

Pericope

PARTNERS

Advent, Christmas, Epiphany
2005-2006

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 B pericopes for the First Sunday in Advent through the Transfiguration of Our Lord (November 27, 2005–February 26, 2006). 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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The First Sunday in Advent

(November 27, 2005)

by John LeMond
Global Mission

ADVENT IS A TIME not only of waiting for the coming of our Lord, but of preparation for that coming. At Lutheran Theological Seminary (LTS) in Hong Kong, students from throughout Asia come together in response to God's call to be prepared.

Gao Fong is a doctoral student at LTS, and is the leader of a provincial seminary in northern China. Over the past 25 years, the number of Christians in China, most of them coming from non-religious backgrounds, has grown tremendously. Having millions of new Christian believers in the church is a rich blessing, but this growth brings with it some distinct challenges. Who will prepare these new sisters and brothers for life in the body of Christ? Who will teach them the biblical stories? How will they learn what it means to love your neighbor as yourself? Who will prepare them?

In response to this great need, thousands of training courses are being conducted throughout China. Those being prepared are farmers with a rudimentary formal education, shopkeepers facing the ethical challenges of China's unfettered capitalism, and college professors schooled in the philosophy of Marxist materialism. These new Christians want to help create a strong Chinese church that is prepared for the advent of the Lord.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America sends missionary educators to Hong Kong to help train leaders like Gao Fong. These leaders, in turn, prepare seminary and Bible school teachers throughout China. They reach out to the farmer, the shopkeeper, and the college professor. Advent calls us to wait and prepare...together.

(Inspired by Mark 13:24-37 and 1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

The Second Sunday in Advent

(December 4, 2005)

by Bradn Buerkle
Global Mission

THE AUTHORITIES DECIDE that they need another warehouse. And so, the echo of pounding hammers reverberates through the space that had once been reserved for the ancient liturgy. Dust (instead of incense) fills the air, as young men drill into the whitewashed walls where icons once visibly proclaimed the gospel. Alexander remembers his time in that labor camp north of the Arctic Circle clearly. He remembers holding the hammer, participating in the desecration of that holy space, knowing that this was his only chance of avoiding execution.

Almost 50 years later, Alexander shares with me the pain and guilt this memory stirs within him. Ministry in the former Soviet Union requires again and again the speaking of God's words of comfort: "Alexander, Alexander! Your sins are forgiven!"

The ELCA supports the education of pastors and lay leaders here, and so builds the capacity of local Lutheran churches to speak God's word of forgiving grace. After once having been forced to participate in its destruction, Alexander now builds up the church. It is because of Alexander's commitment that a Lutheran congregation has re-established itself in his hometown after an absence of nearly 70 years. And thanks to his efforts, the relationship between Eastern Orthodox and Lutheran Christians there is exceptional.

In ministry together, we will strive this season to speak the word of God's forgiveness to each other and to remember the promise of the glorious advent of God, which transforms this world so that none will be forced to labor, none will compromise conscience for the sake of survival, and all will be led into the Lord's eternal comfort.

(Inspired by Isaiah 40:1-11)

The Third Sunday in Advent

(December 11, 2005)

*by Aaron Cooper
Church in Society*

■ I CAN ALMOST HEAR the rich, harmonious hum of three African choirs singing simultaneously under the shade of tall trees and a makeshift ceiling at Burugo Lutheran Church. This was the first of two Sundays on a trip ELCA communicators made to East Africa. We were worshipping with 300 fellow Lutherans in the hills of Bukoba, Tanzania. The service was in Swahili and lasted three hours.

I stood in front of the congregation and promised that I would go back to the United States and tell Lutherans there about Burugo, about them. I did that. I came back and told of the vibrant spirit of the people I encountered, often overshadowed by HIV/AIDS, hunger, violence, and a litany of related and pervasive threats to their survival.

I went to Africa to learn, listen, be a witness, and try to come to some understanding of what has been dubbed “the forgotten continent.” I was determined not to be part of the forgetting.

