



Welcome to *Moments with Matthew*, the NC Synod's 2020 summer Bible reading plan.

This study is the result of efforts from a variety of your fellow Lutherans from across North Carolina, both clergy and lay, and is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry. In continued celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women in the ELCA (and predecessor bodies), all writers for *Moments with Matthew* are women. We are thankful for their voices!

Begin each day's reading by first reading the corresponding chapter from the book of Matthew and then reading the lesson which includes a thought-provoking devotional, some questions, and a prayer.

In her introductory reading, the Rev. Dr. Katherine Shaner invites us this summer to “read the Gospel of Matthew and its moments a little differently this summer,” moments specifically for living, loving, and faithfully creating communities in unusual times. (And hasn't 2020 been unusual?) The Engage the Bible Task Group is excited offer this Bible reading plan for you—and the whole synod—to do just that!

We pray the Holy Spirit's richest blessings on your journey this with *Moments with Matthew*.



Reading 1 Introducing Moments with Matthew

Matthew's gospel has so many wonderful moments scattered through its pages: the visit of the Magi; Mary, Joseph and Jesus become refugees in Egypt; the Sermon on the Mount; the resurrection of the dead when Jesus is crucified; the great commission. This summer, I hope you will join me in exploring these moments with the North Carolina Synod. Many of these moments ask questions about how to live faithfully in community. How should a community care for its members? How do we gather together? What do we do when we disagree? How do we invite others to join our faith community? As

Lutherans in this moment in our collective human history—during the Great Pandemic of 2020—we are asking many of these same questions about our communities and way of faith.

Matthew was likely written sometime in the 80s CE. That's about 50 years after Jesus's crucifixion and nearly 15 years after the Romans brutally destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. Some parts of the Jewish world were roiling still, trying to rebuild and resist Roman domination. Other Jewish groups, like the Pharisees, were flourishing all around the Mediterranean rim. Their emphasis was less about temple rituals and more about strong local communities and religious education. Contemporary readers often (and unintentionally) read Matthew as warning against Jewish practice—"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Matt. 13)—but that doesn't work since Jesus also tells his followers that not a single, itty, bitty bit of the law goes away with his coming and that their righteousness must *exceed* that of the Pharisees (Matt. 5:17-20). What if Matthew's gospel does not condemn the Pharisees or Jewish practices, but rather challenges the community to deepens their impulse toward mercy, generosity, and justice—impulses that were already deeply ingrained in Jewish faith and practice?

I know, I know, that's not very Lutheran. But neither was Matthew. Or anyone in the community for whom he was telling the Jesus story. The first readers of Matthew probably understood themselves as Jewish Jesus-followers—the term Christian wasn't invented yet. Nonetheless, we have much to learn from our ancestors (and contemporaries) in faith, especially since they, too, were/are living in an unprecedented time when their usual ways of being community were no longer possible or available.

I encourage you to read the Gospel of Matthew and its moments a little differently this summer. Those moments are full of wisdom for living, loving, and faithfully creating communities in unusual times.

To Consider:

- How has community-gathering changed in your lifetime? In this moment?
- What connects you most vividly to your faith in such moments of change?

Faithful God, you draw us into moments with you and with your Word that we cannot anticipate or sometimes even understand. Give us courage to follow where those moments lead, assurance of your presence, and joy in the new communities you are building. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Katherine A. Shaner teaches all things New Testament at Wake Forest University School of Divinity where she is an Associate Professor. She is also a third-generation ELCA pastor and the human to Karl Bark, a schnauzer who has theological ideas of his own (see his forthcoming book, *A Revised DOGmatics*).





Reading 2 So Many Names—Matthew 1

A couple of things right off the bat. To start with, the first 17 verses of Matthew's gospel give me a headache! Nothing but genealogy. Name after name after name. It's like Ancestry.com gone crazy! The names go on and on and make my eyes cross. Names that I can't even begin to wrap my tongue around.

Seriously! If the author insists on listing so many names, wouldn't it be a good idea for someone to come up with a translation where the names have at least been changed into something more easily pronounceable? Why not change Aminadab and Jechoniah into Allen and Jack?

And second, I don't even recognize half these names...and I'm a pastor, for goodness' sake! I know a fair amount of Bible stuff! Who are Perez and Salmon anyhow?

Prior to the pandemic and the practice of social distancing, the staff and any visitors in the synod office, gathered each Tuesday morning at 10:00 a.m. for devotions in the chapel. (Now, we do it via Zoom.) During our time together, included in our prayers this year (2019-2020), we have been naming the rostered women of color across the ELCA—about ten each week (2019 is the 40th anniversary of the first ordination of a woman of color in the Lutheran church, the Rev. Earlean Miller). Some of their names are hard for me to pronounce. African. Latina. European. Middle Eastern. Asian. The first time I was naming them aloud in prayer, I chose to call them only by their first names. That made me more comfortable. That was not faithful. The challenge of pronunciation helps me remember that God uses people of every language, place, and name to incarnate the love of Jesus.

God places all of us in the long line of those who take part in bringing Jesus to birth in the world. God uses people whose names I recognize and can easily pronounce (the Abrahams and Ruths) and those I do not know (the Perezes and Salmons). And God uses saints and scoundrels and murderers and women and men and you and me to incarnate the Christ. Whatever your name, you matter. You are part of the genealogy.

To Consider:

- Whose name(s) have you been surprised to see/experience as part of Jesus' family tree?
- When have you seen yourself as part of Jesus' genealogy?

Loving God, you knit each one of us into your family tree—that Jesus, your Son, may show forth in all we do and say. Open our eyes to see Christ incarnate in all of your children everywhere. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Rev. Sara Ilderton serves as Assistant to the Bishop for Candidacy and Boundaries. She and her husband, Cliff, are the parents of two teenagers (so far, there have been minimal injuries).





Reading 3 “Where is Jesus?”—Matthew 2

The congregation of which I am a member, Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, has a closet full of elegant, regal wise men costumes with matching crowns and faux gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some of the costumes are for wise women, and some represent countries and cultures from around the world.

For years we have had beautiful Epiphany Day services honoring the showing forth of the birth of Christ to all nations. In addition to the kings, we also adorn the sanctuary with flags from many nations. You might say that on Epiphany Day, January 6, we pay homage to our namesake.

This early chapter of Matthew, where we first encounter the wise men, is full of drama: foreign kings looking for the King of the Jews and deceiving Herod by not returning to him, the wrath of Herod brought down on the Hebrew children, Joseph and Mary escaping to Egypt, and finally, their trip home to Nazareth.

Sometimes, however, we get so caught up in the drama—How many kings? How do we know? What kind of gifts? How expensive and for what purpose? How long did their journey take? They found Jesus in a house?—and overlook the message.

The purpose of chapter two of Matthew seems to be to authenticate the birth of Christ through references to Old Testament prophecies. The words *prophet* or *prophecy* are used four times in this chapter and once in chapter one. For people longing for a Messiah, here is scriptural proof that Jesus is the Promised One.

These travelers, however, although they were fulfilling one of the prophecies, seem to have another reason for their journey: They were seeking Jesus in order to pay homage and give him their gifts.

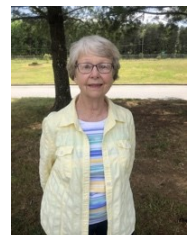
What does this teach us? That our first question every day should be, “Where is Jesus in my life today?” Like the wise men of old, we, too, should be seeking Jesus throughout our life’s journey in order to worship and serve him with the very best gifts we have to offer.

To Consider:

- When, in your daily or weekly life, do you take time to worship and pay homage to Jesus? What helps you?
- In this chapter, three times God speaks to Joseph and the wise men in dreams. How do you hear the word of God speaking to you?

Dear God, bring us to our knees in thanksgiving and worship every day. May the gifts we offer to you in service to others be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Kay Conrad is a member of Epiphany, Winston-Salem, and has recently finished the requirements to become a Lay Preacher of the North Carolina Synod. “The boundaries of her life have fallen in pleasant places,” but she is disappointed that she has never gotten to be a wise person in an Epiphany service.





