

OUR LIGHT  
AND  
OUR LIFE  
2022



A RESOURCE FOR  
CONGREGATION COUNCILS  
AND CALL COMMITTEES

Monthly devotions written by leaders in  
the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod

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# INTRO

Dear Gulf Coast Synod Leaders:

First, thank you for your ministry. You are serving on your church's council or call committee because others have identified gifts in you for this work, and not only that – when the need was presented, you said “yes!” So, thank you for serving your church and for answering God's call.

Accepting church leadership in these uncertain days is an act of faith. None of us knows exactly what the post-pandemic church will look like, only that it will be different than before. We do not know what decisions will need to be made or what opportunities will be offered to us. We do know we are not alone, and that is why the title of this devotional resource is Our Light and our Life. God is both, and aren't we grateful?

As you meet, there will be plenty of business to cover and many items to which to attend. Before jumping in, take time to read scripture, to be in holy conversation with one another, and to pray. For the months when no discussion questions are provided, consider using these:

What, from this devotion, will stick with you, and why?

What questions did this devotion raise for you?

For whom or for what does this devotion remind you to pray?

May God, who is Our Light and Our Life, bless you as you lead and serve,  
Pastor Tracey



**Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has  
risen upon you. ~ Isaiah 60:1*

A friend of mine had a stroke this past year, one that has left him learning how to walk again. These past six months have been a struggle for him to say the least. And yet this dear man continues to radiate joy and hope in the midst of grief and pain. He is able to do so partly because such is his personality but more so because of his faith. The Good News of God undergirds his life.

Epiphany proclaims the Light of God shining in the messiness of life, celebrates Jesus coming with abundant grace into a world of sin and death. Wise Men knelt in homage, fishermen were called to follow, sinners and outcasts found themselves included.

There is plenty that weighs us down. Covid has disrupted life in church, home and community. Cultural changes impact church attendance. The world is a place of harsh rhetoric one day and tragic news the next, a place with little grace and far too much violence. Yet into this world the glory of Jesus' story has come.

We are an Epiphany people. Where do you see light or life or healing in the world around you?

*Prayer: Holy God, our Light and Life, undergird our lives with your presence so we may arise with your love, joy and peace within us. Amen.*



**THE REV. JERRY MANSHOLT**  
INTERIM PASTOR  
HOSANNA MANDEVILLE, LA

*...Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her. ...I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." ~ Genesis 16:8-10*

The feisty Hagar's story comes to us as a biblical mystery that may yet be answered from deep within the heart of a God who is love. More details of Hagar's relationship with Sarai may have given some clues. But what is clear are God's splendid gifts to Hagar—the recognition of her personhood; an enduring lineage where before she had less than nothing; and a life-changing encounter in the presence of the divine. Though Hagar's personalized call to return to a life of enslavement is somewhat unsettling; nothing can beat the deliberate bestowal of a blessing that almost equated that of her owners!! How amazing is that?! O to be loved by the God who sees — sees through the sinner in me to the living saint who's also me. That's love. That's God!

*Prayer: Thank you, God, for seeing  
me. Amen.*

**THE REV. ELE CLAY**  
HOUSTON, TX



*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; blot out my transgressions. ~ Psalm 51:1b*

This month, we begin the season of Lent. When I was a settled parish pastor, oftentimes a member would ask my advice about “what to give up for Lent this year.” The main thing you’re supposed to give up is your core sin—your “predominant fault”—the sin or sinful tendency that tends to prevail over the others. You already know what this is. If you don’t know, ask your spouse or co-workers; they’ll give you a clue!

Spend a few minutes thinking about your congregation and its history. If you’ve been around awhile, you know what “predominant fault” besets your congregation. If you’re new, you’ll want to figure it out so that you don’t get trapped by it unaware. It could be a rigidity of thinking that prevents you from dreaming about what God has in mind for your congregation. It could be some unresolved conflict or unhealed wound from many years ago that prevents you from passionately embracing opportunities for community involvement. It could be fear, anxiety, sadness, racism, insensitivity to the needs of the poor, indifference to the well-being of God’s physical creation, or any number of things. You already know what lurks beneath the surface of congregational life. Do you have the courage to confess them? To repent of them? To make amends? To be healed and set free in order to be used by God in the next season of congregational life?

*Prayer: Read aloud Psalm 51:1-17*

**THE REV. STEVE STUTZ**  
INTERIM PASTOR  
HOUSTON, TX



*Jesus said: "And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."*

*Matthew 16:18*

Did you catch that?! Jesus builds the church. Not the pastor. Not the council. Not the youth of the church. Not the ones who give the most money. Not the bishop or synod office. Not the churchwide offices. We don't build the church. That's not our job.

