

Pericope

PARTNERS

Lent to Easter 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 Ash Wednesday through the Seventh Sunday of Easter (February 9, 2005–May 8, 2005). They are not exegetical expositions of the texts, but are intended to be suitable textual partners for use in Sunday bulletins and congregational newsletters.

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Ash Wednesday (February 9, 2005)

*by Kathryn Sime
ELCA World Hunger Appeal*

■ FOR WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS, there your heart will be also. —Matthew 6:21

The letters come every day—regretfully, far too many for me to respond to personally. They come attached to gifts for the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. Whether scrawled on memo paper or typed carefully on stationery, the notes describe the giver’s prayers and hopes for their gift to our church’s hunger and disaster ministry.

One letter caught me by surprise. Linda, a grandmother, wrote with a gift in honor of her nine-year-old granddaughter Holly’s birthday. The note said that Holly had asked her grandmother for a gift to help other children. Instead of a gift that only Holly could enjoy, she asked her grandmother for a birthday gift that could help other children. While it couldn’t be unwrapped or shared with friends, Holly’s birthday gift was truly special. Instead of a board game or new clothes, Holly’s present from her grandmother was school supplies for children in refugee camps, and play areas free from landmines for children in war-ravaged countries.

What generosity from a nine-year-old! I thank God for Holly’s parents and grandparents, for her pastor and Sunday school teachers—for all who must have taught Holly about the differences between needing and wanting and the differences between our earthly treasures and those treasures of our heart. I don’t know how long Holly thought about her birthday request to her grandmother, but I haven’t stopped thinking about this special gift of her heart.

(Inspired by Matthew 6:21)

The First Sunday in Lent (February 13, 2005)

*by Marilyn R. Olson
Division for Higher Education and Schools*

■ AS A SEMINARY STUDENT preparing for rostered ministry in the ELCA, I was privileged to serve at Genesis House, a house of safety and hospitality for women engaged in prostitution. More than 90 percent of the women there were drug addicts; almost 100 percent had been sexually molested as children. In society’s eyes, they were sinners and women of little worth.

One morning I was followed through the house by a woman I did not know who seemed quite upset. “I said ‘Hello’ to you back there and you ignored me!” she shouted. Of course, I apologized immediately. We began to talk. When she learned I was a volunteer, she sneered “Oh! You’re one of those rich ladies from the suburbs, aren’t you?” Before I could respond that I was in fact a poor seminary student, she looked me straight in the eye and said in a quiet yet firm voice filled with conviction, “Well! It really doesn’t matter where you’re from or who you are, you are always welcome here!”

In that moment, in those words of welcome, I realized that she had forgiven me for my transgressions—my sins of privilege and power. I was freely accepted. How many of us would utter such words of welcome and forgiveness to someone like her—an addict and a prostitute?

I pray that our ELCA college students and all those who minister in their communities will encounter God’s grace and forgiveness in unexpected places, as I did that day.

(Inspired by today’s readings)

The Second Sunday in Lent (February 20, 2005)

*by Stephen Nelson
Division for Global Mission*

■ GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, and so do we. John 3:16 speaks of God's love and action to redeem the world and all humanity. It only follows that those who stake their lives on God's promises will also love the world God loves. And we do so gladly, whether in our home communities or around the world.

In 2004 the ELCA Division for Global Mission appointed approximately 150 new mission personnel for service.

Pastor David and Carla Schick left congregational ministry in California to begin ministering among a diverse population in an international congregation in Slovakia. In this congregation there are representatives from European, American, Asian, and African countries. Schick says, "Every Sunday the world comes together at Bratislava International Church as members of the student, educator, refugee, diplomatic, business, tourist, and local communities gather in worship. It is exciting to be leading a congregation with such incredible mission potential."

Beth Wolslegel learned of God's love for the world through her congregation and mission trips to Peru and Mexico. Upon graduation from college with a degree in special education, Beth sought out an opportunity for service in God's world through the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission program. Now in Bangalore, India, Beth works at Liza's Home for girls and women with both mental and physical disabilities. Liza's Home also hosts a preschool program for children three to six years old from the neighboring slum and has assisted living facilities for elder women.

God so loved the world, and we give thanks for people who give themselves in service to the world God loves.

(Inspired by John 3:16)

The Third Sunday in Lent (February 27, 2005)

*by Belletech Deressa
Division for Global Mission*

■ WATER OF LIFE and Water for Life

At this time of the Lenten season, we remember the crucified Christ who came to the world to give us water of life through his precious life. The text for this week also reminds us of the significance of water for life, and for sustainable living. For millions of people around the world, access to water, especially clean water, is limited.

