



# gather

FOR FAITH AND ACTION MARCH 2021

*Bible study:*

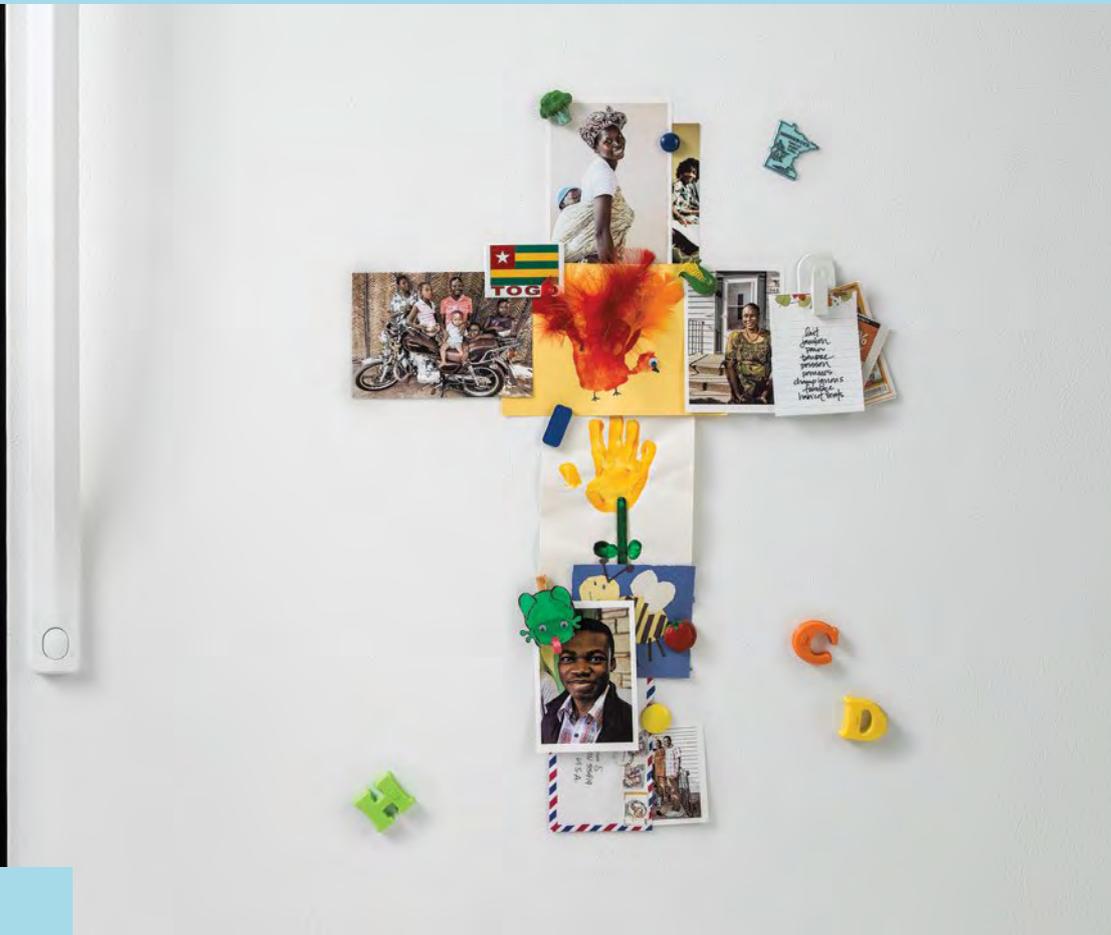
## **Journeys with angels**

Messages from God

Welcome home

At the table

# What makes MIF Term Investments notable? Even non-investors see a return.



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# Never alone

BY ELIZABETH HUNTER

**I REMEMBER HEARING IN THE NEWS** about a 28-year-old mom from Missouri who became ill with COVID-19, 26 weeks into pregnancy with her second child. She was intubated, sedated and placed on a life support machine. While fighting for her life and her baby's life, she felt that a guardian angel was with her.

