

Pericope

PARTNERS

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany
2004 - 2005

Pericope Partners, vignettes about ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, interpret the partnership we share as a whole church. These brief thematic illustrations of mission and ministry are suggested by themes from the Revised Common Lectionary Cycle A pericopes for the **First Sunday in Advent** through the **Transfiguration of Our Lord** (November 28, 2004–February 6, 2005). They are intended for use in Sunday bulletins and congregational newsletters.

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The First Sunday in Advent (November 28, 2004)

by Michael Hauck
Division for Church in Society

■ FROM TIME TO TIME I hold workshops and discussion groups on e-advocacy (www.elca.org/advocacy). At first, I expected to be “teaching” people how to use the ELCA’s Web site to find out who their elected officials were and how to use that site to write to them about important issues.

But I was surprised. Every workshop has shown me that there is no end to the energy and enthusiasm of those standing beside me as faithful witnesses. Writing letters to government officials, speaking out about beliefs and values with a simple e-mail, is just a small piece of what “advocacy” means to them. Now, when I facilitate workshops on e-advocacy, the thoughts and emotions and ideas flow abundantly:

What if we got together and talked about current events? What if we supported one other in our local efforts to save Little League? To protect benefits for seniors? To lower the speed limit next to our school? To encourage local liquor-store owners to card? To support our school lunch program? What if we . . . ?

The people of the ELCA are beautiful expressions of God’s wisdom, and passionate examples of our faith. When the ELCA e-advocacy program turns around 100 letters in two days, telling the Attorney General that Lutherans support the rights of women seeking asylum, I know who is writing those letters—faithful Lutherans in the ELCA.

(Inspired by today’s readings)

The Second Sunday in Advent (December 5, 2004)

by Barbara Berry-Bailey
Division for Congregational Ministries

■ JEFF AND I WERE PLANNING the mid-week Lenten series worship. The sermon was a dialog between a 20th-century interviewer and John the Baptizer. Because we had limited financial resources and camel’s hair in urban Philadelphia would have been impossible to find, we decided John would wear faded jeans, a flannel shirt, untied work boots and a red bandana tied around his head.

“John” was the third sermon in the series, so by the time the Baptizer was up, the congregation had gotten used to one of the two of us portraying the biblical figure as the other asked the questions. That evening, Jeff wore a black suit and clerical shirt as he welcomed worshippers, but slipped away during the opening hymn to change his clothes. The Baptizer interrupted my commentary saying, “Repent! Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

All Jeff did was change his clothes, but people did not recognize him. They were so frightened. Some people dropped to the floor fearing that this was a terrorist action. We had to stop the sermon to assure people that everything was okay. I can still hear Jeff saying, “All I did was change my clothes.”

It was not the response we were hoping for. It was a lesson about what people are actually looking at, when you think they are looking at you. It was a lesson about how the message gets lost if people cannot get past the way the messenger looks. (*Matthew 3:1-11*)

The Third Sunday in Advent

(December 12, 2004)

by Heather Feltman
Domestic Disaster Response

■ AUTHOR JAN RICHARDSON writes, “The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before. It is not possible to keep it from coming, because it will. What is possible is not to see it, to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you. So stay. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be enough time for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait.”

Disaster Response is an Advent ministry. Disasters will come and those in the midst of it all can be tempted to rush through the steps to recovery. We can be caught off-guard, or moving too fast to see God’s newness breaking in.

But when we linger, wait, and ponder—even in the dark days of disaster recovery—we see God’s illuminating presence: the prayers offered for comfort and healing, the meals shared in the twilight of the day after hours of removing the used-to-be treasures of someone’s home, and the ears opened and listening to fear, anger, and weariness. The touch, the smile, the tears.

God’s presence and embrace of the lowly can be keenly felt in the darkness, in the stillness. Sometimes we are wise enough to pause and ponder. Sometimes the unexpected gives us no option other than to stop in our tracks. My Advent hope for us is that we may prayerfully search and embrace Advent times and let them give birth to healing, justice and peace.

May our soul magnify the Lord and our spirit rejoice in God our Savior.

(Inspired by Luke 1:47-55)

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

(December 19, 2004)

by Nancy Goldberger
Lutheran Woman Today

■ I USUALLY DON’T GRAVITATE toward words that seem to contain negative imagery. When I first read this text, I didn’t linger long. But when I revisited Psalm 80, I found myself drawn toward it. This time, the words that stood out for me were ones that contained hope.