Reading 4 Remember Your Baptism—Matthew 3

Three chapters into Matthew's Gospel we get to eavesdrop on the conversation between Jesus and John the baptizer. I suspect Jesus' awareness of God's presence in his life evolved over the course of years. No doubt he knew of his unique calling as God's messenger and savior of the world as the prophet had declared long ago. Jesus must now claim his vocation and baptism opens him to the divine affirmation that will strengthen his resolve and focus his energies.

Jesus's Baptism, however, does not come with gentle words and soothing balm. These waters are not calm or crystal pure, and even the sky itself is scarily ripped open by the thunderous voice of God overhead: not your typical church baptism. Certainly, this was a multi-sensory experience!

Martin Luther often said, "Remember your baptism!" Rather than a sentimental journey or an effort to recapture lost enthusiasm, "remember your baptism" is seeking equilibrium on a storm-tossed sea, getting your bearings, remembering who (and whose) you are, and grounding yourself in that assurance.

Which means that the message of baptism—that God has declared that you are enough, that God accepts you just as you are, and that God desires to do wonderful things for and through you—may be just what we each desperately need to hear. This message has never been timelier for we live in a culture that promises acceptance only if we are...skinny enough, young enough, successful enough, strong enough, etc. Whether young or old, steeped-in-the-faith or relatively new, we all crave a sense of identity and are all too likely to succumb to such false promises.

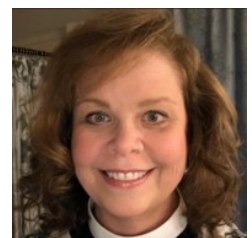
For this reason, there is no better time than now to hear the promise that Jesus lived, died, and was raised again to reveal just how much God loves and accepts us. We each must always remember this: I am God's child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world. You are enough. You are baptized and set free!

To Consider:

- How does God's Spirit work in you today; move through you today; speak to you still today—calling you in this time and place to do new things?
- What transformation needs to happen, even now?

Loving God, thank you for naming and claiming me as your own child. Help me remember my baptism and free me to do your work in your world. Inspire me to share your love through service in our community and beyond. Help me change the world. All this we ask in your name. Amen.

Pastor Judy Lewis Drysdale is the Interim Pastor at Old St. Paul's in Newton. She lives in Hickory with her husband, David, their rambunctious dog, Penny, and her not-loving-the-dog cat, Indy. Pastor Judy is proud of their amazing son, Joshua Copeland, who is finishing his internship and will graduate from United Lutheran Seminary this December.





Reading 5 After Faith Is Tested, Faith Is on the Move— Matthew 4

Matthew was written to a mostly Jewish audience and it seeks to show the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Therefore, it is no accident that Jesus is in the wilderness and there for forty days. It immediately brings to mind the Exodus story and the wandering in the wilderness by the Israelites for forty years. During that time, their faith and trust in God was tested.

Unfortunately, we know that the Israelites all too often failed the test of their faith, as do we. Yet, in Jesus, we see faith that is absolute and complete as he was truly obedient to the law and worshiped God alone. Moses was given the law and it was given to the people. Throughout the exodus and entrance to the Promised Land, the people are always exhorted to keep God's law, the Ten Commandments, etc. In the tempter's very first test, Jesus reiterates the keeping of the law by referring back to Deuteronomy 8 and quotes that, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from God." The devil is testing Jesus: "Are you the son of God?" Yes! Jesus passed the test; he proved it by his faithfulness to God and to God alone.

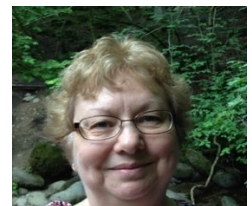
After his testing of faith and preparation time, Jesus gets busy. As we know from Martin Luther: *Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times.* Or, as my seminary professor, Dr. Havens said, "Faith is busy, living, active, and mighty." Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy by beginning in Galilee. Jesus goes to the heart of the villages (the synagogue where everything from politics to religion was discussed), teaching and preaching, saying "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near." Jesus calls the disciples to assist him. Then Jesus continues throughout the area proclaiming the Good News to both gentiles and Jews. As Isaiah prophesied, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. The light is Jesus and we too are called to let our lights shine.

To Consider:

- In what ways is your faith tested? When it is, on what do you rely?
- Scripture often brings to mind hymns; these two come to my mind for this chapter: "Seek Ye First (the Kingdom of God)" and "A Mighty Fortress." How do the words of these hymns reiterate and illuminate this chapter?
- The event of John's death sent Jesus on his public ministry proclaiming the good news; what events cause you to proclaim the good news?

O God, when my faith is tested, may I stand firmly on your holy word in order to renew and deepen my faith. Help me to seek your Kingdom and to proclaim in word and deed your good news. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Pastor Judy Tavela lives with her husband, Tom, daughter, Sara, and two dogs near Emerald Isle. In semi-retirement she enjoys being the interim minister at Grace Lutheran in Little Washington and walks on the beach with her family. She is very blessed and thankful for all of God's goodness to her.





Reading 6

“But /tell you...”—Matthew 5

How much time and emotional energy do you spend comparing yourself to others? We have all kinds of measuring sticks we like to take out to see how we measure up. We have report cards, quarterly evaluations, bank accounts, the number of “likes” on Facebook, the quantity and quality of our friends, our reputations, and even the greenness of the grass in our yards! How about in our spiritual lives? Church attendance, daily devotions, service projects, prayer life, an honest accounting of our sins, forgiving and loving our neighbors... The ways we

measure ourselves are infinite, exhausting, and ensnaring!

In Jesus’s opening to the Sermon on the Mount, we are introduced to a very new and radical measuring stick! First, Jesus takes those who were overlooked as “less than” (the poor, the sad, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted) and elevates them to a place of blessedness. Then, Jesus takes it to those who were revered for their religious piety (before you start feeling too comfortable, remember that many of us “church folks” fall into this category!) and knocks them down a few pegs. “You think that you’ve got gold stars for your adherence to the law. But I say that not committing murder doesn’t make up for the anger you feel toward your brother. But I say that not cheating on your wife doesn’t make up for the lust you have in your heart. But I say that loving your neighbor is too easy and nothing to brag about. Loving your enemy; now that would be something!” And in case you still haven’t gotten the message: “Just be as perfect as God is, okay?”

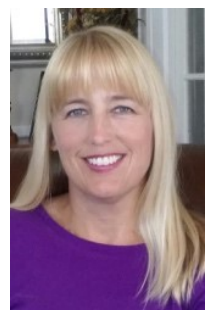
Wow! Impossible, right? Where is the good news here? Read the text again and note verse 17 this time. Not one letter of the law is abolished, but it is fulfilled in Jesus. He accomplished what we so obviously cannot. Jesus breaks our measuring sticks into tiny pieces and then gives us Himself. We are no longer less than we think or more than we think. Only with Jesus are we made complete, whole...perfect. That's good news for all of us!

To Consider:

- It is said that a good sermon comforts the afflicted AND afflicts the comfortable. What in this famous sermon afflicts you? What comforts you?
- What are your particular measuring sticks? (Then figuratively break them over your knee!)

Lord Jesus, thank you for accomplishing all that I cannot. Remind me of my true worthiness when I am tempted to measure myself. Protect me from arrogance and from false humility and fill me with your peace. Grant me the grace to share the peace I've found in you with those around me. In your name, Amen.

Julie Russell is a member of Macedonia Lutheran Church in Burlington. She loves her husband, Chris, her teenagers, Ethan and Riley, and her crazy dog, Charlie. When she's not busy with church, school, soccer, and marching band, she enjoys reading, gardening, and jigsaw puzzles.





Reading 7 Hey Neighbor!—Matthew 6

We have sat on this mountain before. Patches of grass and rocky soil leave little comfort for our bottoms, but we hardly notice. Jesus speaks in a way that captivates our imaginations. Even now, as we sit six feet apart and turn our masked faces towards him, Jesus draws us back to the Holy One. His words sound familiar and new. But as I listen in the midst of this global pandemic and this continuing struggle against white supremacy, his words cause me to wonder... What does the kingdom of God look like? How can God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Don't get me wrong, I yearn for this kingdom. Even though I don't fully understand it, even though I'm going to have to change my ways, I really want to be about what Jesus is about. I wonder if we could try to follow him together. We are neighbors after all. Do you think we could try this together?