This young mom later learned that while she was sedated, a 27-year-old nurse, during each of her shifts, had been whispering encouragement and support to her. When the mom's condition worsened, and her baby girl was delivered via emergency C-section at 29 weeks, this same nurse posted photos of the baby, who was transferred to another hospital's ICU, all around the mom's hospital room. When the mom recovered and was relearning how to walk, the nurse threw her a baby shower.

These two women, Monique and Caitlyn, now text each other daily. Monique chose Caitlyn, the angel of a nurse who made sure she didn't feel alone, as her daughter's godmother. Why? "I felt like she fought for me," Monique said.

This month (p.20), Bible study author Christa von Zychlin explores how angels of the Lord comfort, encourage and protect people including Hagar, Shadrach, Mesach, Abednego, Daniel and even Jesus. She also considers that at times God's messengers may be human, rather than heavenly beings. "Can you think of a time when you were comforted and encouraged by someone (a human

'angel,' perhaps) and only later recognized it as the presence of God?" she asks us.

Helping us to recognize God's presence and gifts in others, author Julia Seymour has written a Lenten devotional series (p. 12) focused on the vocations of people we encounter. Adding these devotions and prayers for others to your daily routine can be a reminder that, as Seymour says, "we are never alone in our Christian journey. The Holy Spirit connects us to other people and to creation in ways beyond our imagination."

How do those Holy Spirit connections bear fruit over time? Read Laura Gifford's story (p. 28) of what happened more than 100 years ago when Norwegian deaconess and nurse Sister Elizabeth Fedde found her vocation in building community, as well as medical and social service ministries in the United States. And

check out Mary Campbell's reflection (p. 34) on the ELCA AMMPARRO program, which connects caring congregations with people, especially young people, who seek safety and asylum in the U.S.

All of this begins with our first seeing others, as Caitlyn saw Monique in her hospital's COVID-19 ICU. Or as Cara Strickland (p. 9) began to see Hagar in the book of Genesis—after years of not really seeing her at all.

Like our biblical ancestors, we are seen and we are never really alone, thanks to God and God's messengers. While God's messengers "don't always solve all our problems, or even most of them," von Zychlin writes, these angels "do God's work, for God's purposes, in God's time." 🌿



# gather

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Biblical angels are not personal wish-granters, but God's messengers—heavenly beings who usher us into God's goodness.

## *Bible study*

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COMFORTING, ENCOURAGING, PROTECTING ANGELS

God's promises point us where we need to go.

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

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ON THE COVER: Artist James He Qi's vibrant, colorful painting depicts an angel speaking to two ordinary people, shepherds (Angel & Shepherds, 2019).



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# Messages from God

BY KARI VAN WAKEREN

ONCE, WHEN I NOTICED AN INCREASE IN THE SPAM in my email inbox, I asked a tech person what to do about it. That person suggested I clean out my spam folder regularly, saying that the more I did so, the less spam I would receive. When I tried it, this advice held true.

I've now realized that the same technique can be helpful—even necessary—for my inner critic, the old messages that play over and over in my mind, telling me I'm not good enough, attractive enough, smart enough, strong enough. Sometimes the critical voice conveying the message sounds a lot like my own. At other times, it sounds more like the voice of someone whose criticism has stood out in my life for any number of reasons.

Unlike messages that remind us that we are worthy, loved and forgiven by God, such critical messages have a way of draining the life from us. They can keep us from using our gifts, shining our God-given light. They can even hold us back from being messengers of God's love and grace to others. You can't give what you don't have.

It's important for us to pay attention to what's being said. Who gets to define us in life? Which messages will carry the most weight?

I would argue that anytime a thought of "I'm not good enough," comes, this is not of God. Because of God, we are enough.

God, who was made known to us in Jesus, creates light out of darkness, hope out of despair, and abundance out of scarcity. God's message of peace

comes to us through Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection. It comes to us through the angels who visited the shepherds upon Jesus' birth. It is the message Jesus gave to his disciples, and the message the Spirit brings into our lives today. When we receive that message ourselves, we can then pass it on to others.

