

Quiet Joseph is example of faithfulness and discipleship

Christmas message from Bishop John Bradosky

Dear Disciples of Christ Jesus,

Martin Luther had much more to say about Mary, the mother of our Lord, than Joseph. Yet Luther gives thanks for this guardian of our Lord. He commends Joseph as a saint who strengthens our faith by his faithful obedience, his sacrificial love for Mary and his protective care for Jesus.

Some consider him “the silent partner” in the Christmas event, a mere passive observer, relegated to the background or scenery. He doesn’t have a line in the Christmas narrative. In fact, there are no words of Joseph recorded in Scripture.

There are many people in our congregations who seem to be silent and passive observers, longing to get through life by blending into the background. They often wonder, “Do I have any part to play in God’s redemptive plan of salvation in Christ Jesus?”

The answer is a profound “Yes” — for Joseph and for all those wondering about their part in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Continued on Page 2



Nativity of Christ by Lorenzo Lotto (1523)

Continued from Page 1

In the course of my ministry I must admit that I have falsely labeled people as “silent” and “passive.” Their lives only seemed to be that way in comparison to the cacophony of noise around us and the meaningless busyness that consumes our time and energy.

What I have discovered is that they are not silent, but quiet. They are not passive, but focused and intentional in their actions. I believe this is the nature of Joseph’s life and faith.

The quietness of people like Joseph is often overwhelmed by the noise of blaring Christmas music, concerts, television specials, parties, celebrations and unceasing commercials. Through all the noise, it can be difficult to hear the proclamation of a profound love, calling us to respond. Through all the sounds of this season, Joseph reminds us of how important it is to be quiet enough to hear God’s voice.

The obedient actions of people like Joseph seem insignificant when compared to the all-consuming busyness of shopping, preparing foods, hosting parties, scheduling events, baking, decorating, cleaning, traveling and caring for a host of other details.

There seems to be no time — even in Advent and Christmas — to focus on Jesus or being truly present with those we love. Through the harried pace of life in this season of the year, Joseph reminds us to be focused, intentional and obedient to Christ in our actions.

Yet the Gospel accounts remind us that God’s plan for the Incarnation, and Jesus’ birth, included Joseph from the beginning. Joseph is a faithful husband and a caring father. He is a man of faith who listens to God’s messages and then obeys God’s commands, trusting in God’s promises.

Joseph’s involvement begins with conflict and embarrassment. The woman he loves, but has not yet married, is pregnant. He has the right according to the law to register a complaint and have her executed for adultery.



The Dream of St. Joseph by Anton Raphael Mengs (c. 1774)

Think of how difficult it was to explain this to family and friends. Yet Joseph is compassionate and decides to divorce her quietly — before the Lord intervenes.

In spite of public pressure to the contrary, Joseph stays with Mary, marries her and becomes Jesus’ guardian and father. This was because an angel told him to take Mary as his wife since her child was from the Holy Spirit.

Luther comments that “Joseph had nothing to go by save the Word of God and he accepted it. A godless man would have said it was just a dream, but Joseph believed the Word of God and took unto him his wife. Thus, he is for us an emblem of faith and virtue.”

This situation must have produced a tremendous sense of loss for Joseph. This was not what he was hoping for. This was not his plan or expectation for life as a husband and father.

Continued on Page 3

Continued from Page 2

Profound loss can cause us to become quiet and focused. Scripture reminds us that Joseph's moral dilemma about divorcing Mary was only the beginning of his sense of loss. Many difficulties and persecutions would follow.

In the Christmas season we are reminded of the evil rage of a paranoid King Herod who slaughtered innocent children and the weeping mothers who refused to be consoled. As Joseph listens, he hears the voice of alarming concern from an angel. There are military-like instructions, commands to flee to Egypt, protecting Jesus even when it meant becoming a refugee.

We even read of the experience that is a parent's worst nightmare — to lose your child in the crowd. Luther considers how our Lord's guardian let his guard down and lost track of Jesus. Luther writes that since Joseph "had received a solemn mandate to care for the child ... it was a great fright and an especial heartache when they could not locate the child." Luther goes on to write about what a painful three days they endured before locating him in the temple.

Often those we consider to be silent and passive are people who are grieving. They have experienced the same sense of loss and despair that Joseph experienced. Broken relationships, children who have wandered off, the experiences of children in tears and the lament of parents is all around us.

For many in this world the joy of Christmas stands in sharp contrast to their overwhelming sense of loss. Perhaps it is the place setting for Christmas dinner that remains empty as a son or a daughter has died or children whose lives were taken at the bomb blast of terrorists, children sold into sexual slavery, addicted to drugs, suffering from malnutrition, poverty, disease and other forms of exploitation.