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” Certainly we don’t utter these words when we are experiencing times of joy. But in our trials and tribulations, we can be assured that there is precedent to cry out for help to a listening, responsive ear.

I have much to be thankful for. My life is richly blessed. But to tell you the truth, I have, as they say, some issues. How will I resolve a potential conflict with a colleague? What will become of the broken relationships that weigh heavy on my heart? What is happening to our country, and how can I live with the strife we are bringing to people in other lands?

When I wake up in the middle of the night, plagued with such thoughts, I know that I do not need to suffer through this alone. I also know that I am like many readers of *Lutheran Woman Today*. These issues are not unique to me. We rest more assuredly knowing that we can pray to our gracious and loving God who knows the contents of our thoughts and our hearts. I can turn these concerns over and then rest until the morning light brings new opportunity to address such topics in the pages of the magazine. “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we might be saved.”

(Inspired Psalm 80:1-7)

The Nativity of Our Lord (December 25, 2004)

*by Len Mason
Department for Communication*

THE MOST COMMON IMAGE associated with the first Christmas is a silent night in a stable. The oblivious people in the inn are tucked into bed, too preoccupied with the upcoming census to notice that the Savior has just been born. It is easy to forget the wondrous way God announced the birth of this Son. During that “silent” night, a group of shepherds received a message of peace, of good news, of salvation.

One of the greatest multimedia events of all time took place in those fields. It began with the angel of the Lord and the glory of the Lord showing all around. This was sure to get everyone’s attention. After reassuring the shepherds that there was nothing to fear, in spite of the somewhat awesome introduction, the angel began his message. It was concise: the purpose (“I bring good news.”), the message (“The Messiah is born.”), and the call to action (“Find him lying in a manger.”). The shepherds wanted to praise God, but were too awed to even utter a whisper. God graciously had thousands upon thousands of angels appear to say exactly what was in the shepherds’ hearts: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

The message of the angels moved the shepherds to action, and those shepherds in turn, became messengers of good news and of peace. This is the role of communicators in the church. We have been given a great message of hope and have been called to share with others, in diverse media, the joy we have found in serving God.

(Inspired by Isaiah 52:7-10)

St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr (December 26, 2004)

*by Anne Basye
Division for Global Mission*

SCATTER AND GATHER, scatter and gather—it’s a regular rhythm of life.

Clouds scatter and gather. Seeds are scattered and gathered. In games like tag or hide and seek, children scatter and gather. In maturity, they scatter into their own lives, and gather with parents for the occasional holiday.

Scattering and gathering are fun when we’re in charge—when we decide where to sow the seed, or which folks we want to meet for worship and fellowship. But when God controls the guest list, our impulse may be to scatter.

Jesus knows how we resist being gathered. But he continues to invite us to respond to God’s gracious gesture. And so we try. “Gathered by God’s grace for the sake of the world” is an ambition our church declares in its vision statement.

Working in the ELCA Division for Global Mission, I’ve begun to glimpse how God gathers North American Lutherans into a communion much larger than ourselves. The 65 million Lutherans in 78 countries linked by the Lutheran World Federation see eye to eye on some basic tenets, but find plenty of places to disagree. Still we celebrate our communion and (knowing that we have been gathered by God) undertones of division fade away.

In 2005, the ELCA Global Mission Events will gather Lutherans from around the world. We will find ourselves learning from people who may share our faith but not our world view. By opening ourselves to ideas that challenge how we live out our faith, we also open ourselves to change and transformation.

Scattering and gathering—they are the rhythm of our lives. When God calls us to gather, may we be bold enough to accept God’s invitation, no matter with whom we find ourselves.

(Inspired by Matthew 23:34-39)

The Second Sunday after Christmas

(January 2, 2005)

by Sue Rothmeyer
Division for Higher Education and Schools

AS PEOPLE FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY gather for worship on this Second Sunday after Christmas, students from across the country are gathering for the closing worship of the National Gathering for Lutheran University and College Students being held in Houston, Texas.

