

DEVOTIONS FOR CHURCH COUNCIL MEETINGS



**VIRGINIA SYNOD ELCA
2017**

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INTRODUCTION

BY BISHOP JAMES F. MAUNEY

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...

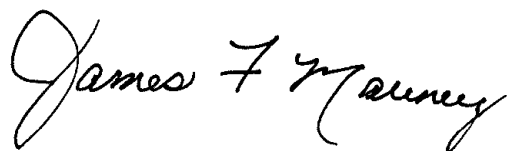
¹⁴Yet it was good of you to share in my struggles.

Philippians 1:3-5; 4:14

As I enter my final months as Bishop of the Virginia Synod, I am filled with gratitude for all of you, faithful followers of Jesus Christ! Through these past years we have, together, witnessed a *koinonia* of God's people. We have celebrated and struggled together. We have rejoiced and grieved. We have sought to be ambassadors of the good news, Jesus' coming into our world, to walk with us, redeem us, and prepare us for an eternity with the Triune God.

Our Virginia Synod Stewardship Table has created this booklet of monthly devotions, to be used by your Church Council at its meetings. Each devotion it contains was written by a pastor or lay member of our Virginia Synod, around the theme of stewardship as that which frames our lives together, called to share in the ministry of Word and Sacraments.

I hope that you will find these brief devotions, with their thought-provoking questions, to be helpful to you as you conduct the ministry and the business of your congregation or parish. May our good Lord bless your deliberations and decisions, and keep you faithful to the Gospel in all that you say and do.



Bishop James F. Mauney

JANUARY 2017

TEXT: MATTHEW 2:1-12

Reflection

In our reading from Matthew 2, you and I, like the wise men before us, have the opportunity to encounter Jesus, to rejoice in the good news of his birth and to offer our gifts for our Lord. Now chances are that you and I won't have gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to share, but each of us has three powerful, meaningful gifts to bring to the Lord.

- We can offer the gift of our faith - our belief that this child born of Mary is God's Son who is born to save God's people.
- We can offer the gift of our worship - a willingness to place God, revealed in Jesus, at the center of our lives.
- We can offer the gift of our lives - a desire to have all that we say and do shaped by Jesus' presence in the world.

These three gifts may not fit neatly in a treasure chest, but their value to God and to us is incalculable. For unlike the wise men who brought their gifts to the Christ child, and then returned home, our faith, our worship, and our lives are foundational elements of a life-long relationship with Jesus – a relationship which will help us to discover more fully the gifts of wholeness and help, the gifts of peace and hope, the gifts of forgiveness and joy that God gives us through this child born of Mary.

QUESTIONS

- What is the best gift you have ever received and what made that gift so memorable?
- What is one way that you personally can share your faith, your worship or your life with God?
- How might a congregation encourage someone to share the gift of their faith, their worship and their life with God?

PRAYER

God of generosity and presence, you reveal yourself to us in the gift of your Son. Inspire us, by the witness of the wise men, to offer the gift of our faith, our worship and our lives to you. Gather together those gifts in the midst of this congregation and help us to use our gifts to be your heart and hands and voices in the world sharing the joy of your presence with the community around us. Bless us in this time of meeting and inspire us to make good and wise decisions as we seek to lead your people. Amen.

Rev. John Wertz, St. Michael Lutheran Church, Blacksburg

FEBRUARY 2017

TEXT: MATTHEW 6:24-34

Reflection

Jesus first said these words on a mountain-side to “the crowds,” people who had heard about Jesus, much like many around us in our community who know something about Jesus; and also to the disciples “who came to him,” much like we gather around the Word and Sacrament on Sunday mornings.

As the people gather around Jesus, he speaks straightforwardly about the reality of worry. We live in a time of worry. We are told with alarming regularity what is wrong in the world we live in. Any contact with your TV, cell phone, I-pad, or computer inundates you not only with what is wrong, but also what you must have, where you have fallen short, and what you must be on the lookout for: in your lives, your food, your body, even your clothing.