In 1992, as part of my responsibility to monitor projects funded by the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, I visited the northern part of Ethiopia, a semi-arid region often hit by drought. Due to deforestation and traditional farming systems, the land is now arid—rivers have dried up, and people and animals suffer from lack of water.

In a community I visited, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and The Lutheran World Federation have dug wells and constructed dams. Near one of the wells I met a beautiful young shepherd girl bundled up in traditional cotton clothes giving water to her sheep. There were more than twenty sheep, but she was getting water from the well and giving it to the sheep in groups of five at a time. She comes to the well three times a day to give her sheep water. I was very impressed with this young girl and wondered if she attended school. She said, "No. I look after my sheep. I cannot go to school because I am responsible for the sheep. They need green grass; they need water; they have to be protected from thieves and wild animals." She told our group that this well provides the only water for her community.

Like a shepherd girl who gives water to her sheep, Christ came to give us living water and died for us on the cross.

(Inspired by John 4:10–13)

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (March 6, 2005)

*by Carol Henke
Division for Higher Education and Schools*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO as I was about to undergo major surgery, my pastor encouraged me to think of my favorite picture of Jesus. Without hesitation I envisioned the picture of Jesus as the good shepherd and the words of Psalm 23.

To understand this psalm, we have to understand what a shepherd's daily work involves. Sheep are helpless, just as I felt years ago facing surgery, and just as our children and teachers sometimes feel. The helplessness of a sheep is especially apparent when it accidentally rolls on its back. A sheep in that position cannot get up by itself. The shepherd must rescue it before a predator makes it lunch!

Often children come to school feeling powerless. They are like sheep on their backs, unable to get up without help. Parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, or even their teachers cannot always help set them free from their heavy burdens. But Jesus can! Jesus, our good shepherd, comes to our children and teachers through Word and Sacrament. Here we experience the green pastures and quiet waters with which our souls are nourished.

In this Lenten season, we focus on the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life to rescue us. In our schools, we gather to worship a living and risen Jesus, our good shepherd, who cares for us each day.

(Inspired by Psalm 23)

The Fifth Sunday in Lent (March 13, 2005)

*by Ray Gottschling
Division for Outreach*

"SON OF MAN, can these dry bones live?" "O, dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

Richard Franks heard the word of the Lord and was ordained at 62, an age when most folks are making plans to retire and take life easy. He and his wife, both with Ph.D.'s, had long teaching careers and had lived and worked in academic centers in metropolitan areas. His first call papers read: "Interested in redevelopment."

First Lutheran in Bryan, a small town in the northwest corner of Ohio, was in desperate need of redevelopment. After some serious conflict, First Lutheran had been without a pastor for two years. Many members had transferred to other congregations. Many pastoral candidates had refused to even interview. Richard Franks and his wife, Betty, heard the word of the Lord to come to First Lutheran.

Since then, both Richard and First Lutheran have come alive. Worship is vibrant with Pastor Franks often composing a hymn for the day. His degree is in music, and those well-honed gifts are now transforming the worship life of First Lutheran. Tutoring and feeding programs have been started with the help of an ELCA hunger grant. Membership is growing. The facility now reflects the care of a people who love their Lord and their congregation.

There is a sparkle in Pastor Frank's eyes and a sparkle in First Lutheran's life. The word of the Lord has had its way, and dry bones are indeed living!

(Inspired by Ezekiel 37:1-14)

The Sunday of the Passion Palm Sunday

(March 20, 2005)

by *Sonia Solomonson*
The Lutheran magazine

“TEARS STREAMED DOWN MY CHEEKS as I read your article,” said one letter writer. “Thank you,” many letters said, “Thank you for writing the story of your father’s last days in hospice and his dying. I’m in the process of dodging cancer,” said another, “and it’s helpful to be given an example in dying well.” Still another said, “You took me to the bedside of many dying members and, ultimately, to my grandfather’s and the chance to do more of my own grief work.”

Verse four of this Isaiah text stands out to me because of what our staff does at *The Lutheran* magazine: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.”

Each month our staff hopes to sustain the weary with a word. We share our stories of dying and rising. We choose stories that we hope will, in the words of our mission statement, “Nurture awareness of Christ’s presence in our lives and the world and challenge us to bring God’s grace and care to all.”

We know that each of us has brokenness in our lives. We have illness, broken relationships, pain, unemployment, fears, unfulfilled dreams, and a variety of things that wear us down. Christ came into our lives that we might have life abundant and that we might know the boundless depth of God’s love for us.

We hope our words may continue to inspire, support and encourage the broken and the weary.
(Inspired by *Isaiah 50:4-9a*)

Easter Day

(March 27, 2005)

by *Joanne Chadwick*
Commission for Women

WE ARRIVED the Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Beit Jala having received permission from the Israeli Defense Forces to worship.