This gathering is indeed a time for young women and men to “rejoice in the dance,” whether learning the Texas two-step during the “Hello Hoedown,” lifting their voices in praise to God, participating in legislative sessions focusing on issues related to church and society, or engaging in conversation with keynote speakers and workshop leaders. The theme for this year’s event is “Houston: We Have a Problem—endeavoring to more fully discover our mission as young adults of faith ... and challenging the church from within.”

Today, the students at the gathering along with congregations across the ELCA will hear the text from Jeremiah that reminds them of the remnant identity of the people of Israel. The gathering’s theme challenges the ELCA not to regard college students as remnants. With intensity and integrity, these students ask difficult questions of themselves and of one another. They sort through the scraps of life, seeking to discern their vocation as people of faith. With passion and persuasion, they ask to be a more visible and viable part of the church. They want to strengthen its fabric and add richness and depth to its texture.

What merriment there will be when young, middle-aged, and old are truly woven together as they carry out God’s mission in the world!

(Inspired by Jeremiah 31:7-14)

The Epiphany of our Lord

(January 6, 2005)

by Myrna Sheie
Office of the Bishop

IT WAS CHILLY AND RAINY as our group climbed a hill in northern India. We were there to visit a community well-digging project sponsored by the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and its partner Lutheran World Relief. A tall, slender, dignified man met us. He wore a simple robe and sandals. He was patient as we acted like tourists and took pictures of him. Our guide had taken a Polaroid picture and gave it to him. None of us thought much of this simple gift, but it was clear that the man was mystified. He told us that he was seeing his image for the first time.

We went to the site where members of the community were using simple tools to build a dam to capture and hold precious rain for use during the dry season.

As we were leaving the site, the man came running. He bowed and gave our leader the simple gift of two eggs wrapped in a square of blue cloth.

The apostle Matthew tells us that the Wise Men paid homage to the baby Jesus and brought him gifts. As a church, we continue to offer gifts, both simple and profound, to our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Because of funding from the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, a village in northern India is more secure because its dam holds water for use during the dry season.

And what of the Polaroid picture? We pray that it is a reminder of the people we represented: the generous members of the ELCA.

(Inspired by Matthew 2:1-12)

The Baptism of Our Lord (January 9, 2005)

by Michael Trice
Department for Ecumenical Affairs

■ I AM AMAZED by the power and promise of water.

I was raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the desert. As children we pursued the serious labor of baseball until the taste of dust on the backs of our throats became unbearable, and we tumbled over to the winding garden hose in front of the house—twenty panting fourth-graders and a single source of water. Together we drank and drank.

Ten years later my college friend Blake was baptized in the stream that still rushes through the middle of a Lutheran Camp in Colorado. In addition to Blake, a Lutheran pastor and twenty college-age camp counselors from various communions in the Christian faith were at this baptism. We stood together calf-deep in a single source of ice cold Rocky Mountain water. The voice of the Lord was over the waters. What had Blake's various Christian friends come to hear that day? We had come to hear the announcement of new things and watch Blake rise up out of that water.

Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan. As soon as Jesus was baptized, "he went up out of the water." The voice of the Lord was over the waters: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." What did Jesus do after he rose up out of that water? The book of Acts says he went around healing and doing good to as many of God's children as would hear him.

I am amazed by the power and promise of water.
(Inspired by today's readings)

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (January 16, 2005)

by Robin McCollough-Bade
Division for Congregational Ministries

■ DONNA GAVE HER TESTIMONY. She is a retired teacher and school administrator, one accustomed to secretaries and office staff to do her typing. For years, she resisted computers and all their problems. Why complicate life? But in her retirement, she has discovered the world of computers. Now, she is hooked.

Recently, she discovered something else new: the ELCA Prayer Web site, www.elca.org/prayer. Again and again, she returns to the meditation page for daily devotions and prayer. It helps center her day around God's Word. In fact, the meditation page on the ELCA Prayer Web site has become part of her daily routine as she works at her computer. She even bookmarked the site for quick reference.

It doesn't end there. Because her life in Christ and prayer life has been richly blessed, she tells others about the Web site. In doing so, she hopes and prays computer-oriented people will discover more about Christ.

Her witness is unique to these computer-oriented times, but in pointing to Christ, she joins John the Baptist, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others throughout the centuries who bear witness to Jesus Christ. True, Donna doesn't necessarily proclaim "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" or "I have a dream," but she uses Spirit-inspired words and images coming from her own heart. Some days, she simply says, "Come and see. Come and see this prayer Web site. Come and see."