You could hold me accountable! I am a serious worrier...maybe you can remind me that God does provide? It's hard for me to remember that with all the violence and bad news on TV. I'm afraid of everything some days! And sometimes I struggle with how I prioritize my money. I mean, who would have thought we'd be scavenging for toilet paper in 2020?!?! And with the unemployment rate so high, well, I am really careful about how I spend my money in case the worst happens. Would you be willing to talk finances sometime? I'm curious how other people are handling this.

Yea, I'm glad we ran into each other too. Funny how you can live across the street from someone or even in the same home and never take the time to talk. It means a lot to me that we could have this conversation. I know conversations like this can be awkward. Your listening means so much and am glad we can encourage each other when we get back home! Jesus has given us so much to consider.

To Consider:

- As you read Matthew 6, what segment speaks most to you now?
- Who supports you as you seek to embody the good news? Call them or write them and say thank you.

God who creates mountains and seas, you have been with us since the beginning. Open our ears to hear your word more fully. Open our hearts to receive your word more fully, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Jennifer M. Manis serves Lutheran Campus Ministry and Holy Trinity in Raleigh. She finds calm during this stay-at-home time walking her dog, singing, and talking with friends. She met her first female pastor in 2003 and is grateful for the many women and women pastors who have mentored her in faith and vocation.



[extra page]



Reading 8

Good Advice Is Not Good News—Matthew 7

Chapter 7 brings us to the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and, as in the previous two chapters, it is chock full of some of Jesus' most quotable quotations. They have taken on almost proverbial status as one-liners, usually lifted out of context. Admittedly, some of them work well as stand-alone proverbs. We might all do well to remember the log in our own eye when examining the speck in our neighbor's eye in our interactions on social media.

However, as Matthew is at pains to show us, good ethical advice, scrubbed free of the particularity of Jesus the Messiah—the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel—is not the Gospel.

Bearing this in mind, Jesus tells us not to judge—not for the sake of being nice—but because we are not The Judge—he is. Throughout the rest of Matthew's Gospel, we will see more images of Jesus as the Judge, just as we do in 7:21-23. We prefer to skip over these parts; they make us squeamish. We hate judging.

But a quick gut-check will reveal that we hate human judgment. For God, who is goodness, to uphold the Good—that's good news! And that's what Jesus is showing us here. To not judge others (which is to let God be God), to see the log in our eye (which is to confess our sins), to ask (which is to pray), to do the good to others we would like in return (which "good" Jesus tells us is found in the law and the prophets)—this is the good that the true judge upholds.

And that is the other context. Not only was Jesus a Jew, he was the Son of God, who himself was—and is—the exemplification of this goodness. To live in accord with the Sermon on the Mount is not to try to live up to the impossible standards of an arbitrary judge. It is to be drawn into the life of God, who is good, and calls the church into this goodness. That's worth a lot more than good advice!

To Consider:

- How does remembering that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sermon on the Mount change how you read it?
- How does remembering that this Sermon is for the community - the church - and not just you as an individual, change how you read it?.

Good and gracious God, thank you for the gift of Jesus and his Sermon, which shows us what life in you looks like. Help us see and confess our sin, and give us grace to live according to your will and goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Laura Weant is privileged to be the pastor of the good folks at Bethany Lutheran in Boone, where she enjoys daily sunrises over the mountains, the sound of the babbling brook in her backyard, chasing chickens, avoiding her children when they're arguing, and talking theology with her pastor-lumberjack-husband. Also, music. And faking-it at gardening.





Reading 10 Daughter, Your Faith Has Made You Well— Matthew 9

This chapter of Matthew is full of great stories of Jesus' ministry but there is one pericope within this chapter that stole my attention. In Matthew 9:18-26 a man comes to Jesus to tell him that his daughter has died and asks Jesus to come with him to lay his hands on her and while he is on his way to attend to that a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years touches Jesus's clothes and is healed. Jesus seeks out this mysterious person who touched him in the crowd and says to her, "Take heart,

daughter; your faith has made you well." Then when he arrives at the home where the daughter has died, he proclaims that "she is not dead but sleeping" and with a touch of her hand, she is indeed alive.

What makes Jesus' encounters with these particular unnamed women significant is that by Jewish purity standards, these women are unclean the first being dead and the second because she is bleeding. However, it is essential to note that Jesus seeks neither of these touching encounters out, he is begged by a grieving father to lay hands on the little girl and grasped in a crowd by a desperate woman.

The parallel between the grieving father and the bleeding woman is this, their last hope is Jesus. Their last hope is this new traveling Rabbi they have heard tell of in their community that they without really knowing him have chosen to believe in. And their hope was well placed. The healing of the woman who has been suffering for twelve years takes place, not at the woman's touch, but at the word of Jesus. In this Gospel, the word of Jesus has power. The words of Jesus have more than just healing power Jesus' touch has "saved" her and that same touch raises a girl from death. A desperate father and a broken woman both from different places in the societal hierarchy now in a similar need because of illness chose to put their last hope in Jesus in a time when they were in great need. Our hope too is found in Jesus who is still moving in and among all types of people saving the weak and the weary in unexpected ways.

To Consider:

- When have you had to place your hope in the unknown?
- How has your faith in Jesus made you well?

Gracious God, we give you thanks that so often that when we put our hope and faith in you it makes us well. Our faith gives us the gift of relationship with you and with one another, centers our days and guides our actions. Be with all those in desperate need of your healing words in their lives this day and always. Help us to move in and among those in needs as your hands and feet working in the world. Amen.

A live worship artist and one-time Disney pirate, Stephanie Burke now has the great joy of being the ELCA Regional Gift Planner for the Carolinas. She is spending quarantine with her husband Matthew watching five baby barn swallows learn to fly and binging on African safari videos.





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Cassie McIntosh Overcash is the pastor at Grace Lutheran in Thomasville, North Carolina. She enjoys crafts, time with her dogs, and her family.





Reading 11 Called by Name—Matthew 10

Jesus names, calls, and equips his disciples to heal, preach, and teach in his name. Jesus warns the disciples they will encounter opposition and lack of resources, not always being welcomed along the journey. Despite difficulty, the disciples were encouraged to continue their journey regardless of what was encountered along the way.

Like Jesus' disciples, we too are named and called by God to proclaim God's Word. Like Jesus' disciples, we daily encounter disease, social expectations, temptations, and all things pull us away from God's love. When faced with opposition, how do we respond? Are we like the disciples, equipped to serve regardless? Are we like the latest Marvel film, ready to jump into the battle? Or, are we like the Hallmark character, finding life's fulfillment in a 50-minute movie?

Regardless of what Hollywood wants us to think, many of us do not encounter perfectly-crafted Hallmark moments or fight superhero battles. We live somewhere in between—encountering God in the small daily spaces of our lives. In these small spaces, we find God calling us, naming us, equipping us to be disciples who go out and proclaim a message of grace. Using the passions, skills, and gifts God gives each of us, being disciples looks different for each of us. Yet, one thing does not change: each of us are invited by name to be a part of God's story.

God is calling you by name to be a disciple. How will you respond?

To Consider:

- What is Jesus summoning you towards?
- In what ways, skills, or abilities is Jesus equipping you to be a disciple?

God, we give thanks for naming and summoning us as your disciples. Equip us to faithfully follow and serve you no matter what we face every day. Thank you for the grace you so freely give so that we can participate in your story. In Christ's name, Amen.

Deacon Susan Jackson serves as the Coordinator of Youth and Families at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Wilmington. Susan loves baking, the beach, Disney, and learning about historical stories of communities.





Reading 12

The Love between Cousins—Matthew 11

My grandparents had nine children, eight of whom survived to adulthood, so I have many first cousins. My cousin Tom introduced me to my husband Jim, so we're close. Sometimes cousins are close to one another because they are close in age. Tom and I are only a year apart. Sometimes cousins are close because they live near one another. Since I have married and moved to Raleigh, Tom and I live close to one another. With Jesus and John the Baptist, both reasons may also be true.