So then, what is our job? Our job is to remain faithful and expectant. And even then, our faith is a gift from God. All we get to do is respond joyfully and thankfully. And the best way to do that is to work together to cultivate a congregational environment that is fecund, and then trust God to do what God does best- create, redeem, and sustain!

Question: In what ways do we forget as a congregation (or call committee) that we do not build the church?



*Prayer: Dear Jesus, as you build your church, teach us how to cultivate fertile ground for growth to happen. In your name we pray. Amen.*

**THE REV. BROTHER CHRIS MARKERT**  
BISHOP'S ASSOCIATE FOR MISSION  
TEXAS-LOUISIANA GULF COAST SYNOD  
HOUSTON, TX

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ~ Acts 2:1-2*

In this passage from Acts, there is a loud rush of wind, blowing things and people out of sorts. Tongues of fire appear over the apostles' heads. People probably responded to what they were seeing by gasping, pointing at each other, talking, and whispering. Then, the Spirit moved people to speak. Such a hum of words were spoken all at once that you couldn't make out just one voice or one language. Talk about chaos!

Sometimes, as leaders, our work seems structured. We know what to do next. Other times, though, may feel like this scene at Pentecost. You will have a number of options before you, and you'll have differing opinions about the best choice. People may begin talking at the same time. It may feel like that rush of Spirit-wind has blown through the room. During those times, remember that as much as we like order and control, God is about surprises. The Spirit stirs and shakes us, reminding us that what feels like chaos is bringing about something brand new!



*Prayer: Holy and Life-Giving Spirit:  
when ministry resembles chaos, remind  
us that you are with us, stirring us to  
new possibilities. Amen.*

**THE REV. DR. TRACEY BREASHEARS SCHULTZ**  
BISHOP'S ASSOCIATE FOR LEADERSHIP  
TEXAS-LOUISIANA GULF COAST SYNOD  
HOUSTON, TX



*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

~ Romans 8:28

The eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is about life in the Spirit. Paul says followers of Christ live according to the Spirit, set their mind on the Spirit, and are in the Spirit, which is life and peace. The Spirit of Christ dwells in you. That Spirit is life. If you are led by the Spirit, you are children of God.

This Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't even know how or what to pray, but that Spirit helps us in ways that are too deep for words. Paul was filled with the Spirit, lived according to the Spirit, and trusted the Spirit. Can we?

Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3) that the Spirit was like the wind. It blows where it wills. You hear it, but you cannot predict it, and you cannot control it. It moves at its own pace.

The Spirit blows in our lives and in our communities. The Spirit blows great gusts during times of transition. It's exciting and terrifying. It could go anywhere! Are you listening for it?

*Prayer: (from ELW Evening Prayer)*

*O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**BISHOP MICHAEL RINEHART**  
TEXAS-LOUISIANA GULF COAST SYNOD |  
HOUSTON, TX



*But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ~ Luke 10:40-42*

As we enter ordinary time, we sometimes feel like Martha complaining about so much falling to us. Or maybe we feel like Mary, eager to sit and just absorb the wisdom of the teacher without getting up to do the work of being church. But action without reason becomes bullish and can be self-serving. Contemplation without action is navel gazing. We need both action AND contemplation! We need sound instruction for the work ahead and to be worker bees for God to bring about the fruits of our faith. Let us find both with joy.

*Prayer: Let us pray: God, in whatever we do, may we have a praying heart. In whatever we learn, may we put it into loving practice. May we always find the middle way between action and contemplation for service through the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

**THE REV. LAURA STEPHENSON**  
CHRIST THE KING  
KENNER, LA





*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.*

*~ Jeremiah 1:5*

Sometimes life feels like a mystery. There are so many questions to have answered. And often one question leads to another and another and yet another unanswered question. And as the questions go unanswered the level of anxiety can begin to rise also. And suddenly life becomes scary and unpredictable and the feeling of being out of control invades reality.

Questions like, "Who can ever replace our former pastor?" or "Who should be on the call committee?" or "Who can we convince to be on church council this year?" or "Who will lead the devotions next meeting?" or "Who will be our next deacon or pastor?" These questions and more can lead to unsettled feelings.

When these "Who" questions begin to surface in the conversation, just grab your Bible, and turn to Jeremiah 1:5.