(Inspired by John 1:29-42)

The Third Sunday after Epiphany

(January 23, 2005)

by Brian "Red" Burchfield
Division for Outreach

WHAT BEGAN AS just another summer evening in Brevig Mission, an Alaska Native Village on Alaska's Seward Peninsula, ended with the whole community gathered around the Lutheran church. They were trying to salvage whatever they could from the fire that was furiously eating up the new sanctuary and the second floor parsonage where Pastor Brian Crockett and family lived. The historic church building next door was already lost and, in spite of heroic efforts by the Nome fire department which had flown in, the fire had spread to the current church building.

The fire consumed almost everything: hymn books, Bibles, sanctuary furniture, and the Crockett family possessions, but no one was hurt or injured. Working together, the community saved most of the building's structural elements.

Now, volunteers from the congregation, from the community, from nearby villages, and from across the Alaska Synod have come to help clean up and rebuild. In addition, congregations and friends from New England to Minnesota are remembering that, "when one part of the body suffers, all suffer" and they have been reaching out "with the same mind and the same purpose": "to build up the body of Christ."

This Epiphany season we can join with others in our congregations, our communities, the ELCA, and around the world to let God's light shine.

(Inspired by 1 Corinthians 1:10-18)

For more information about rebuilding the church in Brevig, go to www.elca.org/outreach/resources/brevig.html

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

(January 30, 2005)

by Craig Settlage
Division for Ministry

IN JUST A FEW WEEKS over 240 approved ELCA ministry candidates will be assigned to the regions of the ELCA, and then to synods. The ELCA seminaries, candidacy committees, the conference of bishops, and the ELCA churchwide organization have worked together to identify, prepare, and support these new leaders. They will be pastors, associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers. They will serve in congregations and other ministry settings. These men and women bring their gifts and abilities, their faith commitments and life experiences, to ministry in this church. They have discerned that their call in baptism to follow Christ and the "foolishness" of the cross now leads them to respond to God's call through the Church to serve as a minister of Word and Sacrament or Word and service.

I see the ministries of such people in my congregation on the southwest side of Chicago. Our congregation is served by a second-career pastor and by the principal and teachers in a Christian elementary school. The school grows, and the ethnic diversity of the community is seen more and more in both the school and the congregation. Pastor and people are committed in their witness to the gospel in this place.

God's Spirit is alive within this community of faith, as it is across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God." Thanks be to God for the ministry of the baptized in church and world, and for those who serve in their midst.

(Inspired by Matthew 5:1-12)

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

(February 6, 2005)

by Leslie Weber
Division for Church in Society

SELDOM DO WE IMAGINE God's glory and power being revealed in ministry among people who are hungry, poor, sick, homeless, excluded, and powerless. There God's power seems hidden, perhaps even absent.

At first glance, one might see plenty of glory and power in Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI). This 135-year old agency, owned by the three ELCA synods in Illinois, has 200 programs at 100 sites around the state; 15 lines of service bring healing, justice, and wholeness to children, individuals, and families; and a \$90 million budget funds these programs. This is not the whole story, however.

Not so long ago, LSSI had 4,000 employees. Its budget would be \$130 million if it had kept pace with inflation. Thirty-seven percent of its employees live at or below the poverty line. What has happened with LSSI and many other Lutheran social ministry organizations is that states wonder if there is value in what they do—do they, for example, make people more dependent? States have drastically cut budgets for social services in the last decade. Managed care has made “the bottom line,” rather than the needs of the individual, the main concern. With public attention fixed on matters of national security, less attention and support is going toward people who have nowhere else to turn.

LSSI president Pastor Frederick Aigner, says that Lutheran social ministry organizations “bear risk for the church in the world.” They are the church addressing situations congregations cannot or, even, would not address. God's glory is evident not in impressive institutions, budgets, and buildings but in the costly love these institutions practice for the sake of God's beloved children and creation.

(Inspired by Matthew 17:1-9)

These stories are examples of ELCA churchwide ministries suggested by the pericopes for the First Sunday in Advent through the Transfiguration of Our Lord (Cycle A). **Pericope Partners** stories are available for free download at www.elca.org/pericope

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