The Word of God, our Lord Jesus, blows a fresh wind on this anxiety-producing cycle. We have a Grace-filled God who loves the whole Creation, including us, a God who knows the reality of the world we live in – God created it! God sent Jesus Christ to be with us – Emmanuel, remember that name from Christmas? Look around, Jesus, our Emmanuel says! Look for the birds of the air fed by an abundant God! Look at the lily that we identify with Easter, or the crocus that may be peeking out of the ground with the promise of Spring. The latest fashion designer of the rich and famous cannot compare with God’s adornment and providing! If this is true of flower and bird, what does it say about God’s care for your life, your body, what you eat, and what you wear?

God’s Word and God’s feeding through the Sacrament provide us with a life-giving perspective that breaks the cycle of anxiety and worry that our world invites us into on a minute by minute basis! You and I, who are sitting next to Jesus, listening to his life giving Word, nourished with his body and blood - his very life - are a part of his kingdom, a part of his Body! The world looks very different from this perspective. Even those of little faith can experience God’s grace and peace in the midst of today’s troubles!

QUESTIONS

- Can you share a time in your life where putting your trust in God’s love and care allowed you to set aside a worry or a burden, and find a way forward?
- Reminded by God’s Word of God’s gracious providing and care in your life, what is a worry you can set aside today?
- What is a worry of this Council meeting or this congregation that you can place before the feet of Christ as you begin this meeting?

PRAYER

Gracious God, your son Jesus Christ reminds us how valuable we are to you; we give you thanks for the blessing of your Word, and your nourishment of Grace at your son's table. Help us to live by the Good News of your Son, to cast our burdens upon you, and to leave them – and our worries -- with you, confident of your gracious providing for our bodies, and indeed, our very lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Paul Pingel, Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Waynesboro

MARCH 2017

TEXT: GENESIS 1:26-31

Reflection

The telling of the Creation in Genesis provides us one of the great truths. Everything is God's. The air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, our minds, our bodies, our friends and families, all these things are gifts from God.

In our passage from Genesis, we learn that we are created in God's image. We are to have dominion over the fish, birds, cattle, wild animals, and indeed over the Earth itself. As the passage continues we learn that God gives us all the food that we need to live. Finally, God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

God created everything and gave it to us as stewards over creation. In addition, we are created in God's image. Thinking about this, the Genesis account reveals an additional truth. If God is a giver and we are created in God's image, then it should follow that we too are givers. We are most like how God intended us to be when we ourselves are givers. And not just any kind of givers, but as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9:7, cheerful givers, because God loves a cheerful giver; just as He was when He freely and cheerfully gave everything we have, seeing that it is was very good.

As we reflect upon our very nature, we find not only are we called to give. We are *made* to give.

QUESTIONS

- In your own experience, how does it feel to freely give gifts?
- Does giving to loved ones feel different than giving anonymously? To the church? Explain your answer.
- How might a congregation encourage someone to share the gift of their faith, their worship and their life with God?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for all that you have given me, my talent, my time, and my treasure. Help me to be the cheerful giver you created me to be. Amen.

Tom Bartkiewicz, Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Warrenton

APRIL 2017

TEXT: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

Reflection

In these words to the people of Corinth, St. Paul tells the great drama that congregations all around the world will soon celebrate (or have recently celebrated). This is the life-giving story of Easter: that Christ died and was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to Peter and countless other disciples.

Christ is alive! And not only is he alive, but he has also appeared to us. I remember bringing communion once to Marianne, a woman who had been blind since her early 40's. When I placed the bread in her hand, she made (what I thought was) an unusual request, "Tell me what this Jesus looks like." I awkwardly told her about the bread, dark and crumbly, baked by a member of the congregation, and confessed that it was a bit burnt on one side. She said, "Ah yes, I see him now. Perfect but scarred. I always like to see Jesus so I know what I'm going to become."

God appeared to her in that very bread. Through that bread, she was becoming perfect even with her scars. She would become Jesus, sent out to serve him in the world. All that she had came from God, and everything she could give back only reflected that grace more. Jesus had appeared to her. Jesus appeared to Peter and Paul and countless other disciples. And Jesus has appeared to us.

QUESTIONS

- What specific celebrations of the Lord's Supper do you remember?
- Where has Jesus appeared in your congregation?
- How can you share those gifts and stories with others this week?