God knows who will follow your previous pastor. God knows who will be the correct match for the call committee. God knows the best people for church council. God knows who will be great leading the devotions next council meeting. God has already chosen the deacon or pastor for your church. Your job is to pray and listen to what God is sharing with you. Pray and listen. Yes, you see you are not in charge. Give it over to God, and pray for direction, and listen for God's response. God's got this...in God's time. It is all going to be amazing. God has all the answers.



*Prayer: God, when we come to you with indecision, fear and anxiety, we ask you to be gentle with us as you pry our need to control out of our hands. When we want to know "Who" immediately, bathe us with discernment that you and you alone will disclose "Who" to us when, and only when, it is your time to do that. God, comfort us and guide us on this journey of service to you. We ask this in your name. Amen.*

**THE REV. CHON PUGH**  
MEMORIAL LUTHERAN/FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
TEXAS CITY, TX

*Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. ~ Luke 14:25-33*

I remember sitting in the fellowship hall of a small church, listening to a presentation from a group of lay leaders about a possible future for our congregation. It was a big dream for a little church. It included using some property we owned for a possible day care and senior living center someday: the dream of seeding the future with our elders and youngest children together. It seemed impossible, but some of us were ready to dream. Then one of the patriarchs of the congregation stood up and read a verse from Luke 14: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost?" You could feel the wind go out of everyone's sails, the light dim in our eyes. The man sat down. The message could not have been clearer. The dream died before it was born; the senior living tower was never built.

But I wonder: is that why Jesus told this parable? So that people would give up, walk away, shaking their heads? Why did Jesus tell this parable?

I don't think that's a question anyone can answer in a few words, or a few minutes. It's a question to wrestle with as we daily do the impossible: follow Jesus. Following Jesus is full of grace, and failure, getting it wrong and starting over. It's about not giving up and it's about falling on the mercy of God.

*Prayer: Gracious God, help us to hear your hard words and not to turn away and shake our heads. Help us to dream dreams and count the cost, and follow you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

**THE REV. DIANE ROTH**  
GRACE LUTHERAN  
CONROE, TX



*"But ask the animals, and they will teach you;  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of the Lord has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being."*

*~ Job 12:7-10*



**AMBER HARBOLT**  
WORD & SACRAMENT CANDIDATE  
CELEBRATION, CYPRESS, TX

October is typically a month where reminders of mortality appear around every corner. It can be tough to recall God's promise of new life between the shorter days, Halloween and All Saints Day, and the wind taking on an autumnal chill (less so in Texas and Louisiana, but we can dream). St. Francis's Feast Day on October 4th reminds us that we need look no further than the natural world to remember the life God breathes into all creation.

During my hospital chaplain internship, I visited a patient (Mr. M) who was awaiting a heart procedure. The dreary weather and oatmeal-beige paint on the walls seemed to drain all the energy from the room. Mr. M said he had not been to church in a long time, but when I asked where he felt most connected to God, his eyes lit up. "Fishing!" he exclaimed, "When I'm out on the water first thing in the morning and see the sun come up over the horizon, I feel closer to God than in any other place on earth." Mr. M asked that I pray for his procedure, but also for the preservation of natural places and animals for his grandchildren to enjoy and connect with God. Though 800 years apart, Mr. M and St. Francis share a rare insight: sometimes the best way to find new life and encounter our Creator is to enjoy and care for creation.

- When was the last time you encountered God in nature?
- How do you honor God by caring for creation?
- What is one way this week you can make space to spend time with God in creation?

*A prayer from St. Francis:*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,  
and bear infirmity and tribulation.*

*Blessed are those who endure in peace  
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus ~ Philippians 4:4-7*

The day before Thanksgiving, I went to the store for a few last-minute items. I didn't have much on my list—just fried onions. So, I began to walk up and down the aisles finally finding ONE can. As I stood there eyeing the prize, a person blew into the aisle and zeroed in on my can of fried onions. “You don't need that do you?” she huffed. “I do, but my husband is at another store, and I can ask him to get it.” Realizing that I was acquiescing the can, she bellowed, “then he can get them!”

Anxiety comes in many shapes; it can look like anger from plans going awry to someone not following through with tasks, or seeming indifferent when making decisions. Beloved, no matter the source of the anxiety know that God is always near.

