Do you have a GPS system? We all want to know where weare going these days. I still use MapQuest to find my way around. I like to click and see whatthe intersection or building looks like at my destination. We all like to know where we areheaded.

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

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

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

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

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

Come and worship

Come and worship

Sing God’s praise

He will always love us

All our days

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

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

***Mary Anne McCombs***

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

Love is in the air. It is February!

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

\*“For you know the **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus gave up everything for us to give us the richness of His love and forgiveness. God had so much love for even someone like Johnny, who cannot seem to stay out of trouble. God loved Johnny enough to offer up His Son to pay the price of Johnny’s sin. Even someone like me, who continues to make the same

mistakes and fail daily, has been rescued. The gift of His grace rescues us from the mess we continue to find ourselves in.

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

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

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

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

**Carol Smallwood**

***Bowing or Bragging?***

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

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

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

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

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

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

……….

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

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

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

Amen? (Now you can bow!)

***Written by Edward Grube, LL.D.***

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**Rejoice, Rejoice, Rejoice**

Have you learned to rejoice in everything?

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

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

“Rejoice…pray…give thanks” is God’s will for every believer in every situation.

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

Paul did not tell his readers to “be happy,” but “rejoice in the Lord.” We are to “rejoice in the Lord,” not our circumstances. Our rejoicing is to take place in Christ. We are to delight in Him. The apostle Paul had inner joy when his external circumstances did not look very promising.

What for you is the most difficult time or situation for you to rejoice? Do you find it difficult to “rejoice in the Lord always” when you face conflict at work? Do you find it overwhelming to “rejoice in the Lord” when the weight of responsibilities at your school pull you down? Is it hard to “rejoice in the Lord” when you are slandered for the sake of Christ? Illness, sickness of a child, aging parents, and bankruptcies are all times to “rejoice in the Lord.” There is no limit to the exhortation to “rejoice in the Lord.” Indeed, as one beloved pastor said, “Through fire and through water, through life and through death, rejoice evermore.”

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

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

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

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

**Let’s Pray:**

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

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

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

***Michelle Hines***

**What’s Your Name?**

Five-year old Sarah was excited when she arrived at church on a beautiful Sunday morning.

This was the day she was to be baptized. She wore a new white dress with lacy socks and white

slip-on shoes. When the moment came, she proudly took her place on the small step stool in

front of the font. She was tall enough to bend her neck and have her head hang in place over the basin all by herself.

The pastor worked his way through the liturgy, and solemnly began pouring water on Sarah’s

forehead as he intoned, “Sally Jean Bishop…”

Suddenly Sarah’s head bounced up from its forward position. “That’s Sarah” she exclaimed—

then bent her head again, waiting for the pastor to say it right. While most adults would be

embarrassed to correct the minister in public, to Sarah his slip of the tongue could not be

ignored.

Names are important to little children as well as to adults. When I read the names of older

students who have earned awards, I know that if I mispronounce one, I will hear about it

afterwards. Your name tells who you are. Little Sarah was afraid that if the pastor didn’t say her

name, it wouldn’t be she who was baptized. And she did not want to miss out.

Could you imagine your spouse speaking endearing words but getting your name wrong?

Baptism makes God’s love personal. He makes no mistakes as he calls each of us by name. In

baptism he calls each of us by our name because he loves us each intimately. And in baptism he

calls each of us by his name—Christian—because he makes us a part of his family.

On Judgment Day God will call our names again. He will get them right. There will be no

mistakes. It will be the same name he called when we were baptized. He will call Sarah, and

you, and me. They will be the names he has used often through the years, so his voice will be

familiar to us. And we will eagerly respond--in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit.

It is our privilege as educators to placing the names of children and their families forever in

God’s heart.

***Carolyn Sims***

**Christ and My Treasure**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Carolyn Sims**

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

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

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

This is what I have learned:

1. No matter what I have done wrong. No matter how worthless I feel. No matter all the opportunities I’ve missed. God wants to spend time with me. He is always there. He has forgiven me!

2. My heavenly Father wants me to know that He loves me. He wants me to take time to relax in His loving arms.

3. There is nothing in this world that is important enough to worry about. In the end we have no control. We don’t know when this tumor will take Rob’s life, (none of us know when we are going to die). God has a plan; He is in charge. In the end, our relationship with God is all there is.