One week after worshipping at Burugo, I sat in a different congregation in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where women of the church led the service. Mulatuwa Tesso, the spouse of the head pastor, proclaimed enthusiastically and poignantly that hope in the midst of turmoil was possible. She said something I will never forget: “We are living in difficult times. People are dying of starvation and AIDS. Regardless of all this, God is on our side.”
(Inspired by John 1:6-8)

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

(December 18, 2005)

*by Marlys Waldo
Evangelical Outreach and
Congregational Mission*

■ WHAT AN EXPERIENCE! Mary learns from an angel that she is soon to be the mother of God’s son. She is, of course, both in awe and fearful. She needs to talk to someone. But who? The angel provides a hint: “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. . . .” Mary makes the trip “with haste.”

We can only imagine the conversations between Mary and Elizabeth during those days and weeks. Surely they shared their simultaneous hopes and fears, their respective experiences of unexpected heavenly visitors, and God’s plans for their sons. Perhaps they talked about the “good” parents they knew and how they intended to raise their children.

These two God-fearing women encouraged and affirmed one another. Within that supportive relationship, they were so filled with joy and gratitude that they broke into song. Within that relationship of acceptance, Mary was able to articulate the radical nature of Jesus’ ministry, while he was but a seed within her womb.

I think of the power of such relationships when I consider the birthing of new ELCA congregations. When a mission developer goes to a new location, there is no building, no office. There is a commitment to birth and nurture a congregation. There is probably also a mixture of doubt, fear, and hope.

Some of those mission developers and infant congregations find their Elizabeth. They are surrounded by Mission Partners—individuals and congregations who “stand with” and affirm them. Some are blessed with relationships in which they mutually share their joys and concerns, offer encouragement and are encouraged, and shower each other with their specific gifts and talents.

In that relationship of acceptance—in which God comes—each, like Mary, can sing a song of praise.

(Inspired by Luke 1:26-38)

The Nativity of Our Lord (December 25, 2005)

by Leslie Weber
Church in Society

■ PASTOR JONAS DROVE the Land Rover® over rough roads back into a banana plantation on the outskirts of Bukoba, Tanzania, to visit Gasto, a 15-year-old boy with AIDS inherited from his mother. His situation had begun to deteriorate in April. Since then, Sister Judith Bukula and others from the HUYAWA (Save the Children) program, sponsored by the Northwestern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and supported by the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, had come every day to feed him. Now it was May and he was extremely weak and thin, a terrible sight to behold.

The darkness of human suffering, of the evil of this particular sickness, of the sin of people's indifference to AIDS' effect on so many, and of death itself, crouched as it prepared to extinguish hope. When one realized that there were 30,000 other AIDS orphans in this single Tanzanian church diocese, darkness' triumph seemed unquestionable.

Sr. Judith propped up the youth's frail body with her own and cleaned his mouth with a saline solution. Pastor Jonas spoon-fed him hot tea with milk and herbs. At the end, a song was sung and a prayer offered.

That evening Gasto died, and Sr. Judith grieved as though she were his mother. Another life—a young, innocent life—had been lost to AIDS. But the next day, she and Pastor Jonas were back at the same work.

In Jesus' birth, God took on our humanness to demonstrate love. The Word of God became flesh and lived among us. His glory and the fullness of his grace and truth shine most brightly when they are least like anything humans consider glorious: the humiliation of suffering and death. The Church's ministry on behalf of people who are sick, hungry, in poverty, institutionalized, discriminated against, and unjustly treated is at its heart a "Christmas ministry," whatever time of year it occurs. It gets to the point of Christ's incarnation.

(Inspired by John 1:1-14)

The First Sunday after Christmas (January 1, 2006)

by Rebecca Sorensen
Lutheran Student Movement

■ "PRAISE THE LORD!... Young men and women alike, old and young together!" (Psalm 148:1 and 12).

New Year's Day is traditionally a time for celebrating. Celebrating the year that has past, and celebrating the new beginnings and opportunities that the new year brings. Each New Year's holiday, nearly 500 Lutheran young adults attend the National Gathering for College and University Students. For many students, it has become a tradition to spend five days worshipping, participating in service projects, and ringing in the New Year surrounded by peers and campus ministers. This year, from December 28, 2005, to January 1, 2006, students meet in San Diego, California, with the theme "Out of the Boat and Into the Water: A Faith Immersion." All week, young people are encouraged to jump out of their boats (their usual routines) and jump *into* the water (something other than what they are accustomed to).