Even as we are intentional about listening for God's truth in our lives, it can still be a struggle to push "stop" on those critical voices, or "gremlins," as author Brené Brown calls them. Brown aptly compares those voices to the cries of toddlers who, if they don't get what they want initially, just grow louder and louder.

And every bit as important as hitting "stop" and "delete" will be replacing those critical messages with affirming ones, especially those given to us in Holy Scripture. For example, Isaiah 43: "I have called you by name; you are mine" (v. 1). Here is the voice of a loving parent, one who looks forward to holding an adored child. This kind of tender love is what God feels for us. Make a

list of affirming messages you hear in Scripture, at church, in encouraging words, writings and songs. Add to it frequently and keep it somewhere you can access it easily when you need it.

Take time every day to remember who God says you are. Let the reality that God delights in you sink in. Feel yourself hemmed in behind and before (as Psalm 139:5 says) with this message. It will set you free to serve neighbors in love. It will enable you to be a messenger of God's peace and hope in your daily life. 🌿



# *Welcome home*





By baptism, she heard  
the call of Jesus.

BY MARY MARTHA KANASS

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1: 9-15)*

**ONE COOL, DREARY DAY IN MARCH 2020,** I joined members of Hephatha Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, to stand together at Children's Court with a family of our congregation. We didn't know we were on the verge of a pandemic, although in going through security, more hand sanitizer was offered than usual. I showed my I.D. and took my place waiting in the hallway with the marvelous woman who, once again, was adopting a child.

For many reasons, my role as pastor can take me to Children's Court. That day was the best reason of all: to be with our congregation to witness the adoption of a youngster by one of our members. As we continued to wait, I watched the child who would be adopted. She was the picture of calm, sitting and reading before a formal process that would change her life forever.

Finally, as church members, family, neighbors, doctors and lawyers, we all stood together in court to witness the adoption. Children filled the jury box. Adults stood alongside the back wall of the courtroom. The child, her adoptive mother and their social worker sat at a table facing the judge, who smiled and stepped out from behind the bench to warmly shake their hands, then sanitize again.

The mother had been here before. She'd been foster mother to 48 children and adoptive mother to five children already. Many years had passed since she

first took a child as her own from the foster care system. Now she was a 65-year-old messenger of God's love, standing up once again to mother a 12-year-old who had come to her out of the wilderness, by the hand of God.

Two thousand years before this moment, this mother's Lord Jesus was in the wilderness, where angels tended to him.

While we do not know the names of those angels, I can share the name of the angel in Children's Court: Ledora. Ledora, an angel of the Lord, has tended the Lord Jesus as he wanders our modern wilderness in the form of children without families or homes. These children have carried the Lord's suffering in their young souls and flesh. One foster son had a scar under his eye, from when his daddy's gun opened his flesh as the youngster was thrown into a closet during a police drug raid. One set of children saw their father shot to death by their mother. Ledora's message to them? *Here I am, your mother now. I will tend to you and raise you as my own. You have a family, a home, a place of safety. In Jesus' name, welcome home.*

Ledora has buried three beloved grandchildren. She is no stranger to the pain of the wilderness. She wanders there now as she walks into a courtroom to adopt one more child, still grieving the loss of her 12-year-old granddaughter. Moving one step at a time toward God's call, Ledora is the angel who ministers

to this suffering child. Neither she nor the child will wander the wilderness alone. God has given each an angel and the presence of the Lord Jesus to see them through.

As Ledora adopts her final child, she says that the gift God shared is the same gift Jesus received. It is the gift of God's love in the form of a place and a family of love.

Angels tended our Lord Jesus in those 40 days. In the face of harm and death, angels brought him forth to life. Angels fed him, gave him water and held him in love as he suffered.

In our day, where are the angels who will tend those whose flesh is torn open by violence, whose young lives are scarred by racism and hatred in all its forms, whose souls are heavy with loneliness and for whom lack itself has become a heavy load?