What a contrast this is to the sounds of Christmas, but it is the sounds of the world around us. In such a world, it is easy to become silent and passive, overwhelmed and without hope.



St. Joseph with the Infant Jesus by Guido Reni (c. 1635)

The very thing I love about the Scriptures, I also hate. They are wonderfully true and painfully honest! So quickly the Bible moves from the celebration of Jesus' birth to the stark reality of the world into which He was born — a world filled with suffering and pain, with grief, terrorism and despair, the abuse of power and the victimization of the innocent.

Keeping such passages so close together in our readings for worship during the Christmas season reminds me that Jesus came for a purpose! Jesus came to be with us in that suffering. Jesus came, not to remove our suffering, but to bear it with us!

Jesus entered a world in which there is uncertainty and death and He came to offer the certainty of His love and His glorious resurrection that overcomes death. In the Church Year, it isn't much past Christmas before we see Jesus suffering and dying on the cross. It isn't long after Christmas until we celebrate Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

Continued on Page 4

Continued from Page 3

It is impossible for Kristi and me to get through a Christmas without some measure of grief. There on our bedroom wall is our son Joshua's last school picture, taken before he died. There are the ornaments he created that still make it to our tree, year after year. There is the hymn, "Away in a Manger" that was also sung at his funeral — "Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in your tender care and fit us for heaven to live with you there."

While there is always pain and grief, we also know that Jesus is here to face it with us. Because of Jesus' resurrection we also know that Joshua is with Him forever as well. It is the cross and the empty tomb that proclaim the real joy and meaning of Christmas.

In all that followed the birth of Jesus, Luther considered Joseph and Mary to be missionaries under persecution. He writes: "There is no doubt that Mary and Joseph and perhaps others with them that had come to know the child were not silent while in Egypt over the great miracle which had occurred with this child. They preached and brought others to faith and salvation."

Luther uses this episode of Mary and Joseph to teach about how the Church grows when it is under persecution — something Luther found comforting during his day and which we can also appreciate today.

Luther speculates that Joseph had to tell the story of God's involvement in their lives. He had to speak of God's commands and his obedient response. He had to tell others of God's warning and His provision. He had to tell others about this One he was called to love and guard. He had to tell others about Jesus.

Even those who are quiet are not speechless. Even those who seem passive are willing to respond obediently. In the midst of all the sounds I hear from the world and the variety of sounds of life in the Church, I have learned from Joseph to be quiet enough to listen to God's Word and to trust in His wisdom above all others. Amid a hectic schedule

and the busyness of Christmas preparations, I have learned from Joseph to be focused, intentional and to obediently respond to Christ Jesus, proclaiming the truth and wonder of who He is and all that He has accomplished for us.

Ignoring God's Word always puts us in great danger and on a pathway that leads to destruction. Joseph's example calls us to faith. Being obedient to Jesus is the life of trust and faith. This is the very nature and meaning of discipleship — not a new law but the loving response of obedience, true faith! The example of Joseph's life also reminds us to listen to what is happening around us. Hear the evil, the cries of those in need, the pain and the grief of those who have been wounded, terrorized and murdered so senselessly!

Joseph not only listened carefully but acted on God's instructions. Joseph did exactly what God asked him to do. He didn't wait until morning. He didn't wait for better weather. He took immediate action.

Jesus said, "Blessed ... are those who hear the Word of God and obey it" (*Luke 11:28 NIV*). In another place He said, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (*John 13:17 NIV*). Through Joseph, God provided protection and care. It was obedience motivated out of faith and love of God that moved him to action.

God is still speaking through His Word. God is still giving us ears to hear the cries of people in need in our community, city, state or province, nation and world. He is still expecting our faithful response through obedient action. Joseph is more important than we can imagine to this Christmas story, and his example should inspire and guide us even now!

May you find hope and direction for living by taking time this Christmas to be quiet enough to listen to God's voice in His Word and respond with faithful obedience, taking every opportunity to tell His story!

With you following this One born in a manger in Bethlehem,

Bishop John Bradosky

Congregations may nominate candidates for NALC bishop

Congregations of the North American Lutheran Church are encouraged to nominate pastors for the office of bishop of the NALC.

The 2019 NALC Convocation, Aug. 7-9 in Indianapolis, Ind., will elect a new bishop for the NALC. Bishop John Bradosky has announced that he will not accept nomination to a third term as bishop when his term expires in 2019.

According to the NALC Constitution, congregations are the primary source of nominees for bishop. Congregations are encouraged to begin the process of discerning who they might nominate for bishop. Any NALC pastor may be nominated. Congregations may nominate more than one person for bishop.

The only other source for nominations prior to the Convocation is the NALC Executive Council. The council has announced that it will not be nominating any candidates this year, so it is important that congregations nominate pastors for the position.