It's traditionally understood that Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins. The ministries of Jesus and John barely overlap, yet Jesus spends time in this chapter praising John the Baptist.

We can assume they are close. In fact, John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River at the beginning of Mark. That's a significant moment in Jesus' life, and the beginning of his ministry. Jesus tells the crowds in Matthew 11:10 that John is more than a prophet:

"This is one about whom it is written,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'"

That was indeed what John did. As Jesus said, he did not wear "soft robes." Rather, he wore camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. To me, he's a wild man. But people definitely took notice of John.

Their relationship was pre-ordained: when Mary was pregnant, she went to see her relative Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John. He leapt for joy when Mary drew near.

The Bible does not tell us how Jesus reacts to the death of John the Baptist in Chapter 14, only that he withdraws to a deserted place by himself. Even then the crowds do not allow him to mourn—this is when he performs one of his greatest miracles, the feeding of the Five Thousand. Even at such a joyous time, he is surely missing his cousin.

Jesus could not have begun his ministry without John. Repent, John said, and believe in the Good News.

To Consider:

- In what ways can you prepare the way for Jesus today?

Father God, thank you for people who lead us to Jesus. Help me to be one of those people. Amen.

Susan Shinn Turner lives in Raleigh with her husband, Jim. She is a staff writer for St. John's Lutheran Church, Salisbury.





Reading 13 Recognized by Our Fruit—Matthew 12

Make a tree good, and its fruit will be good. Or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.
Matthew 12:33

How many times have you gone to a produce stand or farmers' market and purchased fruit? You pick out what looks good. You take it home, wash it, cut it open. You take that first bite and realize that this fruit tastes horrible! You think to yourself why is this fruit so bad? Then you realize

that perhaps it came from a bad tree.

Trees require lots of love just like we do. They must be watered, fed, pruned, and protected from the elements. We want to ensure that the fruit we grow is good on the inside as well as outside. This is how we also raise our children. They are like our little fruits. We must love them, feed them, nurture them, teach them so that when they are ready, they can go into the world to be good citizens. What we do for our children determines how they will grow.

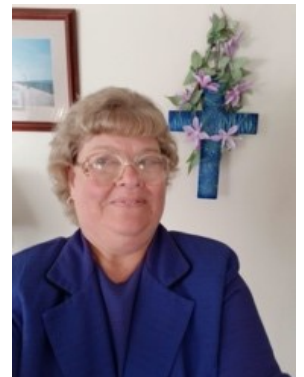
A tree is judged by the fruit. We are all God's trees. If we are good trees, we will produce good fruit. Even if a person has no children, they are still one of God's trees and can go into the community to serve and therefore produce good fruit.

To Consider:

- What will you do today to be a better tree?

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving me the gift of life. Please continue to help me produce healthy fruit so that our world can be a better place. Amen.

Sharon Benton has been a member of Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Raleigh since 1984. She is involved several community organizations serving the blind and visually impaired community.





Reading 14

Parables and Powerful Questions—Matthew 13

Chapter 13 introduces parables for the first time in this gospel. It comes at a precarious time for Jesus. In Chapter 12 we learned the Pharisees were beginning to plot to kill him and in Chapter 14 (spoiler alert) we will learn of the execution of John the Baptist. Here we find Jesus sitting in a boat on the sea speaking of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God through parables. A parable is defined as a simple story using everyday things to convey a message often about major religious themes (the Kingdom of God, importance of prayer, meaning of love). The use of parables for teaching was familiar to the Jews so this is a natural method for Jesus to adopt.

importance of prayer, meaning of love). The use of parables for teaching was familiar to the Jews so this is a natural method for Jesus to adopt.

Jesus begins with the Parable of the Sower. Then the disciples question his method, asking “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answers that the disciples have the gift of understanding “Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear” (v.17). He explains the parable and tells them that those who understand these parables are genuinely blessed; they both understand what they are hearing and show the Spirit is working within them. These disciples will be called to go and make disciples, teaching others what they know. So, what does all this mean for us?

We know the Spirit came as an advocate for all of us. As a member of the priesthood of all believers, called to be disciples of Christ, we can ask the Spirit to help us see and understand as well. In coaching, we use powerful questions to help clients find the answers they already have within themselves. When you are reading Scripture, you can use the same technique. Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and then read this chapter all the way through and ask yourself:

To Consider:

- Which of these parables sparked my interest? Did something make me uncomfortable?
- What questions come to mind as I reflect on this parable?
- What in my life does this parable speak to?
- What does the Spirit want me to learn from this parable?

Gracious God, Holy Spirit, guide us through your Word. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the message you would have us know. Through our wondering, our questioning, and our wrestling, lead us to your truth and the abundant understanding and peace that comes from you. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Heidi Kleine is an ACC certified coach with the ELCA focused on Congregational Vitality, Leadership and Discipleship. She also enjoys equipping the saints in her role as Director of Faith Formation at Christ the King in Cary. In what time remains, you can find her on the front porch sharing great conversation over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine.



[extra page]



Reading 15

Human Pride and Christ's Love—Matthew 14

Herod is pretty sure this Jesus he keeps hearing about is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod remembers John's death because he ordered it. John told Herod to his face that it was unlawful for Herod to be "having" his brother's wife, so Herod used the power vested in his political position and had John imprisoned. At Herod's birthday party, he is so delighted by the dance of a young woman that he promises her anything she wants. She wants John's head.

So far, this story feels far away from my life. I'm not the ruler of a great dynasty. I don't have the power to imprison someone because they called me on my bad behavior. I cannot imagine being so pleased by something that happened at my birthday party that I would say, "I'll give you anything you ask of me." It feels like a story about people who are wholly unlike me—until we get to verse 9 and read, "The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison."

The king was grieved, yet he felt stuck, and he did something he didn't want to do because people were expecting him to do it. Now, this is my story. I have gone along with things I didn't want to do because I felt stuck and others in the room expected me to do it. I have known what is right and done something different. I have chosen not to use my privilege to stop something I should have stopped. I lament the truth of this, but it's still true. I am not wholly unlike Herod.

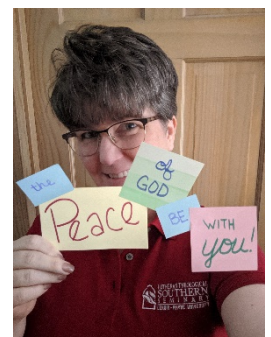
When Jesus heard about John's execution, he didn't run to Herod to set things straight, to take revenge. He took some time by himself (v.13). When others interrupted him, he drew near to them, not away (v.14). When they got hungry, he fed them abundantly (vv. 15-21). When they were sick, he healed them (v. 14, 36). This is our Savior, who uses his power for love of neighbor. We do not deserve such love, but it is poured into us. In turn, we can pour ourselves out for the sake of the world God loves.

To Consider:

- Call to mind a moment when you did not use your power to speak up and stop something hurtful from happening. Take three breaths as you dwell in that memory. If you could do it again, what would you do or say differently?
- How is God equipping (feeding, healing, teaching) you for next time you find yourself with a choice about speaking up and shaping a conversation or event?

God of second chances, forgive me for the times I have protected my pride or position while my neighbor was hurting. Grant me clarity to see, courage to speak, and generosity to act in service of my neighbor. I pray this in the name of Jesus, who is my example and my Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Jennifer Lynn Shimota is the Coordinator of Seminary Enrollment at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary of Lenoir Rhyne University in Columbia, SC. Her first grandchild will be born right around the time this devotion is published. When you see her, she promises to wear a mask and keep some distance when she whips out her phone to show you pictures of him.





Reading 16

The Faith to Persevere, the Courage to Show God's Love to All—Matthew 15

Has your faith been tested by the completely unexpected pandemic? Because of the coronavirus, we find ourselves filled with uncertainty, anxiety, fear, or for many maybe even panic with things changing quickly and a constant barrage of distressing news reports. We fear for ourselves and for our loved ones, especially if we or they are in vulnerable populations or are at risk.