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

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

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

**Carol Smallwood**

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

And look how far we’ve come

So far from where we used to be

But not so far that we’ve forgotten

How it was before

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Gary Spencer**

**Wonder – Amazement – Love - and safe-Keeping***Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.  
And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple, which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered into the temple. He, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, "Look on us." And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And leaping up, he stood and walked and entered with them into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and they knew that it was he that sat for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him.* Acts 3:1-10 (21st Century NKJV)Each of us is broken, and we look to the One, the only One, who can repair us. People are fond of saying that “the world changed on 9-11 and we’re left to deal with the aftermath.” No, that happened at the Fall, and more importantly, the world changed at the Cross. Although the Fall changed us, thankfully we didn’t have to deal with it – the cross took care of that.

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

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

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

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

***Christopher L. Saraga*** *is the Music Director for Christ Lutheran Church and School, Rancho Palos Verdes, Ca, where he has served for the past 15 years. In June of 2010 he was diagnosed with diabetes. Unfortunately, the disease took a major toll on his body and he consequently had to have his right foot amputated. Through the marvels of medicine, technology, prayer and ultimately, God’s abundant power, he quickly recuperated and began walking again with prosthesis. Although the disease continues its assault, he rests assured in all things that “God works for the good of those who love Him, and are called to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28) Amen!*

**ONE THING**

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

Spending time with my father and husband at the end of their lives this year, the ONE THING took on new meaning for me. In the end, all of those things that we have spent our lives working for, the house, the car, the special collections, all of the tech gadgets, or money in the bank, none of those things matter any more. At the end of our lives the only thing, the ONE THING that matters is our relationship with Jesus Christ. It’s you and God. That is all there is.

Paul says in Philippians 3:8 “I consider everything as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him…”

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

Praise God for His love and faithfulness!!

**Carol Smallwood**

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

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

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

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

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

God blessed me with many different teachers after second grade. The pastor, teachers, and church family at Zion Lutheran helped guide me to serve in Lutheran School ministry. Many years after I had Mr. Ludeke, I took my call to teach third grade in Ann Arbor, MI. It was then when I discovered why his toes were always curled. The leather from which shoes were made in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s was stiff, hard leather. It wasn’t as soft and pliable as today’s leather. Mr. Ludeke’s toes were curled up because he was always squatting so he could be at eye level with his second grade students. This tall commanding man with a deep voice, who demanded respect in every way, cared enough to bring himself to the level of his students.

As I stood before a class of thirty-three third grade students in Ann Arbor I remembered Mr. Ludeke’s shoes. The preservation of a childhood memory made a huge impact as I began my teaching career. Always be at the level of your students. Miss Leuth and Mr. Ludeke were two very different teachers, but both of them exemplified the words of the Psalmist, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

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

**Rich Nordmeyer**

*“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*I Thessalonians 5:18

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, I had one of those “mom moments” where my sage parental advice was handed back to

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

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

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

**Mary Fink**

**For Such a Time As This**

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

Esther 4:14b (ESV)

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

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

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

**Dr. Marci Nuoffer Vice-Principal, Concordia Jr./Sr. High School**

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

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

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

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

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

**Carol Smallwood**

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

Matthew 11:28

These are certainly familiar words from Scripture. In fact, if you teach elementary kids, you have most likely assigned these words as a memory verse at one time or another.

This is certainly a verse that ‘pops’ into my mind with regular frequency, when the weariness and burdens of the day threaten to overwhelm me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*“He restores my life…”* Psalm 23:3

May you reflect on these verses, commit them to memory and hide them in your heart!

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

**Lynne Rose**

*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.* Ephesians 1:15-19a

What is the nature of Paul’s praying? The answer may be a bit surprising: Paul’s petitions in this passage for believing Christians in Ephesus, people who know they’re going to heaven, people who understand what it is to walk with Christ, are focused on their *continued* growth in the knowledge of God. “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better.” Meaning what? Meaning, for one thing, that there’s always more to know *about* God and always more to know *of* God.