Congregations decide how they will nominate candidates, but some formal action by the congregation or its council should be taken. A congregational meeting, such as an annual meeting, would be a good place to formalize any nominations coming from a congregation as it would involve as many members as possible.

Congregational members are encouraged to engage in conversation about people who might serve as bishop with their pastor or mission district dean.

To prepare for the nomination and election process for bishop, the Executive Council provided a packet of information to congregations in August. The packet includes a booklet of prayers encouraging NALC members to engage in a year of prayer and discernment leading up to the election.



The installation service for Bishop John Bradosky at the 2011 NALC Convocation in Hilliard, Ohio.

The prayer booklet, nomination form, and more information on the election process may be found online at thenalc.org/election.

Congregations are encouraged to submit nominations to the Nominating Committee early in 2019. The Nominating Committee is required to make biographical information on all candidates for bishop available to NALC congregations 90 days prior to the Convocation. Receiving nominations by April will allow the committee time to gather the biographical information from candidates.

The committee has set a May 3 deadline for all nominations prior to the Convocation. Additional nominations for bishop are possible from the floor of the Convocation, but it would be helpful to the process to have all nominations submitted in advance so that biographical information on all candidates can be available to delegates.

Questions about the nominating process may be addressed to committee chair, Marc Voigt, at nominations@thenalc.org.

NALC Pastors' Conference to focus on discipleship from Catholic perspective

The 2019 NALC Pastors' Conference will explore discipleship from a Roman Catholic perspective. The conference will be held Feb. 19-21 at the Crowne Plaza Orlando Universal Boulevard Hotel in Orlando, Fla.

Featured speakers are the Rev. Stephen Pullis and the Rev. Charles Zlock.

Father Pullis is director of evangelization, catechesis and schools for the Archdiocese of Detroit. He will offer two presentations on the archdiocese's "Unleash the Gospel Initiative."

Father Zlock is the pastor of the Church of St. Monica in Berwyn, Pa. His two presentations are "Building a Parish Community of Disciples" and "How Do You Preach for Discipleship and Reach People in the Pews?"

The Rev. Dr. James Nestingen will return to the Pastors' Conference to offer his annual text study of the lectionary texts for Lent, Holy Week and Easter.

The Rev. John Bradosky, bishop of the NALC, will lead a meeting of the NALC Ministerium on Thursday. The meeting will be preceded by a service of Holy Communion, including the renewal of ordination vows and the blessing of anointing oil for use in congregations.

Afternoon and evenings are free time with no scheduled events. There will be opportunities on Tuesday afternoon for meetings with NALC staff and insurance and benefits representatives.

All NALC pastors are strongly encouraged to attend the conference, and congregations are asked to support their pastor's attendance financially.

Registration is \$100 per person until Dec. 31 and \$125 beginning Jan. 1. A discounted hotel rate is available at the hotel. To register or for more information go to thenalc.org.



James Nestingen



Stephen Pullis



Charles Zlock

Although this conference is designed for NALC pastors and seminarians, other NALC leaders are welcome, as are non-NALC pastors and seminarians. Clergy spouses are welcome and encouraged to attend, but they must register so that adequate arrangements for seating and meals may be made.

Lutheran Week videos, photos and reports are available online

Videos, reports, photos and presentations from the 2018 Lutheran Week — which included the annual NALC Convocation, Mission Festival, Braaten-Benne Lectures in Theology, Life-to-Life Discipleship Training, Women of the NALC Annual Gathering and Ventures in Youth Ministry Symposium — are available on the NALC website in the Lutheran Week Archive.

The Lutheran Week Archive includes videos and resources from all of the NALC's Convocations and other events since 2010.

Books containing the lectures from the annual Braaten-Benne Lectures in Theology from 2010 through 2017 are available at alpb.org.

A word on behalf of your seminary

By the Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee

As the North American Lutheran Seminary's new interim director of partnerships and recruitment, I would like to extend an invitation to the congregations and pastors of the NALC:

Help your seminary to identify and to train the next generation of workers for the harvest — ministers of Word and Sacrament, formed deeply and passionately by the Gospel of Christ, the truth of God, and the love of the Holy Spirit, ready to proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom and to lift up the light of forgiveness to a world in need.

Quality training for ministry can't be emailed or screencapped — not if those being trained, beyond getting facts stuffed into their skulls, are *also* to be formed through worshiping, praying, mentoring, reading, singing, preaching, and all the practices and experiences of community, of guidance, of transformation, that make servants of the Gospel for the Church.

Let me say for the record that facts, those things that go into skulls, are essential. I have nothing against distance learning. (My own teaching for the NALS has been online, and I greatly appreciate the advantages of such an arrangement.) Residential education is not some kind of magic wand, automatically churning out Gospel-filled, Scripture-shaped, worship-spirited, Christ-following pastors.