Following a confrontation where Pharisees complained that Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate, Jesus went out to the country where he met a Canaanite woman. The woman followed Jesus and asked for healing for her daughter, "Have mercy on me...My daughter is severely demon-possessed." Against all odds, even when it appeared that she was being ignored and turned away, the woman persevered. She persevered when the disciples urged Jesus to "send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." She persevered when Jesus was silent. She persevered when Jesus made it clear that He was not sent to Gentiles like her. She knew who Jesus was and trusted, believed, and hoped in Jesus! Finally, her plea was answered. With a faith that wouldn't give up, she kept hanging on to the hope that Jesus would have mercy on her and help her, and He did!

Jesus is an example to his disciples and to us of how to be mission-focused but with the life-giving truth that God loves all people and teaches us to show compassion and stand against those who deny human rights and dignity to anyone. It seems intentional and appropriate that later in this chapter Jesus fed a crowd of four thousand, a sign that He could meet the needs of the nations.

Maybe it seems that God is silent as we endure trials but let us have faith like the Canaanite woman. It is in uncertain, changing times like we are living in now, and against all odds, that God calls us to trust, believe, and hope in Him. Let us not lose hope or give up but let us persist in faith and prayer.

To Consider:

- Jesus described the Canaanite woman as having "great" faith. How do you think He would describe your faith?
- The Canaanite woman was certainly an "outsider." Reflect on what you do and don't do, see and disregard, or hear and ignore when it comes to showing hospitality or caring for "outsiders," those in a different race, custom, or culture.

Good and gracious God, keep us faithful in our calling. Help us to have the faith to know that you hear our prayers and to persevere. God of mercy and hope help us to see the needs of those around us and to respond with love. Amen.

Diana Haywood is the Vice President of the North Carolina Synod. She is a member of Church of the Abiding Savior in Durham, NC where she enjoys cooking, listening to music and spending time with family. She and her husband Jim are the proud and loving parents of sons, Tony and Chris, and devoted grandparents to TJ and Zachary.





Reading 17 One Bite at a Time—Matthew 16

For years, humans have been trying to boil down the Bible into bite-sized, easily-digestible chunks. One of the more infamous attempts to make the Bible easier to digest comes from Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson sat at his desk with a razor, carefully cutting out the chunks of text that detailed the seemingly indescribable pieces of Jesus' life, namely his miracles and resurrection.

I'm not going to suggest that we follow in the footsteps of Jefferson and begin removing the pieces of Scripture that don't make sense to us, but I am going to share that Matthew 16 helps me empathize with Jefferson. This relatively short chapter from Matthew's Gospel tells five different stories, none of which can be left out without greatly skewing the scope of this chapter.

It begins with the Pharisees' and Sadducees' demand for a sign, moves into Jesus' warning about the Pharisees' and Sadducees' teachings, details Peter's accurate declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, quickly turns to Jesus rebuking Peter, and then ends with Jesus' command to take up our crosses and follow him. Whew. That's a lot.

While these stories may feel unrelated, when read together, they help us to see a more complete picture of Jesus. They show us that Jesus used imagery that was familiar to his listeners to help them understand his life and mission. They show us that Jesus couldn't do it alone; he relied on the witness of his disciples to share the Good News. They show us that Jesus never promised us that life would be easy or without pain, but that life with Jesus is infinitely better than anything we have to give up to follow him.

In these days when news breaks so quickly and turns from bad to worse before we can blink, I'm particularly grateful for passages of Scripture, like this one, that force me to slow down and pay attention. They remind me that with Jesus at our side, we can get through hard things in life the same way we get through hard passages in Scripture: one bite at a time.

To Consider:

- When you slowly read through this chapter, is there anything you notice that you hadn't noticed before? What details jump out at you the most?
- Do these little things help you to better understand the person and work of Jesus? Why do you think this is?

Jesus, our friend, help us to slow down so that we may know you for more fully, serve our neighbors more lovingly, and trust in your promises more confidently. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

Julie Tonnesen is a 2019 graduate of Duke Divinity School and a candidate for ordination in the ELCA. She just wrapped up her internship year at Macedonia Lutheran Church in Burlington, NC and serves as the LEAF (Lutherans, Episcopalians, and friends) Campus Minister at Elon University. Julie loves hikes with her dog Gracie, strong coffee, and checking things off her to-do lists.





Reading 18 High on the Mountain—Matthew 17

There is a lot going on in Matthew 17. The chapter begins with a narrative of the Transfiguration, Jesus curing an epileptic man, and forewarning the disciples about what would happen to him, among other things; but the high point (pun intended) for me is the experience on the mountaintop. Many important things happen on mountaintops. Moses received the tablets containing the law on a mountain. Jesus was tempted by Satan high up on a mountain peak. And Jesus preached a sermon from the mountain, commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount.

I love going to the mountains of North Carolina, driving on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and looking at the vistas below. High on the mountain, you can see for miles down into the valley. On a clear day, you can see the skyline of Charlotte, fifty or so miles away, from the top of Grandfather Mountain. Just as we can see far distances from the top of the mountain, Jesus could see into the future. He knew they had to go back down the mountain.

As much as Peter wanted to remain on the mountaintop, they had to return to the valley. J. William Harkins, III writes, “The valley is where Jesus continued his ministry.” As much as we would like to remain on the mountaintop, we too must return to the valley, where our work continues. We all know that life is not lived only on the mountaintop. In fact, a lot of life happens in the valley.

Our lives often seem like mountains and valleys, a roller coaster, if you will, with highs and lows, ups and downs; but Jesus is with us on the mountain and in the valley also. As much as we long to stay on that mountaintop, we must go into the valley, to feed the hungry, to clothe the poor, to welcome the stranger. We all occasionally need a mountaintop experience; but then we must return to the valley, to face the reality of life—with Jesus always by our side

To Consider:

- Have you ever had a “mountaintop experience?”
- How, if at all, did it change your life?

God, you come to us you on the mountain, in the valley, and everywhere in between. Walk with us as we go up and as we come down. Open our eyes to see the realities of life. Amen.

Susan Harris is a lifelong member of Salem, Lincolnton. She is married and has two grown children and five grandchildren. Susan and her husband divide their time between Lincolnton and Blowing Rock. She previously served as president of the NC Women of the ELCA and currently serves on the NC Synod Council.





Reading 19 Living Forgiveness—Matthew 18

“I forgive you.”

These three small words came out of the mouths of my nieces and nephews often as I visited family earlier this summer. Days were filled with normal sibling behavior—stealing toys, stepping on fingers, eating each other’s snacks, or just looking at a sister the wrong way. Their parents have taught them to apologize, and respond with “I forgive you,” when they have been wronged. The words struck me each time they came out of a sweet two-year old’s mouth, but

what happened after is what has stuck with me for weeks. Living forgiveness, not just saying it. Abundant grace. It was as if forgiveness truly erased the transgression and fully restored the relationship.

With that sort of example, it’s no surprise that Jesus urges his disciples to become like children at the beginning of Matthew 18. In this chapter we, with the disciples, hear about forgiveness that is life giving to the body of Christ and an example of God’s grace to the world.

The stumbling blocks of sin are all around us. Our lives, our Church, our world, are full of things that separate us from God and one another. Jesus calls us to repent, this is, turn away from the things that cause us to sin, and return to God who is gracious and merciful. Each time, like a sheep that has strayed from God, God forgives and erases the transgression from memory.

In God’s forgiveness for us, we are shown how we are called to forgive others. As God’s forgiveness in Christ has restored our relationship with God, our forgiveness of others mends relationships and builds up the body of Christ. Showing compassion and mercy to those who have sinned against us proclaims God’s goodness and is a witness to God’s love. We are called to be people who not only speak forgiveness, but live it as we continue to love and serve our neighbors together for the sake of the world.

To Consider:

- What are the stumbling blocks of sin in your life?
- How can you model child-like forgiveness? How can you live forgiveness, rather than just speak it?