By baptism, Ledora heard the call of Jesus speaking to her in the quiet of her heart, in her prayers and in the moments of her solitude: Help the children. Once she agreed, she says, the children kept coming, coming, coming.

I see the children come with Ledora to worship. They sit in the front pew with me, offering their alleluias through tears and exhaustion. They serve as acolytes and Sunday school participants. They give offerings in envelopes prepared at home. They receive Holy Communion. They share in our Sunday lunch. Later, at home, they enjoy a chicken dinner and read their children's Bibles. They

belong to an ever-expanding circle of God's love, to which God calls them as God's own beloved children. In the wilderness, an angel tends them and calls upon God to deliver a legion of angels for their care.

On that adoption day a year ago, people threw together a dinner party to celebrate God's action in our lives. Mom and daughter were all smiles. Food overflowed: macaroni and cheese, chicken, greens, spaghetti and more. We had balloons and more balloons, as well as a cake with the message, "Welcome Home." It would be our final in-person congregational event for a long time. Soon our building would be closed due to the pandemic.

Last September, six months after the adoption, I signed onto Zoom for socially distant, but spiritually connected Sunday school. I saw Ledora's 12-year-old daughter on the screen, with her mother behind her on the couch. Another child was with them as well, taking some time in the wilderness as foster child number 49 of Ledora. Jesus still suffers in the wilderness. Ledora still serves as his angel.

One child at a time. One day at a time. By the grace of God, may we all be led into and through the wilderness to minister to the Lord Jesus, who always ministers to us and who will ultimately welcome us home to God. 🌿



# Seeing other people

How Sarah and Hagar  
opened my eyes.

BY CARA STRICKLAND

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, but I didn't grow up thinking very highly of Hagar. Maybe it's because I thought of Abraham and Sarah as the good guys, the heroes of the story. Hagar didn't have a starring role. It was easy to think of her as almost the villain.

Now, as an adult, with present events swirling around me, I read Hagar's story differently. We know several things: Hagar, an Egyptian "slave girl," is owned by Sarah. As someone from Egypt, she is of African descent. She likely had richly dark skin, despite

the many paintings of her with lighter skin. She is young. There's also a lot to learn from her name: Hagar means "other," "outsider" and "stranger." Not only is she enslaved, not only is she racially different from the people she served, but her otherness is wedged into her name.

In many ways, Sarah has an attractive story. She is promised a baby in her old age—something seemingly so out of reach she laughs about it. But then it happens. I'm not sure why I used to gloss over the fact that before the prophecy, before her pregnancy, she does her best to take matters into her own hands.

#### THE HANDMAID'S TALE

I never heard the word "rape" in Sunday school, but that's essentially what happens in this story. As a slave, Hagar has no bodily autonomy. Hagar does not have the option to say no when Sarah insists that Hagar sleep with her owner's husband. And Hagar becomes pregnant.

The idea was always that this wouldn't really be Hagar's child. Sarah owned Hagar, so Sarah and Abraham would own whatever child she bore. This child would be the beginning of a great legacy for Abraham. This would also leave Hagar out in the cold, still the other, still a slave, not really a mother but more of a surrogate.

Once Hagar becomes pregnant, many biblical translations say that she looks on Sarah "with contempt" (Genesis 16:4). But the actual Hebrew words are not that harsh. Debbie Blue, writing about Hagar in *Consider the Women*, notes that a proper translation should be something like: "Hagar looked at Sarah with less esteem." Blue writes, "Maybe that was because Sarah forced her to have sex with her 85-year-old husband. Maybe it was because Sarah was asking her to bear a child she would have to give away. There are many reasons Hagar might have looked at Sarah with less esteem."

Thanks to those biblical translations, I used to see "contempt" and think it was Hagar who was in the wrong.

Sarah certainly seems to think so. She goes to Abraham and complains about Hagar's attitude. The Biblical translation I own states that Abraham replies in this way: "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then it states that Sarah "dealt harshly with her." Blue points out that the Hebrew phrase meaning "dealt harshly with" is the same wording later used to describe how the Egyptians treat the Israelites. Hagar, still pregnant, flees into the desert, most likely believing she will die.