But — despite our age's obsession with pragmatizing and commercializing all human endeavors, including education — what we are doing at NALS would not be made more "effective" merely by *taking away* essential dimensions of the program.



North American Lutheran Seminary faculty and students posed for a group photo. They are, from left, the Rev. Dr. Amy Schiffrin, Dr. David Yeago, Ke "Ray" Zhu, Colin Neill, Andrew Fuller (NALS Student/NALC Director of Communications), Justin Baker, George Schrader, Deanna Edwards, Taylor Rister, Justin Fisk, Brittany Jones, Janessa Fisk, Matt Knuppel, Marisa Crofts (NALS Student/NALS Administrative Assistant), Ben Blobaum and Ryan Henkel (NALS Student/NALS Administrative Assistant).

For these reasons, seminary education is expensive, time-consuming and labor-intensive. It's always been challenging, even in obedience to God's powerful call, for those called to find the resources to give — often accompanied by families — to a period of intensive preparation.

Among our highest priorities is helping those for whom it would otherwise be financially very difficult or impossible to study with us. Many full scholarships for residential students are available — and we are extremely grateful to all who have contributed to establishing those for the NALS.

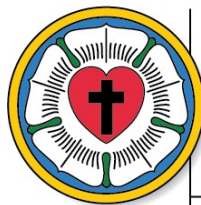
Additionally, the NALS is currently working with three undergraduate institutions — Concordia College in Bronxville, N.Y.; Concordia University in St. Paul, Minn.; and (very soon) Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa — and is actively in discussion with others, to help college students desiring to be prepared for ministry in the NALC to be trained more affordably.

Continued on Page 8

This will generally be accomplished by taking some of the course work in Bible and theology at these undergraduate schools (done at a deeper level and with more rigorous requirements than typical) as fulfilling part of the seminary curriculum, making it possible to avoid unnecessary repetition and thus to save up to a full year of costs.

We would like our congregations to help us by commending this possibility — along with other opportunities, like the summer NEXUS program at Grand View University — to young people discerning a call to ministry, as well as by praying fervently for laborers to be raised up. Please feel free to contact me at maurice.lee@tsm.edu for more information.

Our partnerships have given, and continue to give, us opportunities to think and plan and pray with fellow Lutherans about the future of the Church's witness to the Gospel in North America. And the larger picture here is significant. Your seminary, like any other institution, survives by drawing people in to participate. (My job description could be



NALS

North American Lutheran Seminary

simplified if this were not the case.) But — even if church activities and strategies often seem reducible to this — the NALS is not about merely getting warm bodies through the door.

The Gospel is the true and holy treasure of the Church, and the NALS is committed to identifying and forming candidates for ministry who can equip believers for mission and disciple-making, tell the biblical story of God's kingdom in Jesus with faithfulness and sensitivity, and point, like John the Baptist, to a light and a hope not their own. *That's* what we're about. Your prayerful support for this work is vital. Thank you!

The Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee serves as interim director of partnerships and recruitment for the North American Lutheran Seminary.

Online devotions by NALC Life Ministries

Daily devotions for Advent and Christmas are being provided by NALC Life Ministries. The devotions provide a daily pro-life message from Advent through Jan. 18 (the date of the 2019 March for Life in Washington, D.C.).

The devotions are available each day at thenalc.org/devotions. You can also follow along with this year's devotional by signing up to receive a daily text or email message.

To receive a daily text message, please text @nalcadvent to 614-682-8693. To receive a daily email, please visit remind.com/join/nalcadvent and complete the brief request.

To learn more about NALC Life Ministries, visit thenalc.org/lifeministries.

NALC pastor to lead trip to Holy Land

Pastor Bassam Abdallah will be leading a trip to the Holy Land May 13-26, 2019. This is a unique opportunity to visit the Holy Land with a native of Jerusalem.

"It is my true desire to bring as many Christians as possible to see the sights of the Holy Land. The Old City of Jerusalem is where I was born and raised. I would like all Christians to see the biblical sights I grew up with. Standing in the same places where Jesus and His disciples stood makes the pages of the Bible come alive," he said.

Trip participants will visit biblical sights in Jordan and Israel.

More information is available at thenalc.org or by contacting Pastor Abdallah at revbja@gmail.com or (219) 808-1420.

Texas congregation to lead mission trip to El Salvador

Iglesia Luterana la Transfiguracion in Irving, Texas

By Pastor Pedro Portillo

Last year, Iglesia Luterana la Transfiguracion — Transfiguration Lutheran Church, an NALC congregation in Irving, Texas — joined with several other Texas Lutheran congregations to bring hope and happiness to many poor families in El Salvador during Christmas time.