Loving God, by the death of your Son, you forgave the sins of the whole world. By your grace, help us to show your love as we forgive others, that all might know of the abundant life made possible through your mercy. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Deacon Katie Rivers serves at St. Mark’s in Asheville. When she’s not encouraging discipleship in the life of her congregation, you can find her on the side of a mountain with a fly rod in hand and a basset hound puppy underfoot.





Reading 20 Faith Like a Child—Matthew 19

In addition to serving as a pastor, I work as a professional musician. While learning music, I ask questions: What is the major theme? Where is the tension, the resolution? These questions help me understand the music. These questions work with biblical texts as well.

In Matthew 19, the first three verses set the context. Jesus has “finished saying these things” (v.1), a clue that Matthew has ended the fourth of five teaching sections. Jesus leaves home, Galilee, journeying toward Jerusalem and the grand finale, the crucifixion and resurrection. Here is the first theme. Jesus is healing the crowds. This healing is not simply the cure of symptoms. Jesus transforms the crowds freeing them to live into new life. Jesus’ presence makes them whole.

The tension builds. Like a counter-theme, the Pharisees enter and try to ensnare Jesus with a lengthy discussion about divorce. Then the disciples get confused and start asking questions. Children are brought to Jesus, but the disciples try to push the children away. In Jesus’ day children had no standing in their culture. Instead, Jesus is doing something new. Jesus welcomes and blesses the children

This is the dominant theme, a child, helplessly dependent on God, is the model for what it means to inherit the Kingdom. A radical idea then and now. We receive this entrance into God’s merciful kingdom by grace alone and with the utter dependence of a child. In the midst of play, or even in the midst of a meltdown, children have the amazing gift of tenacious, singular focus. All that matters is the Now. That’s exactly what God’s grace is all about—the new life given to us through God’s grace each moment of every day. Grace and love given as a gift; Jesus blessing the children who are brought to him—new life in the kingdom of heaven.

In the midst of the dissonance and chaos of our world, this new life surrounds us now.

For all that has been, all that is, and all that is yet to be, thanks be to God.

To Consider:

- How do children show you what it means to inherit the kingdom of heaven?
- In times of chaos, uncertainty, and fear where have you felt and seen God’s loving grace?

Blessed Jesus, please give me the faith of a child so that I may be singularly focused on your great love for me. And as I am filled with your love, help me share that love with others through simple acts of kindness and mercy. Amen.

Pastor Laura Wind lives in Winston-Salem with her husband Heath, daughter Catherine, and Nike the dog. In addition to beekeeping, she enjoys gardening, quilting, making music, and plotting her next novel.





Reading 21 Our Absurdly Generous God—Matthew 20

Taking in the 20th chapter of Matthew's Gospel feels at first like feeding on a hodgepodge dinner of leftovers from the fridge. Two stories, a parable, and Jesus' third unsettling prediction of his death (definitely not comfort food).

But in fact, what unfolds here turns out to be a carefully crafted picture of our absurdly generous God. Its opening parable gets under my skin as I side with the all-day workers who sweat in the sun, pulling grapes from brittle vines, and then get riled when the last hires earn exactly what they don't deserve—a full

day's wage. But the landowner's question takes me down: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" The kingdom of heaven is like what happened here, Jesus says. The last will be first and the first, last.

Matthew's Jesus turns right around in the next breath and reminds the disciples and us that God in Jesus has already chosen what to do, to die and rise again, a choice that continues to stump the disciples to the very end.

Then follows the Zebedee boys' predictable misunderstanding of the kingdom Jesus brings. Their mother turns up to appeal on their behalf for seats of honor at the celebration they anticipate. Surprisingly, Jesus not only refuses to blast them for their audacity, but he scolds the other ten, mad as hornets, for their own presumption of status.

Last comes the clincher. Chapter 20 is not only a story about the kingdom of heaven-kind of generosity. No, here Matthew finally shows Jesus himself doing that kind of generosity. With the eyes of the crowd set on him, he stops for two blind outcasts by the roadside. "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" "What do you want me to do for you?" he asks. "Lord, let our eyes be opened." And he, the one who owns everything and could choose to offer nothing, gives them new eyes. Considering that Jesus is no more than a week away from his own death at the hands of those whose eyes are blind to who he is, surely this final healing is packed with significance.

Do we have eyes to recognize this God of radical, upside-down grace? Can you see yourself in those grumbling vineyard workers? Can I recognize in myself the ambitions of the Zebedee brothers? Or am I one of the ten who watch and bristle with anger? Do you and I need the miracle of new eyes? And will we trust our absurdly generous God to give it?

To Consider:

- Which characters in this chapter are most memorable for you? Note Jesus' response to them. If you were in their shoes, how would you receive that response from Jesus?
- Where in your life is healing needed? If God's choice in answering your prayer for healing differs from what you hoped for, how will you renew your confidence in God's generosity and grace?

Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see our need. Give us grace to honor your generosity, even when it puts us in last place instead of first. Amen.

Jennifer Ginn is Senior Pastor of Cross and Crown Lutheran Church in Matthews. A former teacher and editor, she enjoys writing, preaching, and telling gospel stories by heart. She is married to a pastor, and they relax by cooking together and watching PBS mysteries with their Jack Russell Terrier, Brisket.





Reading 22 Important Questions—Matthew 21

Sometimes questions are more important than answers.

I am a middle school English teacher. I spend a lot of time either answering or asking questions. Sometime when a student asks me a question, even if I can easily answer it, I tell the student “Go find out, and let me know the answer.” Usually, I get a sigh and an “Okay.” Sometimes I answer with another question. I do this to involve them in their own learning, or to point to something they already know. I want to make them responsible for their own learning. It’s sneaky and underhanded, but it works.

People questioned Jesus all the time. Who are you? Who’s your favorite? What’s in this for us? How do I forgive? I picture Jesus raking his hair back with his fingers, leaning against a nearby tree or rock, and taking a deep breath. I feel that way a lot. Are you seriously asking me that question? Didn’t I just tell you that?

In Matthew 21, Jesus is questioned repeatedly about his authority. Like a good teacher, he turns the question on those who ask it, making them take responsibility for the answer. They know it but are either afraid or unsure if they want to be responsible for their answer. So, the priests and elders copped out and pled ignorance. Point made. Jesus wanted them to have the faith to affirm the answer they knew and could not give.

Jesus tells two stories. The story in verses 28-32 is the parable of two sons who were asked to go work in the family vineyard. One refused outright and the other replied “Okay” and did nothing. Jesus asked which one obeyed. No answer. The story in verses 33-40, about a vineyard owner, is about taking responsibility. Again, the audience copped out, pleading ignorance. What could they say?

Their answers, or their lack of answers, was much more important than any question they might have asked. They already knew the answers but were afraid to say so.

What are you afraid to say? What are you afraid to take responsibility for?

To Consider:

- Why were the people in authority so afraid to answer Jesus’ questions?
- Read the parable of the two sons. Have you ever been either one of them?
- How are questions in this chapter important?

Gracious God, be with us in our questions. Give us wisdom to ask important questions and patience to hear answers. Make us bold in our action to speak your grace to the world. Amen.

Julie Arndt is a member of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in Lumberton, NC. She is active in Christian education, worship and music, Women of the ELCA, and the congregation council. She has been editor of the monthly newsletter for St. Mark’s, and during the COVID-19 crisis has taken the publication weekly. Julie has a BA in English from Charleston Southern University in Charleston, SC and a BS in Middle Grades Education from UNC-Pembroke. She is a middle school English teacher, avid reader, and wannabe novelist. She has been happily married to Robert Arndt since 2002 and gives him full credit for bringing her into the Lutheran church. They live in Pembroke, NC.





Reading 23

Questions. Questions. Questions.—Matthew 22

A chapter of questions confronts us. For some we know the answer and others raise even more questions.

The chapter begins with a wedding feast to which many have been invited but did not come. Most commentaries believe this was a reference to the Jews having been given the first chance at belief in the Messiah and they turned it down. The people off the street are those who are not Jews, but Gentiles, but who is the person with no wedding garment?