In addition, however, just as any relationship grows more deeply rooted with the sharing of life and the sharing of knowledge and the spending of time together, the more time people spend with the Lord in His Word and in prayer, the more time they spend in worship, the more time they dedicate to being in fellowship with like-minded people who themselves are engaged in these things, the more intimate and deeply rooted they become in the Lord Himself. Let me ask the question, and maybe you’ve never really thought about it before: can you think of anything more profound and life-changing and worldview-altering than growing closer and closer in a personal way to the God of the universe? Can you think of anything of eternal consequence that would be more important than learning to more fully know the One who created you in His image, redeemed you from sin, and even this very moment sustains you? Can you imagine anything more delightful than spending time with the one Person in the world who knows you better than anyone else could possibly know you and loves you more than anyone else could possibly love you? That Person is God. And this is what Paul is praying for on behalf of the Christians at Ephesus – and on behalf of you and me today: he prays, he calls out, he entreats the Father, that we be given the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we can know God better. Everything else flows out of this one petition.

Think about this as we wrap things up for the day: the better we know the Lord, the better we understand the things of the Lord… and the better we understand the things of the Lord, the more joy we have in knowing who we are and what we have as His people. Notice that *after* Paul prays for us to receive what we need in order to know the Lord better – the Spirit of wisdom and revelation – Paul *then* prays that the eyes of our hearts will be opened to know three additional things: the hope to which our great God has called us, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power toward us who believe. To close, let me just ask the question directly: Do you want to know God better? God wants you to know Him better! Do you want to understand God more and live in the reality of that understanding in a truly genuine way? God most definitely wants that for you. Is there a desire in your heart for more joy, more peace, and more confidence in who you are and what your purpose in life is? God has that very same desire for you in His heart. That’s why this passage is in the Bible, and that is why we are spending time on it.

**Prayer:** Lord, have mercy on us today. It’s a new month with new opportunities and new challenges ahead. You are our strength; you are our shield. You are the One to whom we look for help in every situation, and as we remember your promise to guide and direct our steps, we ask that you help us to call on you and yield ourselves to you each moment of the day. Thank you for blessing our study time so that we can learn and grow in our faith. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

**Pastor Paul Stark - E-DiBS Devotional Study**

**Incredible!**

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

Lots of things are incredible this time of year. It’s incredible that the Gutenburg family is leaving the congregation. (What other printer will do the Fun Fair flyers free?) It’s incredible that Freddy is back this year! His parents threatened to pull him out every week last year! It’s incredible that Mr. Ruble’s bulletin board looks the same this year as in the past 46. (Perhaps it’s an alternative to a field trip when we study fossils. The bulletin board, not Mr. Ruble.)

Among the most incredible facts—and the best incredible fact—is the truth of our salvation. Is it not incredible that God loved you so much that He sent Jesus to take away your sins? You of all people! You were dead in your sinfulness—truly an enemy of God. But now you are sanctified and becoming more so every day. Incredible

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

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

God still does incredible things. He revives the spiritually dead through baptism, bringing them to new life as His children. And can you just imagine Judgment Day when Jesus returns to split open the graves and revive His children to a life that will never end?

God empowers us to do the incredible. He sends the Holy Spirit to work though us as we teach His children about His incredible love for them. Sadly, some will find the Good News too incredible to believe. Others, especially the very young, will soak up incredible amounts of fact and faith. Are you ready for all this?

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

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

Enrichment: Acts 26:1–8

**Ed Grube**

**“Hope that Really Matters”**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Susan Brandt**

**“Walking with Jesus: Equipped, Empowered, and Encouraged!”**

“…*What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul…?”* Deuteronomy 10:12

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

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

As we walk together, fixing our eyes on God and all that He has done, still does, and can do, may we be filled with thanksgiving and hope. If we only look to ourselves and to one another with regard to doing His Will in ministry we would have every reason to be discouraged. However, it is in our weakness that God is strong in us. It is in our humility and submission that He takes us and uses us to accomplish His purposes. Through challenges, He nurtures and strengthens us in faith and provides us with opportunities to trust Him. When our human eyes view adverse circumstances as obstacles, through the clarity of His vision revealed in His Word and through other people as instruments of His grace, we can see adversity as an opportunity for God to be glorified, and faith and trust in Him strengthened and affirmed.

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

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

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

**Charlene Soon**

**Milestones**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Bob Riggert**

**Landmarks**

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

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

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

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

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

**Relying On Christ the King:**

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee;

Let the water and the blood, From Thy riven side which flowed,

Be of sin the double cure: Cleanse me from its guilt and pow’r.” LSB #761

**Bob Riggert**

**GO! TELL!**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Having had the privilege of working with children and youth from preschool through college years, I am a respectful witness to the myriad of behavioral choices and the growth that comes in learning from mistakes. But few experiences resonate with me as does the response of a parent to their child’s classmate following a barrage of insults toward their first-born.