We provided 1,000 food baskets for adults and toys for children. In El Salvador, an average family is composed of five members. We helped to provide food for 10 days, making a Christmas dinner possible for them. In total, we were able to feed 5,000 people.

We brought smiles and happiness to many children. Many of them for the first time experienced a special meal of Pollo Campero and enjoyed ice cream and toys.

The average salary for about 40 percent of these households is \$7 a day. They would never be able to afford the luxury of restaurant-style food. No father or mother would be able to pay \$7 per meal for three children when that's triple the amount they would make in a day.

In El Salvador, the cost of living for an individual is about \$1 per day. That dollar is enough to provide basic needs such as beans, rice and tortillas.

This year we are organizing another mission trip to El Salvador. The trip will take place Jan. 27 to Feb. 7, 2019.

We are asking for money to provide medicine, food, clothing and wheelchairs for the elderly and handicapped. The need is urgent. Many hospitals

are running out of medication. Children and elderly are dying because hospitals do not provide proper medication.

The corrupt system and government leaders are the ones responsible for this problem, but they blame gangs for this social and economic violent situation. In the last 30 years, each presidential administration has stolen taxpayer dollars and international financial support. Some of them are in jail, others are hiding out in other Latin American countries.

As you might have heard, many Salvadorians and other Central Americans are seeking to get out of their own countries. It has been in our news a lot with talks about caravans traveling to the United States border. Many families are coming in caravans, escaping from different kinds of violence. We have a great opportunity to help them with food and medicine.

Over the last 10 months many unaccompanied children from El Salvador have come to the United States seeking food and shelter. Many of them are still living in tent camps in different places on the United States' southern border.

If you want to participate in this humanitarian effort, please call me at 214-287-8590 or email me at pedroportillo715@hotmail.com.

I will tell you that the best feeling is to be present when people receive your gifts. I also encourage you to go with me to El Salvador during this time.

"The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." — Proverbs 22:9 NIV

Update from Pastor James Puotyual serving refugees from South Sudan

By Pastor James Puotyual

Many people in southern Sudan are Christians. About 2,000 in my village attended a Presbyterian mission church. People prayed to God every day. They prayed just as the psalmist did. Then one day our faith was greatly tested. Psalm 44 applies to my experience in Southern Sudan. It says, "Thou hast made us like sheep for slaughter, and hast scattered us among the nations" (*Psalm 44:11 RSV*).

It reminded me of when I was 15 years old. That year, 1985, in January, I was married, and war broke out in our village. Soldiers came and started killing people and burning houses. They wanted the chief to pay a bribe to the government. He refused because he said the land did not belong to them.

We fought the soldiers all that day and the next morning. But they had too many guns and soldiers. My cousin was shot and died in my arms. I ran into the woods along with other villagers and the soldiers started our village on fire. I felt afraid and angry.

We couldn't return home for three months. Then the soldiers met with the chief and told him we could come back to the village. They promised not to fight any longer. But they had put mines in the ground and they blew up and killed many more of my people. We were like sheep being slaughtered. "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (*Psalm 44:22 NIV*).

When the soldiers came to our village, they burned the church. People started crying. They asked God why He had let this happen. They blamed God just as the psalmist did. "You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us" (*Psalm 44:13 NIV*).

The psalmist felt the same way my people and I did. This was a comfort to us because we knew he understood how we were feeling. I was such a young man and had to trust the chief and older men



Pastor James Puotyual and his wife, Nyandit Rika, will be serving as NALC Global Workers in the refugee camp in Gambella, Ethiopia.

of the village were making the best decisions. I had to trust God to take care of me.

My family and I, and the other villagers, ran away to a refugee camp in Ethiopia to get away from the soldiers. Our village had been destroyed and the soldiers had stayed there to keep us away. We walked seven days without food. I only had water.

I thought about how hungry I was, how afraid I was, how I wanted to live in a safe place. I knew God was with me, helping me even though I was hungry, tired and afraid.

Continued on Page 11

I lived in the refugee camp for six years. There were 500,000 people in that camp, including me and my family. Every morning at the camp, at 4:30 a.m., we went to church where we cried and asked God to please help us. God heard our prayers and gave us food to eat every day. We were safe. It was there that I learned to speak, read and write English. This has been very good for me.

We thanked God for the help from the United Nations. There was medical care, food and shelter, security, education and the opportunity to apply to go to the United States and many other countries around the world. It was also there in the refugee camp that my wife and I were blessed with the birth of our son. But like in Psalm 44, we felt disgraced and humiliated. When we had lived in our village, everyone worked hard to make a living and take care of one another. In the refugee camp everything was free. This made us feel disgraced and humiliated.