This otherwise bustling Palestinian city was a ghost town. The streets are littered with debris. The town was under a 24-hour curfew. All inhabitants are, essentially, under house arrest. There are no people in the streets. Our cars are the only ones.

As we approach the church people peek out their windows, but the church is empty.

Soon, two young men come through the deserted streets and climb the bell tower. They ring the church bells. The bells ring loud and long. When the bells stop, the quiet is broken by tanks coming.

The silence is also broken by 40 courageous people who risk safety to join us in worship. Outside we hear the rumbling of the tanks. I wonder whether they will again knock down the gate of the newly completed retreat and conference center—a center dedicated to promoting understanding among all of Abraham’s children—Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The tanks pass us by. Inside, we celebrate the Eucharist and listen to the proclamation of the Word: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!”

In the midst of desperation and seeming hopelessness, the proclamation of the resurrection resurrects hope for Palestinian Christians and for their visitors. We came to express our solidarity with people living under the yoke of a dehumanizing occupation. We left unbelievably moved by this community’s living witness to God’s love. In the midst of suffering, they dare to cry, with a hope grounded in profound faith: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!”

(Inspired by *today’s readings*)

The Second Sunday of Easter

(April 3, 2005)

*by Richard Bruesehoff
Division for Ministry*

■ THIS JESUS GOD RAISED UP, and of that all of us are witnesses. —Acts 2:32

The bar was set high right from the beginning! God raised Jesus from death. And, as if we had seen it ourselves, we are witnesses to this life-giving event. God has entrusted this story to us.

Of course, it's important to know the story of Jesus' ministry of mercy and justice, his arrest, execution, and resurrection. It becomes our story as we echo Luther's confidence that God has done this for me! But, like the account of any eyewitness, it is not complete until I have told the story.

My friend Pete taught me something about being this kind of eyewitness. Pete is active in his congregation, and never shy to tell others about it. But Pete is also a good ear-witness! He not only knows how to speak, but also when to listen. One of his co-workers, angry at God and the whole world, began to entrust Pete with his middle-of-the-night hopes and fears. Pete knew no pastor would be able to get close to this co-worker any time soon. But Pete also knew this was a time for nothing less than the story of God's life-giving power. Pete's plea, on behalf of his friend was "I'm the only pastor he has right now. God help me!"

Pete kept the bar high. Of that I have been a witness!
(Inspired by Acts 2:32)

The Third Sunday of Easter

(April 10, 2005)

*by Ann Hafften
Division for Global Mission*

■ AMERICAN LUTHERANS are often surprised at the news that there are Arab Palestinians who are Christian, who are Lutheran.

Sometimes Americans ask the Palestinian Lutherans, "When did you convert to Christianity?" or "When did your family become Christian?" And the Palestinian will playfully answer: "On Pentecost!" The book of Acts tells us that following Peter's first sermon 3,000 people were converted to Christ. Among those were "Arabs," and Christians have been a faithful community throughout in the Middle East since then.

The Lutherans of Palestine celebrate God's love in Jesus! They witness to Christ by providing vital education and health ministries. And Lutheran leaders speak out boldly for peace with justice. They are passionate about the injustice of life under an illegal occupation.

The history of Lutherans in the Holy Land goes back 150 years and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) was formed in 1959. The church's 2000 members are in six congregations, located in Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Amman (Jordan).

These congregations work hard to serve their struggling communities. Five of them operate schools that serve children from all denominations, and about 30 percent of the students are Muslim. Too often checkpoints and curfews restrict movement in and among the West Bank communities, severely hampering the congregations' ability to carry out their ministries. However, rather than give in to defeat or bitter partisanship, Palestinian Lutherans persist in their call to peacemaking. Both the Palestinians and the international Lutherans who live and work among that community provide a radiant witness to grace in the midst of conflict.

(Inspired by Acts 2:14a, 36-41)

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

(April 17, 2005)

by Ed Kruse

Division for Congregational Ministries

■ HAVE YOU SEEN FOLKS who just love to give? It is delightful to watch them. It is inspiring to listen to them. If you take your time when you're with them, you might get a glimpse of God.

Barb loves to give. In a store, she says, "This will look nice on Lily." While reading the travel section of the paper, she announces, "I think I'll give Mom a trip." At a restaurant she notes, "Frances does a lot at the church. I want to give her a nice evening out." When she thinks about her job, she thinks of her co-workers, "Cheryl did a good job. I think I'll get a box of her favorite candy and take it in tomorrow."