Next come two entrapment questions from the Jewish leaders, one having importance for the political situation—loyalty to the government or rebellion—and the second for the faith community: belief in the rules of the Torah or the prophecies of the Old Testament.

The most famous question of this chapter is probably the next: “which is the greatest commandment”? Our faith, our community, our church, and our lives are based on this answer.

Then the tables are turned and Jesus asks a question. Fortunately for the Pharisees, he answers it for them and effectively shuts them up.

How do we answer the questions posed in this chapter?

Foremost is the last one which Jesus asked, “What do you think about the Christ?”

Our thoughts about this tell a great deal about our faith. I would add to this, “Who do you think he is?” A friend, companion, leader, prophet, visionary, supporter, guide? Is he someone else to you?

The questions which the Jewish leaders asked have some import for us today but I would concentrate heavily on the greatest commandment, how we live it, and who we think Jesus is.

To Consider:

- What was the wedding garment and what does it mean for us today?
- How would you answer the question about which commandment is greatest without the guide of Jesus’ answer?
- What do you think about the Christ? Who is he in your life?

Dear Lord, we ask that as we rely on the greatest commandment and its corollary, you show us in our hearts and souls who you are and how important you are in our lives, Amen.

Laurna Badendeick is a cradle Lutheran and always wanted to be a Lutheran school teacher. She realized that dream at Lutheran High East in Harper Woods Michigan and taught in several other Lutheran schools. She is now retired to North Carolina and has been active in many areas at St. Andrew in New Bern.





Reading 24

Where Is God in the Woe?—Matthew 23

Jesus used the word more than anyone else in the Bible, *woe* is used seven times in this chapter. What is Jesus trying to say? I believe Jesus is trying to get us to wake up and take notice of our choices. Calling each of us to stop living without concern for others and stop accepting and justifying bad behavior. Jesus invites us to start self-examining our actions and our motives. He is calling us to live lives filled with justice, mercy, and faith.

Jesus is explaining how we can get caught up in our choices, without thinking about others. We find the normal around us and

live and act confidently without noticing our behavior patterns. We stop asking the important question: are my choices life giving to others?

Jesus is encouraging us to look inside ourselves, ask the hard questions. He said, "First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean."

In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul writes, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test!" Passing the test means I am growing in my awareness that Christ is present in me. I am living in the grace poured out from Jesus.

Matthew 23 is filled with a heavy message. But, if you take the time to read and see what is being said in the verses, you can really feel the love of Jesus coming through the words. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" God is a God of second chances.

Where is God in the woe? In God's loving insistence that we take care of each other. We think about our lives being life-giving to all those around us. Make choices that are life-giving....I choose kindness.

To Consider:

- How can you practice washing the inside of the cup?
- What is different about my environment when I know I am gathered under the wings of God? What can I do to dwell under those wings?

Gracious God, we thank you for challenging us to think about the welfare of others. We are grateful for your unfailing love and mercy. Help us to live our lives striving for justice, mercy, and faith in all our actions. Amen.

Deb Rosenberg writes: I am a Mom and Grandma, the greatest jobs ever! I have been married for over 30 years to the greatest guy ever. I am blessed beyond words and eager to serve the Lord.





Reading 25

Follow Me and Do Not Fear—Matthew 24

Upon hearing about the chaos, darkness and destruction that will mark the end of the age, one by one, the disciples reveal their anxiety and fear as they approach Jesus privately. They ask big questions such as “How long, O Lord?” and “How will we know the time is here?” Jesus both reassures and challenges the disciples in his response—follow me and do not fear, but it will be painful.

As I write this today in the age of COVID-19, the time feels apocalyptic. Even as I wear a brave face for my children and those around me who are hurting, in the quiet times of prayer, alone with Jesus, I find myself asking different variations of the disciples’ questions.

How long, O Lord, until...

...the illness and death from coronavirus will end?

...separations will become reunions?

...we can worship, sing, and share the Eucharist together?

...the haze of anxiety blanketing our world will lift?

Today, we are living through birth pangs, and Jesus didn’t exaggerate...they are excruciating.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk and gratitude expert, was recently featured on the radio broadcast *On Being*, where he reflected that with time and contemplation, we can see the connections between living through experiences of intense anxiety and transitions to new life. Living in a state of gratitude enables us to see the future opportunity while living through tremendous challenges.

Life-giving opportunities are being born in our midst—the resurgence of the centrality of family, compassion and empathy for our neighbors, a shift toward greater interdependence, healing of the earth, a slower pace and greater simplicity of life—can we see these opportunities? Will we grasp hold of them?

As I live in the awareness of my anxiety today, I am doing my best to embrace it as a companion on the journey. Following Jesus with courage, I am pushing back against paralyzing fear as I cling to God’s promises that our pain will be redeemed, and new life will emerge from death.

To Consider:

- What are your prayers and what life-giving opportunities do you see today?
- What does it look like to walk with your anxiety and follow Jesus in times of crisis?

God of All Creation, out of chaos, you bring order, out of death, you bring new life. Grant us a spirit of peace and a heart filled with faith as we seek to follow you, despite our anxiety and stumbles along the way. Amen.

Deacon Wendy Roberts, Minister of Discipleship at Morning Star in Matthews, NC, has been quarantined with her husband, Chris, two teens, Jace and Lauren, and rescue pup, Trixi. Together they are getting fresh air, playing indoor mini golf and preparing new recipes.





Reading 26 Something Is Missing—Matthew 25

When I first read my assigned text, I was excited to have received it. But after thinking for a short while, I realized that I didn't know how to interpret parables. Then I remembered the book a friend had loaned me, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* by Amy-Jill Levine. From the introduction, I gleaned two important things to remember when reading parables: 1. each person will hear a distinct message and 2. these stories challenge us to look at our values and lives, often bringing up questions and showing us truths we know but don't want to acknowledge. That sounded

daunting.

Reading at face value, the lessons to be learned in these parables seem cut and dry: God is the bridegroom, and you must be ready for his return; God is the master who gives talents to the slaves, and you'd better manage them well; when you care for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned, you're caring for God, so you must respond correctly. Do it right, or else...

But reading these stories in this manner negates Jesus' life and death and contradicts the overarching narrative of God's actions in the Bible. What's missing in these stories is grace, mercy, and love. When we see what life is like without these things, we see that we need Jesus.

When I use Levine's guidance, I further see that these parables raise my tendency to want to be "right" and make me fearful of negative consequences. I also wonder: When am I self-righteous or unwilling to share? When am I so scared of getting it wrong that I don't even try, instead burying an opportunity I've been given? When do I judge people and separate them into categories? How do I exclude others from the kingdom of heaven?

These questions only lead me back to Jesus. I see through Jesus' life that God loves me and all people and that God wants to be in relationship with us. I see through Jesus' life that there is abundant grace and mercy for all. Thanks be to God!

To Consider:

- What do these parables mean for you today?
- When have you experienced divine love, mercy, or grace or helped others know these gifts?

O God, thank you for your presence in my life and for your grace, mercy, and love. Give me opportunities to share you and these amazing blessings with others. Amen.

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Reading 27 Dropping the Ball—Matthew 26

Matthew chapter 26 includes the Last Supper, Jesus praying in Gethsemane, Judas' betrayal of Jesus, and Peter's denial of Jesus. These aren't easy topics to cover. We take away different lessons each time we have read these stories. As I read this in quarantine, Jesus's prayer and Peter's denial stuck out to me.

The disciples stuck out to me in Gethsemane. They dropped the ball and fell asleep on the job. Jesus said to them, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26: 40-41). I often feel like my

spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak. During these times of isolation, it can be easy to lose sight of Jesus. I've dropped the ball on keeping a strong relationship with Christ, like the disciples dropped the ball while sleeping in Gethsemane. It is not hard to stay awake for one hour, just like it is not hard to watch a sermon online; our spirit may be willing, but our flesh is weak.