But I continued to love God because I believed that He created me and would continue to take care of me and my people. I know I can trust God no matter what happens because it is His character to be faithful and to take care of His children. I learned this from the Scriptures. "The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need ... Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever" (*Psalm 23:1, 6 NLT*).

My faith in God is very strong, and I have learned through these difficult times that sometimes God chooses not to come and directly fight the enemy. But He does directly work in our lives today.

When I was walking to the refugee camp, He made sure I had water to drink. I had food to eat at the refugee camp. I did not die like other people in my village had. My family was with me. He made a way for us to come to America when I was 23 years old. I trust God to know what is best for me because He has always taken care of me.

Everyone faces the enemy in their lives, and we must resist with the help of God. The enemy is false teaching from the devil. This false teaching was

what brought the soldiers to my village to kill and destroy us.

"For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm" (*Ephesians 6:12-13 NLT*).

Even though I have seen terrible evil, through the power of God, I am standing firm against evil in God's strength. Psalm 44:6 says we should not put our trust in weapons. I don't think that weapons will save us. They didn't in my village. But we pray to God just as the psalmist does: "Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love" (*Psalm 44:26 NIV*). We don't trust in weapons because weapons only are a short-term solution to fighting. This type of solution will not last because it has not reached the heart of man.

True followers of Jesus should seek to use God's truth to change the hearts of people rather than weapons of war. God tells us to love one another: "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (*John 13:34-35 NLT*). So we need to find ways of fighting violence with God's love. As I said earlier, violence is only a short-term solution to fighting.

I think that people today are the same in many ways as the first ones who prayed Psalm 44. Some people today still blame God for everything that goes wrong, including things that they themselves did wrong. Even in Old Testament times there was a lot of fighting as there is now. It seems as if people will always think they have the right to fight for whatever they want. These situations will always test our faith. But if our faith is based on the character of God, rather than on situations, our faith will endure. This describes the faith of my people as well as my faith in God.

For more information or to learn how you can support Pastor James Puotyual and his wife, Nyandit, as NALC Global Workers, please visit: thenalc.org/GCS.

Peace on earth — and in our hearts, homes and churches

*“Glory to God in the highest and **peace** to His people on earth!” — Luke 2:14*

It’s amazing how many times *peace* is mentioned in the Bible. Concordances indicate the word is used 429 times in the King James Version of the Bible.

One Bible dictionary states, “In English, the word ‘peace’ conjures up a passive picture, one showing an absence of civil disturbance or hostilities, or a personality free from internal and external strife. The biblical concept of peace is larger than that and rests heavily on the Hebrew root which means ‘to be complete’ or ‘to be sound.’ The verb conveys both a dynamic and a static meaning, ‘to be complete or whole’ or ‘to live well.’ The noun had many nuances, but can be grouped into four categories: (1) shalom as wholeness of life or body (i.e., health); (2) shalom as right relationship or harmony between two parties or people, often established by a covenant and, when related to Yahweh, the covenant was renewed or maintained with a ‘peace offering’; (3) shalom as prosperity, success, or fulfillment and (4) shalom as victory over one’s enemies or absence of war. Shalom was also used in both greetings and farewells. It was meant to act as a blessing on the one to whom it was spoken: ‘May your life be filled with health, prosperity, and victory.’ As an adjective, it expressed completeness and safety.”

In the Greek New Testament, the word for peace often refers to reconciliation between God and humanity, and humans one to another. This peace/reconciliation is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, through whom we now have peace with God and each other. St. Paul makes this clear, proclaiming, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Romans 5:1 RSV*).

Interestingly, Paul goes on to affirm that this peace with God gives us joy, even in sufferings, because now, in Christ, as we are reconciled to the Father,



Ministry Matters

Pastor David Wendel

Assistant to the Bishop
for Ministry and Ecumenism

“suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (*Romans 5:3-5 RSV*).

What a blessing that, in and through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we have not only peace, but because we have peace, our suffering, difficulty and trials in life can be transformed, leading to hope and joy!

Our reality, however, is that we often find that “peace” eludes us.

In this season of Advent, as we prepare for the song of the angels and the birth of the Prince of Peace, our lives can be anything but “peace-full.”

Indeed, our homes and even our congregations can be places largely devoid of the peace of God which is to surpass all human understanding (*Philippians 4:7*).

We know that families wrestle with chaos caused by dysfunction, addiction and the stress and strain of daily life. At the same time, it’s tragic to hear of congregations where tension, disagreement and struggle rule the day. Life in community, whether home or church, can be challenging! This is the nature of human life and the consequence of sin.

Still, the Christian disciple and follower of Jesus, saved by God’s grace, reconciled to God and

Continued on Page 13

neighbor, has been blessed with the “peace which passes all human understanding.” We are called to live in this gift. We are called to let peace reign in our hearts and homes and congregations. This, itself, is not easy.