A young child named Steve fell down and skinned his knee on his way into school. Pete, a friend of the child stood in the doorway, watching, as Steve’s mother rocked him in her lap trying to ease the pain. All of a sudden Pete jeered, “Look at the baby! Mama’s boy! Mama’s boy!”

The mother stopped rocking. Gently, she eased Steve off of her lap with a kiss and sat looking at Pete who continued to sneer from the doorway. In an unexpected gesture, the mother opened her arms wide to him. Pete stood motionless for a moment. Then, to Steve’s surprise, Pete rushed into his mother’s arms, climbed up onto her lap and buried his face into her shoulder.

In Matthew, Jesus commands our love and the extension of it to our neighbors. There aren’t conditions attached to His love for us nor are there any rules or guidelines of how to share it with others. In interpretive simplicity…as children of God we are commanded to Go! and Tell! (Matthew 28:19-20) The call is to action and the time is now.

God’s intention is pure and clear:

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

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

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

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

GO! TELL!

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

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

**Sandi Scott**

**WHITE AS SNOW**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Elinor Courvoisier**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Mike Grasz**

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

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

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

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

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

**Tanya Grasz**

**I hate roller coasters!**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recently, the Sunday morning scripture reading hit home in a new way. The reading came from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Chapter 4 verses 12 and 13 “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

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

The ride hasn’t ended. I realize that it won’t end until I finally “coast” through the pearly gates. Then I will meet my Lord and Savior face to face; and He will help me from the car.

As I practice and begin to learn how to be content no matter what my current circumstances, I become able to proclaim with Paul, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* Philippians 4:4

**Nola Seaman**

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

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

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

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

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

What we can be confident of is this…

*The Lord is compassionate and gracious (*Psalm 103) and unfortunate events occur,

*so that the work of God might be displayed* (John 9:30) and

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

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

**Carol McDaniel**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Joanne Krafft**

**Living Water**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Kim Violette**

**A Special Gift**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Teachers are also a special gift to the families and students they work with every day. We have been tasked with an amazing and challenging job, but what a relief that we can do it each day with Jesus as the focus. Teachers have also been given so many gifts and talents to enable them to serve each day. There is a reason that I hear, almost every day from parents or other professionals, “Wow, I could never do what you do.”

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

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

“Who is it for?” I asked.

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

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

**Meredith Binnie**

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes it’s hard to see God’s hand at work in your life. He may seem hidden, far away, or totally out of reach, yet nothing could be farther from the truth! Your tender Savior is always watching over you, and always at work behind the scenes. As you pass through the waters and look back, you’ll see the way He worked on your behalf. Remember, although you can’t see His hand, you can trust His heart.

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

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

**Michelle Hines**

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

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD…* Psalm 92:1

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

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

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

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

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

**Conni Schramm**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Paul Kasaty**

**Special thoughts to you for the New Year, 2014**

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

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

But how about these “headlines” for 2014?

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

God gives strength to us each day to make headlines like that! Don’t miss these opportunities!

And remember, you already have lofty status and a place of privilege – you are a CHILD OF GOD! Treat your students as such!

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

God bless you in the New Year! *~Rachel Klitzing*

**How far reaching is ‘the whole creation’?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Karen Markin**

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

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

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

**Trevor Van Blarcom**

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

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

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

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

“Heaven is real and filled with “***ABUNDANT LIFE***”!”

**Jenny Jordan**

**Beginnings**

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

Oops! Surely the title of this devotion must be a mistake. This is **June**, not September. It is the **end** of the school year—not the beginning. You have worked long and hard to get to this day. You have planned and prepped and assessed. You have prayed and listened and counseled. You have laughed—and wept. You have probably counted down the days until the last day of school—when you can shelve the textbooks, un-charge the iPads, and file the lesson plans. You have (or will) say your good-byes, turn in the attendance sheets, and seal the report cards. Off your students go—all assignments complete, all lessons learned, all standards met. The End.