Today is the closing worship service of the 2005 National Gathering. As you worship today, so do several hundred Lutheran young adults in San Diego. Picture 500 young Lutherans singing at the top of their lungs, arms around their new friends, all the while praising the Lord. These students will return home, maybe some of them to your own congregation. They will have energy and passion for service and social justice. They will be excited about the future of the church, and what they can do to make a difference. They will need your love and support. How will *you* welcome them home?

Let us praise the Lord, old and young together!
(Inspired by Psalm 148)

The Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6, 2006)

by Scott Weidler
Worship and Liturgical Resources

■ HOW EXTRAVAGANT, perhaps exotic, those gifts must have seemed: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were not the usual gifts for a newborn or first-time parents. They certainly weren't what you'd usually find in a barn. Yet the combination of the humble and extravagant, the simple and profound, the least and the greatest, is a powerful image of the God we worship—the same God those mysterious visitors from the East sought out to worship.

It's really no different every time we gather for worship in our own humble surroundings. The ordinariness of it all is amazing. Water from a local source. Bread from a baker in the community. Ordinary table wine. These things, with the extraordinary grace-giving word of God, are what Christians gather around week after week in order to worship the God who has given us these things and far more than we can ever imagine.

I am always grateful that God did not require us to use special bread or a particular wine in our celebration of Holy Communion. It's the ordinariness of it all, made extraordinary by the grace of God, that gives me hope. For you see, I am not all that extraordinary. Maybe you, like me, feel pretty ordinary most days. But because of the treasures that God has given us—word, water, bread, wine, oil, song, paintings, sculpture, dance, and a myriad of gifts I don't even know I have—I am regularly lifted from my ordinariness and reminded that I am a child of God. There is no greater gift.

(Inspired by today's readings)

The Baptism of Our Lord (January 8, 2006)

by Kaari Reiersen
Church in Society

■ ONE OF THE MOST enjoyable and challenging parts of my work is editing an online journal called *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. When we publish essays on controversial topics, we are careful to present the issue from various perspectives, or to choose an approach that's not already well-worn.

I think we've done a good job, but still, when we choose a charged subject, I am always a little nervous. Faithful, profoundly thoughtful, educated Lutherans have been known to come to very different conclusions on how scripture, tradition, and the confessions apply in matters of ethics. Doing our work faithfully and honestly is so very important. Readers let me know if they don't think an essay is good or honest.

Of course, there's a built-in humility mechanism to any church work. In reading the Bible, the reader can't avoid the conclusion that God calls the most unlikely people to deliver the most divine messages and participate in the holiest moments. Who else but a man in a funny outfit with a strange predilection for locusts would be just right for baptizing the very Son of God? The ramshackle nature of biblical messengers serves to remind us that it is God's action that enables us to participate in the divine. I do my work the best I can, but I know that all of our careful thinking and a thousand doctorates will get us no closer to the revelation of God that breaks in on us from above than a guy in a hair shirt who ate bugs.

(Inspired by today's readings)

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany (January 15, 2006)

by Terri Lackey
Lutheran Woman Today magazine

■ I LOVE THE STORIES of the Old Testament because they are just that, stories. My life revolves around good storytelling; my relatively new work as managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today* involves moving a meaningful narrative from pen to publication.

I'm lucky to have this job. Like Samuel, it took me a few tries to recognize God's voice. I am no spiritual giant, so, of course, I'm thinking God's got the wrong number. Fortunately, the Lord doesn't mind re-dialing. My husband had answered a call late in life to become an Episcopal priest, but he was not actively searching for a position in a congregation. After all, we were perfectly comfortable where we were in Nashville. He had a job as a college professor. I was an editor for a large denominational publisher.

But that pesky God kept at us. It was more a whisper than a bullhorn—easy to ignore. Neither my husband nor I wanted to make the first move. Finally, I exerted the smallest amount of effort. Reluctantly, I sat before my computer and typed the words *religion, editor, and Chicago* into a job-search Web site. "Fat chance," I was thinking, when up popped a description for my current job. Within a few weeks, I had an interview and an offer. My husband followed in similar pattern.