Martin Luther knew what it was to suffer and struggle in life, agonizing over his sin, guilt and threat of condemnation. It was only through the Gospel witness in Holy Scripture that he finally experienced freedom, release and peace. And yet, Luther states in his *Commentary on Galatians*, “To be convinced in our hearts that we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God by grace alone is the hardest thing.” Receiving and living in salvation by grace through faith is, itself, a challenge at times. This is why peace often eludes us.

In a sermon on Colossians 3:2-17, Luther says, “Paul admonishes us to let the peace of Christ have dominion in our hearts. The thought of the verse is: Though the peace of the world and the flesh abides not, though you must witness the forces of discord and disruption, nevertheless let your hearts have peace in Christ.”

The question, how does this happen? How do we “let the peace of Christ have dominion in our hearts?” How are we “convinced in our hearts.” Luther goes on in the sermon, affirming, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”

In the Galatians commentary Luther states, “The article of justification must be sounded in our ears incessantly because the frailty of our flesh will not permit us to take hold of it perfectly and to believe it with all our heart.”

Simply put, it is Holy Scripture, the proclamation of the Good News, that convinces us in our hearts that we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God. It is through dwelling in the Word of God that in spite of trial, tension and difficulty, the peace of God will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Indeed, this is why the Word became flesh to dwell among us, full of grace and truth! Now, the Word of God is near to us, on our lips and in our hearts (*Romans 10:8*). Now the Prince of Peace, the crucified, risen Lord Jesus Christ, is God with us.



As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus and enter into a new year, let us welcome the Word made flesh into our hearts, lives and congregations. Let us commit ourselves anew and afresh to having the Word of God always near to us, on our lips and in our hearts. Let us, in each home and congregation, read and meditate upon and pray over the words of Holy Scripture, that we may be, as Luther says, “convinced in our hearts that we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God by grace alone.”

That the peace of Christ may indeed be with us and in us. That the peace of Christ may shape our lives and relationships. That the song of the angels will be fulfilled, as we, together with them, give glory to God in the highest and receive the peace that is intended for all people on earth!

The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you this Christmas and in the new year!

Persistence in Prayer

By Pastor Gemechis Buba

Assistant to the Bishop for Missions

“O LORD my God, I cried to you for help and you have healed me.” — Psalm 30:2 ESV

I am struck by the beauty and simplicity of Psalm 30. Is there a more complete prayer in such few words than here in verse two? This verse sums up the entirety of our stories. As David prays these words, he calls on God by name as he cries out, addressing the depth of our brokenness. And in the same breath, healing. For we have a great God who saves, who gives us the chance to live again. What a gift from God is prayer!

Jesus “told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart” (*Luke 18:1 ESV*). Jesus states the purpose of this parable very clearly from the beginning: Pray and do not loose heart.

To illustrate His point, Jesus tells a parable about a corrupt judge. In a culture and place where honor holds incredible importance, we read of a judge who neither fears God nor people. This detail is important because the two standard appeals in the court of law at this time and place were to plead “for the sake of God” or “for my sake.” People cannot make a true appeal for justice before this judge, for he does not respect God or people. He does not care.

And so while the parable begins with little hope, it quickly loses all hope, for we find a widow standing before the unjust judge. This woman appears to be advocating for herself, which speaks volumes. Again, it is important to note that in this time and place, women did not go to court alone. Men would go for them. When this widow appears, we know she is utterly and desperately alone because there is no cousin, son, father, brother, uncle or nephew to speak for her, to plead her case. In a shame-and-honor culture, we read of a man who feels no shame and of a woman who symbolizes one of the most vulnerable people in the culture. It appears all hope is lost.

Jesus then tells us that this wise woman does the only thing she can do. She will not stop. She will not give up. She continues to plead her case as long as there is breath in her body. The judge finally throws up his hands in the air and cries, “enough!”

While a bit of humor, irony and sarcasm are employed to tell this serious parable, Jesus turns the tables quickly. Using a rabbinic principle to interpret the parable, Jesus moves from the light to the heavy. He shows that if such persistence pays off in the middle of corruption, injustice, and earthly matters, how much more will it pay off when we kneel before our Father in heaven.

If this judge just “gave in,” can you imagine what Yahweh’s response will be if we are persistent in prayer? As we think of all who have pleaded with God — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and others — and are overwhelmed by the world’s events, it would be easy for us to lose heart. But Jesus calls us to pray without ceasing, to continually be lifting up those who are marginalized, oppressed, the lost and the least before Him. We are to combat fear with hope, for the same God who brought freedom to those He called out of Egypt, His own children, will bring an end to injustice, making all things new again. And not just the things we see before our eyes in our world today. It would be easy to stop there. But rather, as we read the context for what Jesus is teaching, the Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom would come. The deafening response to thousands of years of prayer — “The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you” — for Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to pray in the garden on our behalf again. He pleads with the just Judge and gives His life for ours, so that we may be truly free. The debt is paid. The empty tomb declares victory!