PRAYER

God of grace, you appear to us in the breaking of the bread. Guide us as we lead and serve, so that all we do may give glory to you. Amen.

Rev. Kate Costa, St. Luke Lutheran Church, Culpeper

MAY 2017

TEXT: ROMANS 5:6-8

Reflection

Why do we give to the church? What is the difference in giving to the church and giving to charities or good causes? In no way do I say that we should not support charities, as that is part of the DNA of a Christian. But there is a difference. Perhaps, in this season of the church year, Easter, is a good time to find the answer. One of the greatest components of giving to the Lord is gratitude. During this season of Easter, what better time to have a spirit of gratitude for what the Lord has done for us?

QUESTIONS

- What are ways that we can give to the church?
- How do we represent Christ to the world as the church?
- Why do you give to the church? This can be either a spoken response or a time for personal reflection.

PRAYER

Good and gracious heavenly father, we ask that you would speak to our hearts and fill us with a spirit of gratitude for all that you have done for us. May this spirit of gratitude spill over into all phases of our lives. May it be found in our giving of time, talents, treasure and also in the giving of ourselves in our relationships. Amen.

Cary Mangus, Christ Lutheran Church, Roanoke

JUNE 2017

TEXT: ACTS 2:1-8

Reflection

I find it both interesting and sad that there are only two Sundays a year where the red paraments adorn our sanctuary. To me, the color adds life and reminds me that something stark is occurring. Pentecost is one of the two red Sundays and it marks an important Lutheran hallmark. The Holy Spirit both assembles us together and gives us the gift of faith to hear the word of God.

On the first Sunday in June, Lutherans will assemble to worship and celebrate Pentecost across the state. Much like the Pentecost event in Acts, our Synod will speak our language of faith around the Word and Sacrament and yet it will perhaps look and sound very different. Bluegrass music, pipe organs, and keyboards will help voices that have southern drawls, Minnesotan Oh's, and even some Canadian Eh's. The universal reality that transcends dialect becomes Christ's body and blood given and shed for us. The Holy Spirit enables us to share a language of the cross, a language seen in our baptismal waters, and a language of the feast shared at the table. In fact, in some Synod congregations each one of those realities will be present in the Affirmation of Baptisms, the Eucharist, and most certainly the spoken word. How is it that across our Synod that God's story is told in so many different ways and yet so universally understood? Quite simply it is by the work of the Holy Spirit that continues to gather, to give faith, and to transform, stretching from Tidewater to the Northern Valley to the Highland conferences and throughout our Synod.

QUESTIONS

- Where does your congregation see the Holy Spirit speaking the language of faith in your congregation?
- In what ways does the ministry of the Synod assist, promote, or encourage your congregation in speaking the language of faith?
- Why is gathering together so important for your congregation? Why might that importance be something that is essential for gathering together as a synod?

PRAYER

Gathering God, You bring your people together by the inspiring work of your Holy Spirit. Grant that we may we hear, see, and know that the beauty in our diversity is only matched by the unity we share in our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rev. Nate Robinson, Emanuel Lutheran Church, Woodstock

JULY 2017

TEXT: HEBREWS 2:1-4

Reflection

Our culture is saturated with fascination in the fantastic, the supernatural, and the occult. It seems that every new television show and movie has a supernatural element; our heroes are all superheroes, with supernatural abilities; the books that are most popular (for those who still read books!) are about vampires, occult history, magic, and outrageous personal powers.

Where does all this preoccupation with the supernatural come from? Is it built into our DNA? Do we need “signs, wonders and various miracles,” as the text from Hebrews says?

Sometimes I think we become so preoccupied with the running of the church’s business, whether that be property concerns, or paying bills, or a dozen other cares and distractions, that we forget that God’s Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, defeated sin, death and the devil for us. He released us from hopeless captivity, fear and despair. Through two millennia God has shown us, through “signs, wonders and various miracles,” His splendor and power and majesty.

There isn’t a superhero alive who can match that! And perhaps our fascination with the fantastic is our heart’s longing to hear that message of overwhelming joy and hope around which we gather, on Sundays, in our churches and meeting halls, and throughout the year.