I am proof that God is persistent, patient, and not all that picky. But finally, we do have to relent and say, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

(Inspired by 1 Samuel 3:1-10)

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany (January 22, 2006)

by Michael Trice
Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations

■ IN TODAY'S READINGS the psalmist speaks of salvation using concrete symbols: God is a refuge, a rock, a fortress. In short, God sustains us. In the story from Mark, salvation is not so much a thing as an action. To follow Jesus the disciples must drop everything—leave their families and their fishing boats and say goodbye to the stability of their homes. Both the psalmist and the disciples experience God's enduring love in a world of change.

In a world where "nothing is constant except change itself," God's everlasting love is a model of constancy. God's loving presence—whether we experience it as a refuge or a challenge—moves us towards healing ourselves and the whole world.

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 18–25, we reflect upon broken relationships among churches that are seeking healing. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was initiated in 1908, and is now observed throughout the world. God's enduring love is essential to mending and healing broken relationships. Pray this week for increased understanding and action in churches throughout the world as, together, we follow Christ—our Rock and our Salvation.

(Inspired by Psalm 62 and Mark 1:14-20)

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

(January 29, 2006)

by Ivis LaRiviere-Mestre
*Evangelical Outreach and
Congregational Mission*

■ MANY LATINO FAMILIES have taught their children about the importance of showing respect to their elders. An expression of this kind of respect is what most Puerto Rican families have taught their children about asking for “la bendición” from their elders. This means that before leaving the presence of a respected and wise elder, a child or an adult asks for and receives a blessing to go forth with God’s blessing and favor.

This expression of Latino spirituality speaks about God’s loving and active presence through our daily rituals. This special ritual allows a child of God to experience the daily assurance of God’s presence. The Latino grandparents and godparents are frequently considered to be witnesses to God’s wisdom by the way they have continued to pass on the stories of faith of their ancestors, their daily ritual of blessing, as well as other expressions of their Latino spirituality.

Rituals are part of our daily lives. Mary and Joseph passed on to Jesus the importance of their religious rituals. The elders of Jesus’ community of faith, who were clothed with humility, strong spirituality, and God’s wisdom, lifted up their prophetic voices with a special blessing to Jesus. Their language of faith spontaneously proclaimed the fulfillment of God’s promises through Jesus. In this case, the expression of faith of these two elders, Simeon and Ana, witnessed to their community of faith at the temple.

The good news for us today tells us about the powerful witness of God’s presence in our daily lives through ordinary events, the wisdom of our elders, the rituals of our communities of faith that amazingly, by the power of the Holy Spirit, transform the life of God’s children forever. “¡Qué el Señor les bendiga!” (May God bless you!) as my grandmother would always say to us. In the in-between times, go and tell, urgently and eagerly, this wonderful good news!

(Inspired by Luke 2:22-40)

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

(February 5, 2006)

by Sunitha Mortha
Global Mission

■ BLUE TARP WAS EVERYWHERE, as volunteers from Minnesota lashed it over the roofs of small huts built against the walls of the Andhra Christian Theological College. During the monsoon season, the tarp would protect these small houses from three months of steady rain.

I was taking pictures when I felt eyes on me. A woman holding a baby was watching me intently. Because I lived at the seminary, I had seen her many times, but I didn’t know her name. After looking at me for a long time, she stepped up and opened her hand. Inside was a 100-rupee note that had fallen from my purse.

My first reaction was fear. A hundred rupees could have fed her family for more than a week. That she would return it told me that she was asking for something more.

I knew that if I accepted my money back, our relationship would change. Instead of being a generic recipient of charity, she would become someone I knew by name. I wasn’t sure I was ready!

Throughout the Bible, God uses the ritual of naming to communicate a unique love towards each creature in the vast universe—even the stars. Naming is an act of intimacy. By learning and using our names, Sita and I opened the door to a new relationship. Instead of being one more nameless person living in poverty, she became my neighbor, and I became hers.