We truly know that weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning. We can be secure for we will never be shaken. Jesus tells us, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (*John 16:33 NIV*). Always pray. Do not lose heart.

NALC Life Conference

The third annual NALC Life Conference will be held on Thursday, Jan. 17, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Warrenton, Va. The event is free and will begin at noon with a free lunch and conclude at 5 p.m. with a Communion service led by Bishop John Bradosky.

Featured speakers include Melissa Ohden, the survivor of a failed abortion, and Mona Fuerstenau of Bethesda Lutheran Communities.

Believing she was less than five months pregnant with Melissa in 1977, her birth-mother attempted to abort her. Miraculously, the abortion did not succeed in ending Melissa's life. Although the doctors initially believed that she would not live past infancy, and, if she did, she would suffer from multiple disabilities throughout her lifetime, she was adopted into a loving home. She not only survived, but thrived.

Melissa's life story is much more than a story of survival. Her testimony speaks to the beauty of God's grace, the power of love, hope and healing in the midst of grief and loss, and about the transformational power of forgiveness.

Mona Fuerstenau has been a disability advocate for over 30 years. A retired speech pathologist, parent of two very diverse young adults, champion of the marginalized and a lifelong Lutheran, she brings vast experience to her current role as director of ministry partnerships for Bethesda Lutheran Communities. She views most of life through an asset-based community development lens and firmly believes that all people have unique and necessary gifts and talents to share.

Her talk is entitled, "Wonderfully Made and Indispensable: Everyone is necessary in the Body of Christ, we have a lot of work to do!"

There is no registration required. But please email Pastor Dennis at dennisdimauro@yahoo.com if you will be attending the lunch to enable meal planning.

The following day, Friday, Jan. 18, those who are interested may attend the National Prayer Service and participate in the 2019 March for Life.



Youth and Family Ministry

By Gary and Laurie Pecuch

This school year the faithwebbing.com monthly webinars are focusing on our *Trot through the Bible* course for youth. Edited versions of the first few lessons are on the site. Topics include:

- + Classroom Philosophies and Teaching Styles
- + Creation: It is Good!
- + Adam & Eve: The Separation
- + The Flood: Water Cleanses
- + The Tower: God Came to Us

Remember to tune in to the monthly webinars on the second Tuesday of the month at 2 p.m. ET in January, February, March and April.

The remaining youth ministry online course schedule for this year is:

January — Setting Up a Safeguarding System in Your Congregation

February — Models of Ministry

March — Developing Spiritual Disciplines

April — Basic Faith Skills Training

An all-NALC NEXUS Institute week is on the calendar for July 7-12, 2019. Held at Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa, NEXUS is designed to give deep-thinking high schoolers a chance to learn about theology, service and ask questions of faith. It is a great experience and free from the time you arrive to the time you depart.

Gary and Laurie Pecuch serve the NALC as youth ministry coaches. You may contact them at families@thenalc.org.



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NALC News moving to electronic delivery

Readers are encouraged to sign up to receive email notice of NALC News

The North American Lutheran Church is moving to all-electronic distribution of the *NALC News*.

The *NALC News* is currently published online as a PDF document which may be downloaded from the NALC website and read online or printed.

Congregations are encouraged to print copies of the *NALC News* and make them available for their members.

A limited number of copies are printed and mailed to church members and supporters by the NALC. The delivery of the *NALC News* by postal mail will be eliminated by the end of 2018.

“As a church dedicated to a lean structure and faithful stewardship of finances, leaders of the NALC regularly look for opportunities to adjust the budget in order to better support our mission. One of the ways we can reduce expenses is by shifting to an all-electronic delivery of the *NALC News*,” explained Andrew Fuller, NALC Director of Communications.

The 2018 NALC Convocation approved a budget for 2019 that calls for phasing out the printing and mailing of the *NALC News*.

All those on the NALC’s email list receive an email when each issue of the *NALC News* is posted to the NALC website. Please contact the NALC office if you would like to be added to the email list.

There are three options for anyone receiving the *NALC News* by postal mail:

1. Email your name and email address to nalc.mnoffice@thenalc.org to be moved to the electronic mailing list.
2. Contact your pastor or church office to see if they could provide you with a printed copy of the newsletter. Please have the pastor or church notify the NALC office if they will provide this service.
3. If you do not have access to email, please call 651-633-6004 or 888-551-7254 (U.S. toll free) to discuss alternatives.