QUESTIONS

- Why do you think our society is so fascinated by the supernatural?
- What “signs, wonders and miracles” have you seen in your own life?
- How does your church’s message of salvation through Jesus Christ answer the needs of people who look to secular culture for understanding?

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, we thank and praise you for the great gift you have given us in Jesus Christ. Fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may look only to you. Feed us and nourish us with your gifts of Word and Sacraments. Make us fit for an eternity of joy and celebration with you and your dear Son. Amen.

Ellen Hinlicky, College Lutheran Church, Salem

AUGUST 2017

TEXT: ISAIAH 43:19

Reflection

August is the month of recognizing that nothing remains the same. The new school year is beginning, the fall is coming, new families and visitors will be coming as this new season of hopeful beginnings arrives.

We discover that we are all interims in the long run, one link in a chain. “For I pass on to you what was handed down to me.” I Cor. 15: The gospel remains the same, and the church as the stewards of the mysteries of God remains the community with the story of the gospel.

This is my last month serving as bishop, and I am eager for my new beginning, being a steward in a new way of the many blessings and gifts that have been given to me for the ongoing telling of the gospel and service to the gospel.

We pray for our new bishop and synod staff, we pray for the whole Church of Jesus Christ, and we pray for our congregation and its ministry, making the wisest, most faithful choices about how to pass on what was handed down to us.

QUESTIONS

- What soon begins for your congregation?
- What is God up to now in your life?
- What was the biggest stewardship decision you made this past week?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, do a NEW thing through us! Let it spring forth! Send new faith to us! Speak to us, be with us in the sacraments. Then send us as your ambassadors to our homes, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods gifted with your story to share with others. All that we have is yours. Let us use what you have given us to the fullest for your glory. Amen.

Bishop Jim Mauney, College Lutheran Church, Salem

SEPTEMBER 2017

TEXT: MATTHEW 18: 20

Reflection

Throughout the church year we remember the work of the saints who have come before us. In early September we commemorate Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig of Denmark, from whom we have the hymn “Built on a Rock.” In the third stanza, we sing

Christ builds a house of living stones; we are his own habitation;

He fills our hearts, his humble thrones, granting us life and salvation.

Where two or three will seek his face, he in their midst will show his grace,

Blessings upon them bestowing. (ELW, Built on a Rock, 652).

As our September calendars quickly fill with school activities, meetings, fall programs, and sport teams, our time to spend together as God’s gathered people becomes harder. Even in the midst of all those new activities, we are the saints of today contributing to the work of the Church through our daily lives. From children playing during recess with the new boy or girl in school, to the women and men thoughtfully making decisions to care for those in need, we live out our baptism, taking what we have received on Sunday through the hearing of the Word and the eating and drinking of the Meal to live as stewards of all the blessings Jesus gives us.

QUESTIONS

- Where did you see Jesus in another this week?
- Who showed you Jesus this week?
- How did you know Jesus was present among you and others this week?

PRAYER

Christ, our Rock, from you we have a solid foundation on which to stand as your living stones. You have called us to gather, even in twos and threes, knowing that you are among us and at work with us. Continue to equip us as your servants, mindful of the ways you nourish us through your Word and Sacraments, as we seek to be stewards of your mercy to a world in need of repentance and forgiveness. Amen.

Deacon Christine Van O’Linda Huffman, St. Michael Lutheran Church, Virginia Beach

OCTOBER 2017

TEXT: I CORINTHIANS 4:1

Reflection

This month we mark 500 years of a reformation around the profound gospel of a rescuing Lord revealed in manger, teachings, bloody cross, and empty tomb. A cross revealing the truth about our need for a Saviour, a cross and empty tomb revealing the truth about the forgiving love of God, a manger revealing our Lord who comes down for others. Stewards, trusted servants, then, also act for others, speak to others, make use of gifts and blessings in order to be found trustworthy with Word and Sacrament, with mission and ministry, with generosity expressed in offerings, time, and talent, poured out for the gospel for others.

QUESTIONS

- What mysteries of faith do you cherish and wonder about as a steward of God?
- With what has our Lord entrusted us?
- What are signs of our trustworthiness?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself in order that you might make us your own and might fill us with love, hope, joy, hope, and eternal life. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ who though he was rich, for your sake became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Make us trustworthy stewards of your gospel in every way. In the power of your Spirit we pray. Amen.