All giving is a gift from God. It is a spiritual gift and a lifestyle we can choose. Such giving is not pretentious. Barb does not give to impress anyone. She does not give to get recognition. She does not expect anything in return. When she gives, she glorifies God and builds up the body of Christ.

When I met Barb, she was a single mother raising three boys on a subsistence income. Yet she gave all eight of her siblings and their children a gift every Christmas and a card on each birthday. Barb gives behind the scenes to many others in her large extended family. She gives generously to her church. She continually looks for places to give.

Barb also gave me the gift of this story. I now give it to you in the name of Jesus.

(Inspired by today's readings)

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

(April 24, 2005)

by Ruth Reko

Division for Church in Society

■ STONES AND ROCKS become fortresses in times of need. Thousands of people every day are sheltered in dwelling places built of stones and bricks and wood by Lutheran social ministry organizations.

Wilma shattered her hip and soon found herself living at a Lutheran nursing facility. She shared her thanks for the gentle blending of physical, emotional, and spiritual care she received in a note to staff: "Sometimes at night as I've laid in bed I've felt as though God has gathered His choice servants from all over the globe to meet here to minister God's healing and love to us who are under this roof."

Congregations partner with social ministry organizations to offer fortresses in time of need. A Bantu family with father, mother, and four children came to live in Florida, fleeing violent political and religious persecution. Volunteers and agency staff welcomed this family with open arms at the airport. In less than a year Sharif, the father, has found full-time work, the older children are in school, and the parents are learning English.

Eric has lived most of his life in dwellings provided by a Lutheran organization which serves over 2000 people with disabilities here and abroad. Eric has cerebral palsy and uses a wheel chair. He loves his room in the family-like group home where his computer lets him contact people who share his interests in cars and geography. Eric cherishes the staff members who provide this supportive place.

(Inspired by today's readings)

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

(May 1, 2005)

by *Tim Frakes*
Department for Communication

■ MY FEET HURT, and I still hadn't found the "Aereopagus," the place where the Apostle Paul delivered his famous defense of the faith to the Athenians in Athens. My guide book didn't mention it. It wasn't on the tourist map.

I was in Athens recording video footage for a new ELCA Mosaic Television video titled "The Life of Apostle Paul with Rick Steves." Our script followed the story of Paul as recorded in the Book of Acts. I needed to record the place where Paul matched wits with the debating elite of the ancient world.

There are lots of famous places in Athens, including the Acropolis, and they were all marked on the map. I couldn't believe that no one but me was interested in such a famous place. Finally, after much walking, I came across a discreet bronze plaque at the base of a hill beneath the Acropolis. There it was! Scrambling up a treacherous set of worn, stone steps to the top of the hill, I expected to find a statue of Paul, or a church dedicated to his honor. Instead, all I found was an empty, rock-strewn hilltop. No church. No statue. Just the wind and the rocks and a few Athenians walking their dogs. The view of the city was beautiful, so I recorded some footage and trudged back to my hotel.

We tend to think of Paul's address to the Athenians as an important moment in the life of the early church. But the Athenians didn't think much of Paul. "What does this babblers want to say?" the text tells us. A few Athenians responded, but most just walked away.

The Apostle Paul, however, went on to greater things. He never let a set back stop him from pressing forward. In the end, just like my trek up Mars Hill, Paul's efforts were worth it.
(Inspired by Acts 17:22-31)

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(May 8, 2005)

by *Wendy Scherer*
Division for Higher Education and Schools

■ "WHY DO YOU STAND looking up toward heaven?"

A student I know loves to talk about the life to come. She sings about it, prays for it, longs for it in a way uncommon for others her age. We've discussed this, and she is resolute in her conviction that this present life is virtually meaningless when considered alongside that glorious life which will follow. She doesn't even see much point in enjoying this life to the fullest, so fervent is her desire for that "perfect union with Jesus." But I wish more for this student. I wish for her the truly abundant life which is already hers, in the very real presence of Christ—here and now.

"Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

The disciples must have wondered where Jesus had gone. More importantly, when was he coming back? They wouldn't have to wait very long to find out. "This Jesus... will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Indeed he did, in the descent of the Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost. Now he would be with them forever.

"Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

Jesus' Spirit has been given to us, and dwells with us now—no need to wait, or wonder, or look to the life to come as though this present one is worthless. We have only to look around us—at one another, at ourselves—to see the face of Christ.

(Inspired by Acts 1:6-14)

These stories are examples of ELCA churchwide ministries suggested by the pericopes for Ash Wednesday through the the Seventh Sunday of Easter (February 9, 2005–May 8, 2005) (Cycle A). **Pericope Partners** stories are available for free download at www.elca.org/pericope

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