That day, Sita had to decide whether to feed her family or educate me. I am grateful she chose to teach. While we never became close friends, we felt free to greet and tease one another. It was a simple, ordinary relationship—and it all began with our names.

(Inspired by Psalm 147)

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

(February 12, 2006 - Proper 1)

by Kathleen Kastilahn
The Lutheran magazine

MY MAILBOX AT *THE LUTHERAN* spills over with testimonials from people who want the magazine to write about how Jesus cured their diseases—of body, mind, or spirit. Most of the people want to tell about how their faith made them well and how others, too, can experience renewed vitality if they will but believe.

Perhaps they don't know the difference between being cured and being healed. Perhaps they don't understand the wholeness Jesus wants for us. Perhaps they don't recall that Jesus' great command to his followers is to love one another. But, some do.

One is Richard Shaver, 65, a member of St. Mark Lutheran Church in New Stanton, Pennsylvania, whose story we told in the November 2005 issue. His pastor, A.J. Domines, called me months before to tell me about Shaver's "Hunger Garden," where he grows vegetables that feed 4,000 families through the county food bank.

The garden is the sign of Shaver's healing. "No matter what I did, I just felt lousy," said the owner of five businesses, an airplane and two country-club memberships. He'd tried, and tired of, several hobbies and charitable efforts. Then, a dozen years ago, he grew some corn—so much corn that he donated the excess to a food bank. That was the start of the community effort that now involves more than 50 volunteers each week during the growing season.

"Now I feel great," said Shaver, who suffered a heart attack two years ago. "I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing as long as God keeps me around."

(Inspired by Mark 1:40-45)

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

(February 19, 2006 - Proper 2)

by Brenda Engelby
Communication Services

"THE LORD SUSTAINS THEM on their sickbed..." (Psalm 41-2b).

By day she lies in her chair, and by night she lies, rigid, in her bed. Dorothy has a mind that won't quit working, and a body that won't work at all. She can breathe, and she can hear, and she can think.

Sunday nights she has the radio brought close to her bed, tuned and ready for "her" program "Grace Matters." Alone, and in the dark, the grace of God comes to her and for 30 minutes she listens. Then, for the rest of the 167½ hours in the week, she thinks. She goes over and over the words in her mind. Does she believe it? What did the speaker mean by "God's grace is for you?" Did he mean me? And when she thinks about the person who was interviewed, she lives those lives vicariously—maybe fixing a bike for someone in a third world country, maybe feeling the rumble of an earthmoving truck under her guidance, maybe comforting a child following the trauma of 9/11.

Her mind is alive, vibrating with fact, and fantasy, and faith. Her physical body has trapped her, has betrayed her; but her soul and mind dance freely in response to the love and the grace of God. She is God's child, fed through the radio ministry of "Grace Matters."

Dorothy has difficulty speaking but her assistant understands her and writes down the words that Dorothy sends to "Grace Matters": "Thank you."

(Inspired by Psalm 41)

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

(February 26, 2006)

by William King
Vocation and Education

■ NOT A FOG-ENSHROUDED mountaintop, just several sofas circled for a campus ministry Bible study. The only revelatory voice was Kara's as she realized the text was alive with a word she needed to hear—that God wanted her to hear. "If I really take this passage seriously I think it is telling me that I am precious to God. When God says, 'You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased,' I think that means me too."

No faces shone with an awesome brilliance; no disciples fell on their knees in wonder. Yet it was a moment of double transfiguration—hidden holiness flashed into view. Now Kara could look in the mirror and see more than the "damaged goods" label that an abusive home life and sexual assault had imprinted on her self-concept. She could see herself as God sees her, beautiful and loveable. Kara also began to see the Bible in a new way. Far more than a musty old story about a distant god, the text became a love letter addressed to her deepest longings and hopes.

During the college years young adults necessarily reevaluate what they have regarded as true. Old assumptions vie with new, often troubling, perspectives for acceptance. In that winnowing of ideas and emotions, ELCA campus ministry affirms that Christ is trustworthy and invites students to listen for God, who is eager to address them each time they expectantly read the Bible.

(Inspired by Mark 9:2-9)

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 B). **Pericope Partners** stories are available for free download at www.elca.org/pericope

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