Bishop Jim Mauney, College Lutheran Church, Salem

NOVEMBER 2017

TEXT: 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15

Reflection

We gather around many tables in our lives: daily dinner tables, weekly communion tables, fellowship church and funeral meal tables, and the grand Thanksgiving tables. Many have experienced the anxiety of scarcity as they set these tables. It might be the code word, FHB “Family Hold Back,” said by mom to prompt the kids to take smaller servings when an unexpected guest shows up for dinner. Or it could be the anxious altar guild who forgot that this Sunday was homecoming and prepared communion for 20, when 35 had already walked through the door. However, more often than not, those of us reading this devotion have left the tables at which we sit full and blessed. Miraculously, the food stretched to fill the bellies of all who ate, or we who were gathered found nourishment in fellowship that filled even more than our physical hunger.

When we look around the table, we realize the depth of preparation that went into the food and the community gathered. The hands that prepared the dishes, the market merchants who sold the food, the farmers who grew and harvested the basic ingredients. The biology of generations that defined family, the chance encounter that led to an invitation, the saints who have nurtured faith in community. We realize that it all started in God, and as we gather God has blessed us with abundance, sending us forth into our various vocations to share the grace that God has given to us. As this gathering, blessing, and sending occur again and again, we begin to lose the anxiety of scarcity and see that what we have gathered is enough, and with God, enough turns into abundance.

QUESTIONS

- Describe a time when you started a meal anxious, but left feeling full and blessed.
- How have you seen generosity result in abundance for all, both giver and receiver?
- How can the congregation name ways in which we participate in God’s work of gathering, blessing, and sending for mission?

PRAYER

Creator God, all good things start in you. Gather us and our resources of time, fellowship, money, and food and bless them into abundance. Send us forth into the community to scatter the seeds of your grace. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Deanna Boynton, North Mountain Lutheran Parish, Toms Brook

DECEMBER 2017

TEXT: LUKE 1:46-55

Reflection

Surely by December, we're thinking about gifts. Christmas gifts. Holiday cards. Gifts to take to parties. And if your family (like mine) has any birthdays or anniversaries around Christmastime, it's the gifting center of the year. It's also the time of year our favorite charities come calling for donations. When pledge drives take one more go. Perhaps when we send most of our monetary gifts to our selected causes before the tax year ends.

But is December the time of year when we consider giving to the church, or even, what the church and God have given to us?

Mary's Magnificat keeps us mindful of the gifts God gives. For the Mother of God, God's Son was chief among them! But, maybe because he's not there in the flesh quite yet, Mary names other gifts of God in her song of praise. She names God looking with favor upon a lowly servant, giving mercy for generations, lending strength, and putting the proud in their place. For Mary, God's gifts include bringing up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and helping the beloved community.

What if these were the gifts on which we focused giving and stewarding this month? We would be part of God's work of scattering the proud...by speaking up when someone tells a demeaning joke at the Christmas party. We would show God's mercy...to that family member you know you need to forgive. We would help God fill the hungry...by planning ahead and finding a place to drop off all those leftovers after the church or workplace festivities.

Finally, what would it look like to steward these Magnificat gifts to the church? Nowadays we all too frequently see the church as the lowly servant in society, struggling to get its fill. Yet Mary reminds us that it's upon the lowly servant that God looks. It's the lowest down that God lifts up. It's the hungry and struggling that God promises to fill with good things.

QUESTIONS

- When you reflect upon God's work as Mary names it...
 - How are you a part of it?
 - How is your congregation a part of it?
 - How is the church also the recipient of it?
- When you consider the church as the lowly in the Magnificat...
 - Does this change your perspective on giving to the church? How?

PRAYER

God of the generations, you called Mary to be a part of your life-giving, salvific work begun in creation, carried through Abraham and the generations, and made incarnate for us in Mary's child, Jesus. Call us to be part of the same life-giving project. Empower us to take up your mission in the world, as both givers to and receivers of your Magnificat promises, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rev. Katie Pocalyko, Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, Richmond