Except, of course, for the FINAL final exam. Now the real work begins. Do the numbers on the worksheets make sense in the grocery store or kitchen? Will there be books to read just for fun and learning without Accelerated Reader to check on comprehension? Does the faith that was so intentionally integrated into your lesson plans remain integrated in real life? Does the Jesus who loves them remain the center of all they do and the decisions with which they are faced? Will they continue to KNOW that they are loved and forgiven? If they should leave this life before next September, will they begin their new life in heaven?

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

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

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

**Carolyn Sims**

*“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."* Matthew 18:20   
Parents, siblings, and extended family usually come together and help form our earliest sense of community. As we get older, friends, school, work, and church play roles in that understanding. We grow up yearning for the feeling of community; to be a part of a group we can relate to and turn to in times of need. Christ understands the importance of community and continually pushes us and creates opportunities for us to draw closer to other believers. However, most of the time we don’t accept this gift and run in the opposite direction. We look for that feeling of community in people, places, and things that don’t draw us closer to Him, but away from Him, which in return leaves us empty and confused.

College was a time in my life where I felt connected to others each and every day. I was involved with student leadership, met new people in every class I took, and was able to walk a mere ten yards to get to any of my friends’ dorm rooms. I was “living the dream”.   
  
Graduation eventually came and went, my friends and I dispersed into the real world, and my mom remarried and moved to Texas. My sense of community was lost, and I started to question my own sense of community. Where do I fit now? Who am I without my parents, school, and friends? Who is going to guide my steps now? These and many more questions raced through my head. All I wanted was to feel connected again.

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

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

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

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

**Sara Doyle**

**I Belong**

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

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

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

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

Let’s not neglect the vertical connection! We frequently talk about the cross as a reminder of Christian relationships. We connect to God vertically and we connect to one another horizontally. In July, St. John’s celebrated the 100th birthday of the sanctuary by unearthing a long-buried time capsule. As the precious treasures were pulled from their hiding place, one of our senior members, whose family has been at St. John’s for generations, made sure that I had a good view of the event. That small gesture from a long-standing member toward a newcomer demonstrated that the horizontal history of St. John’s belongs to all our members, old and new. It reinforced a meaningful connection. This is something that we can do for our students, too. At home that night I shared the day’s events with my family. When we talked about the original design of the church, my daughter eagerly shared what she knew of the now hidden panel of stained glass behind the altar. This “inside information” had been provided by her art teacher, and my daughter took pride in knowing a part of the sanctuary’s history. New to St. John’s, she is increasing her connectedness and claiming its history as her own, helped along by an art lesson. Imagine the small ways that you can help students connect both vertically and horizontally! Small gestures can make a significant difference in how effectively our students and their families connect to God and others.

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

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

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

**Robin Gomes**

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

Again.

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

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

Grant cried, but quickly decided the room was ok.

Sarah was shy, Lindsey was not. AJ, Lily, Logan and Elias walked in as veterans. “We’ve got this”.

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

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

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

Quinten, Grant, Sarah, Lindsey, AJ, Lily, Logan, Elias, Darby. God has called you by name, and you know what? You are His, and oh how blessed you are. Our God is an awesome God.

This year will be amazing, from the view of a 25 inch tall preschooler and beyond.

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

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

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

*I remember a story a good friend told me about her first year as an assistant principal.*  *She worked with a teacher who frequently referred the same boy to the office for misbehavior.*  *Although the boy (I’ll call him Billy) deserved the consequences he received, the teacher was convinced he was impossible to help and really wanted him out of her class. One day when the teacher had endured an especially rough time with Billy, my assistant principal friend asked if she could take her for a drive during her plan period.*

*The teacher agreed and before long, they had driven a short way from the school and parked in front of a home that was so neglected, it could have been condemned.*  *“Why are we here?” the teacher asked.*

*“Because this is where Billy lives,” said the assistant principal.*  *They sat in silence for a minute. My friend just let it sink in.*  *Suddenly, the teacher burst into tears. “I had no idea,” she cried.*  *That drive changed the way she saw her student.*  *Billy didn’t get any easier to manage, but her heart toward him had changed. Now when she disciplined him, there was something different about her tone and motivation. \**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So, what do you want to *be?* A loved, redeemed, forgiven, child of God washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is finished (John 19:30).

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

**Sarah Salzberg**

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

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

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

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

An excellent academic education is important, but as Lutheran educators we are called to provide more with the help of the Holy Spirit.

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

**Lisa Ellwein**