*Prayer: Holy God, you listen to our worries whether we voice them or not. Help us to remember that you are always near so that we may rejoice and do the work you've called us to do. Amen.*

**THE REV. STEPHANIE STARK**  
ST. JOHN LUTHERAN  
CAT SPRING, TX





*Pero tú, Belén Efrata,  
Aunque eres pequeña entre las familias de Judá,  
De ti me saldrá el que ha de ser gobernante en Israel.  
Y sus orígenes son desde tiempos antiguos,  
Desde los días de la eternidad.  
Por tanto, Él los abandonará hasta el tiempo  
En que dé a luz la que ha de dar a luz.  
Entonces el resto de sus hermanos  
Volverá a los israelitas.  
Y Él se afirmará y pastoreará Su rebaño  
Con el poder del Señor,  
Con la majestad del nombre del Señor Su Dios.  
Y permanecerán,  
Porque en aquel tiempo Él será engrandecido  
Hasta los confines de la tierra.  
Él será nuestra paz. ~ Miqueas 5:2-5a*

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.  
Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
to the people of Israel.  
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength  
of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.~ Micah 5:2-5a*

### Our Ever-Arriving God

The theme of anticipating the presence of the ever-arriving God encapsulates the experience of discerning a call to ministry. Our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, resists becoming a personal object, owned by our own wills. God is ever becoming a gracious presence to us because the contrary would transform the living God into an idol of our own imagination, our own singular comprehension of the God who is beyond our conceptual frame. Rather so, God is always on the way, on the road to Bethlehem, on the way to Jerusalem. Micah, in his time, understands perfectly this insight of the God of his forebearers. Speaking during the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom, Micah denounced the gods the Northern Ten Tribes had made of their own imagination (Mic 1:5). Out of their conceit, the mighty had defrauded people of their lands (Mic 2:2), utterly brought ruin to the least (Mic 3:2-3) and forgot to walk with the Lord God (Mic 4:5). Out of this period of destruction, Micah foretold the coming of the reign of peace out of the most unexpected locations: Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). From the "little clans of Judah...shall come forth from me one who is to rule in Israel." From this insignificant place, God promises to work through the coming ruler for peace. In so doing, God manifests Godself as alluding our anticipation for stability and peace. Peace, like God, would be always coming to us in unexpected ways. Together with Micah, we discern the coming of this ever-arriving God in the unexpected places of our lives. May you be surprised by the ever-arriving God and always strive to deepen your understanding of the mystery of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

*Prayer: (Collect for 4th Sunday in Advent)*

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins  
and make us ready for the celebration of your birth, that we may receive you  
in joy and serve you always, for you live and reign with the Father and the  
Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

**THE REV. SERGIO RODRIGUEZ**  
CHRIST THE KING  
HOUSTON, TX



*Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Let a [portion] of [manna] be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.'"*

*~ Exodus 16:32*

As a call committee, there is a good chance that you are experiencing a pastoral vacancy. You might be still processing the loss of a pastor. You might be anxious about what's going to happen next. You might be sad, upset, or angry that you've been left without your leader, whatever the circumstances might be. Most of all, you might be feeling alone or lost. Know that these feelings are normal.

Know that being alone in the wilderness is a typical part of life as a church community, as well as an individual. But God does God's best work in the wilderness. God is preparing you for the future which God has already prepared for you.

Just as God did with Israel before they crossed the Jordan river into the promise God had made long before. God has called you to holy work. Care and trust in one another, as God has trusted you to accomplish it. Find comfort in the Holy Spirit's accompaniment as you take these steps into God's future.

*A Prayer of Augustine of Hippo*

*O loving God, to turn away from you is to fall, to turn toward you is to rise, and to stand before you is to abide forever. Grant us, dear God, in all our duties your help; in all our uncertainties your guidance; in all our dangers your protection; and in all our sorrows your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**THE REV. JAY SHAILER**  
JOYFUL LIFE  
MAGNOLIA, TX



*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

*~ Philippians 4:8*

Before starting to walk the Camino [de Santiago], seasoned walkers warned us about hot spots... It turns out that the body gives a little warning right before getting a blister. No kidding. You get a hot spot. Generally speaking, pilgrims have less than fifteen minutes before their skin moves from hot and red to blistered. In that brief period, there is a choice to make: Pay attention to the hot spot, or ignore the warning sign.

Connect this to the church. Ask yourself, "Where are the hot spots?" Over the past twenty years or more, there have been multiple warning signs in the church that leaders have ignored... The sad but true evidence is in plain sight, but the church has kept walking as if everything was OK.

What hot spots have you seen in your congregation? What's on your list?



*Prayer: Healing God: give us the wisdom to pay attention to hot spots, and guide us in making good decisions for the sake of mission and ministry in your name. Amen.*

**DEACON PEGGY HAHN**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
LEAD

[www.waytolead.org](http://www.waytolead.org)

*Excerpt from Faithful Metrics: a field guide to measuring mission without missing the moments*



**Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod**  
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God's work. Our hands.

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