Peter's denial of Jesus has always been interesting to me. I never understood why anyone would deny Jesus. Jesus is the coolest guy in the world; he walked on water, cured the sick, brought sight to the blind, and is God's son, why would anyone deny knowing him? Now I understand. It's easier to go about life without talking about your faith. I don't think I have blatantly denied Jesus or Christianity, but I have denied myself a strong relationship with Christ and denied sharing my faith with others. In quarantine, I have to be very intentional about talking to God. Without in-person church services and youth group, I have seen less of God because I haven't been looking for God. While this isn't the same denial as Peter's, it's denial nonetheless.

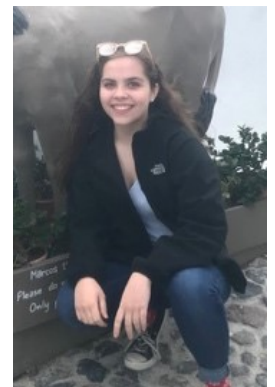
But Jesus still died on the cross, even after his disciples fell asleep on him and Peter denied him. Remember, even when we drop the ball and deny Jesus, we are loved.

To Consider:

- Have there been times in your life when you denied Christ or dropped the ball, like Peter and the disciples in Gethsemane?
- How was your interpretation of Matthew chapter 26 different this time around?

Dear God, remind us that you are there when we stumble and drop the ball. Remind us that no matter how much we deny you, you will never deny us. Help us to follow our willing spirits and turn that willingness into action to serve you. In your name we pray, Amen.

Gillian Kepley (she/her/hers) is a member of St. Philip, Raleigh, a rising senior at Apex High School, and hopes to attend UNC-Chapel Hill after high school. She has served on the LYO Board for three years: VP as a sophomore and senior, and President as a junior. She currently teaches taekwondo for Vision Martial Arts, serves as stage manager for her school's drama program, and as president of Apex High's Key Club.





Reading 28 Two Kingdoms—Matthew 27

The vivid portrayal of Jesus' death on the cross serves as a reminder that the fully divine Jesus is also fully human. He struggles with the fear of death and abandonment. And yet the story of Jesus' suffering and death is something that the Gospel of Matthew portrays as a crucial victory, the triumph of the Kingdom of God. Throughout the gospel—starting at the very beginning with a family tree that shows Jesus to be a descendant of King David (Matt. 1:1-17)—the author is persuading his largely Jewish audience that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, is God's long-promised Messiah.

And here as Jesus' time on earth comes to an end, the crucifixion of the royal Son of God shows us that in the act of execution, it is God who suffers most grievously, completely reframing what it means to be a king: not one who orders bloodshed and vengeance, but one who takes to himself the troubles of his children.

It is perhaps because Jesus in Matthew repeatedly redefines kingship and kingdom that this chapter shows us the stark contrast between the world and its ways and the Kingdom of God. People in positions of power and influence, those with education, wealth, and authority—they are the ones who jeer, question, and ultimately condemn Jesus to death. The crowds of ordinary people are the ones who choose the release of Barabbas over Jesus and the ones who call for Jesus to be crucified.

These contrasts provide sobering reflections for us today. How often are we beguiled and enthralled by people and institutions of the world that point away from the Kingdom of God, while rejecting—even unwittingly—a kingdom where love for one another, obedience to the will of God, and humble service prevail.

To Consider:

- Do you find yourself inspired or bothered by Jesus' cry to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) Have you ever felt forsaken by God? How does your faith help you at such times?
- It is tempting to think that we would not have joined those calling for Jesus to be crucified – yet we all have said hurtful things while caught up in our emotions. Can you think of a time when you did something even though you know you should not have?

Ever-living God, so often we turn from the love you want to share with us to the bright things of this world. When we are led astray, guide our hearts back to you. Remind us of your abiding presence and help us to look to your Son, our Savior, in whose name we pray, today and always. Amen.

The Rev. Beth Woodard is the chaplain at Trinity Elms, a senior-living campus of Lutheran Services Carolinas, in Clemmons, NC, and the part-time interim pastor of St. Michael Lutheran Church in High Point. She lives in High Point, with her husband, son, miniature dachshunds, and cat. Pastor Beth knows she is not the boss of anyone in that household.





Reading 29 Courage and Witness—Matthew 28

The final chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is divided into three parts. Each section tells the reader something about the courage required to be a witness to the Lord of life.

The first section (verses 1-10) deals with the resurrection of Jesus. In this, Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary” go to the tomb where they experience an earthquake and a visitation from an angel of the Lord. The women stand resilient before the open tomb and are told “Do not be afraid.” The women then receive instruction to return and share the good news of the

resurrection. Filled with “fear and great joy”—two perfectly normal reactions to the events taking place around them—they obey. Twice in this short section they are charged with courage and proclamation: “Do not be afraid; go and tell.” They are commissioned as witnesses from the break of dawn on the day of resurrection.

Courage falters in the second section (verses 11-15). We do not know whether the guards who go to the chief priests are the same ones who fainted in the prior section, but we read here of those gripped by fear who also shared what they saw. The report of these guards stands in direct contrast to the women and their joy. Despite the evidence of the resurrection, the enemies of Jesus continue to plot against him. Where resurrection joy is lacking, fear takes hold and fosters deceit.

In the final section (verses 16-20), Jesus commissions his followers. Like the women at the tomb and the guards before the priests, the eleven obey the instruction they receive. Fear and joy co-mingle with doubt as Jesus speaks to them of authority, discipleship, and promise. In this, he declares and shares his divine authority. He charges the disciples to go out into the world and he promises to be with them through it all. Authority and promise empower those who doubt to push past their fear and live into the discipleship they have been prepared for. Sewn into this charge, we hear “Do not be afraid; go and tell,” and we are invited into courageous witness.

To Consider:

- Where do fear and doubt creep into your own witness?
- Jesus instructs his followers to teach others “to obey everything I have commanded”. How would you summarize this teaching to neighbors in a convincing way? Where do you see this work being done in our world today?

Resurrected Lord, roll the stones of fear away from our hearts. Empower your people to go and tell of God's never-ending mercy and grace. Send us out with courage and confidence. Baptize us with the Spirit of love, fill us with your presence, and grant this world your peace. Amen.

Christy Lohr Sapp is the pastor of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Hickory, NC. She loves to travel and eat cheese. She welcomes advice on adding a goat to her family to facilitate chèvre-making and lawn care.





Reading 30

The Light of Faithfulness—Conclusion

I am a lover of Scripture. I find great comfort in knowing that the hope and guidance found in Scripture will never expire or be exhausted. The entrance of the word of God brings light and that light will never be extinguished. No expiration, no exhausting, no extinguishing.

In the study of Matthew, we find a great light shining on the faithfulness of God, and we find the fulfillment of promise and prophecy. Matthew writes to a specific audience, but because God inspires his words, he also writes beyond that audience and reaches us. As we read the Gospel of Matthew in 2020, in the midst of a pandemic, we are blessed to see just how transcendent the light of Scripture is.

The believers of Jewish heritage to whom Matthew primarily wrote would be familiar with the customs, traditions, and prophecies of God found in the Old Testament. Matthew's Gospel resonates with those who have a deep knowledge of what God had already spoken, with those who have already heard the promises of God. The evangelist sheds a great light on Old Testament promises that come into fulfillment through Jesus, beginning with an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Mt. 1). The Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are the first places we see the light shine in Matthew, as the writer illuminates God's faithfulness to the covenants made with Abraham and David. The radiance and suffering of the promised Messiah are displayed throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and God's faithfulness is continued through the new covenant.

As we journey through the Gospel of Matthew, we find a faithful creator. So, let us remember and unveil the faithfulness of God in our own lives. In Matthew we see Jesus, the promised Messiah and our glorious king. It is He who commissions us to go into all the world. We are not commissioned according to our ability or sinlessness, but according to the grace and faithfulness of God. The faithfulness of God shines bright still.

To Consider:

- Where is the faithfulness of God shining in your life?
- What scriptures in Matthew have assured you of the faithfulness of God?

God of all creation, we give you thanks for Your steadfast love. We entrust ourselves to You as a faithful creator. Help us to grasp the hope and assurance Your faithfulness brings. Amen.



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