But then something amazing happens. For the first time in Scripture, the Angel of the Lord appears to someone. This someone is Hagar. Finding her by a spring of water, the Angel of the Lord asks her two questions: "Where have you come from and where are you going?"

The Angel of the Lord listens as Hagar pours out her story. Then the angel tells her to go back and submit to her mistress, the one that had "dealt harshly with her." It's hard for me to read this. I don't like to think of God asking someone to return to an abusive master. But then I wonder: In this instance, did going back save her life? Who can know?

The Angel of the Lord is not done. If the words, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude" sound familiar, this may be because God also says something very similar to Abraham. But Hagar is a woman, a slave and definitely not Hebrew. Even one of her identities makes God's promise stunning. Taken together, at this time and within this culture, God's promise is mind-boggling.

The Angel of the Lord has a bit more to say, choosing the name (Ishmael) for the child, which is again incredible, since it's unlikely that Hagar would be

able to name the baby. “The Lord has given heed to your affliction,” the Angel says. Hagar, shockingly responds by naming God, who speaks to her through the angel. “You are El-roi,” she says, and adds, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?”

Hagar is the only person in the Bible to give God a name. The name she chooses is El-roi: God Who Sees. Because God finds Hagar. God sees Hagar. God promises Hagar care and descendants. And God promises that Hagar will live.

For many years, I missed all of that whenever I read this story. I saw the happy ending of Sarah’s pregnancy, then Isaac’s birth. I’m ashamed to say that if I thought about Ishmael and his mother at all it was only to be glad that they’d been replaced with the true heroes of the story.

#### **MORE HUMAN THAN HERO**

Over time as I’ve deepened my reading of Scripture, one thing I’ve become increasingly aware of is that our Biblical ancestors are human. They really don’t fit the hero and villain stereotypes well, if at all. When I dig more deeply into Sarah’s story, I see a woman with very little power. Before Sarah becomes pregnant in her old age, Abraham passes her off as his sister, leading a neighboring king to send for her to make her part of his harem. Her husband owned her body, a body that was valuable only as long as she could bear children. In that

culture, Sarah’s barrenness made her worthless, but she had something of worth. She had Hagar.

I think we all want to identify with biblical characters. Sometimes we pick our favorites and decide that we want to try to be like them, or even that we are like them already. It’s natural to see ourselves in their stories. I want so much to identify with Hagar, to see myself as subversive and bold, the mother of a great legacy, even with all the hardships. But maybe that isn’t the point. Maybe it’s not about my identifying with Hagar. Maybe I am simply invited to see her, as God did.

Far from the time and place of Hagar and Sarah, it’s easy to condemn the evils of slavery. Now there are other ways for couples impacted by infertility to become parents. But we humans still aren’t great at truly seeing people who aren’t like us and loving them well. And we still aren’t sure they can be the heroes of the story.

After the miracle occurs and Isaac is born, Sarah becomes irritated with Hagar and her son, Ishmael. Her irritation is easy to understand. Her decision to send them into the desert is not. Abraham grieves as he gives them supplies. Once in the desert, Hagar places her son a distance away from her, so she won’t have to see him die up close.

God appears on the scene again, and not to tell Hagar to go back. God both sees and delivers

Hagar and her son. They are alive, and they are free. Ishmael grows and eventually marries a wife his mother finds for him. As promised, from that marriage comes a nation of multitudes. Islamic tradition has many stories about Hagar, stories in which she is the hero, no longer the other.

I wonder if Sarah ever thought about the two people she sent into the wilderness to die. Did she ever regret her decision? Did she ever learn that they were safe?

While there is no reason to try to be like people in the Bible, we are asked to become more like God. I pray God will open my eyes to truly see the people around me, prepare my hands to offer water in the desert, and give me listening ears and loving words to participate in God’s work of healing, dignity and freedom. Seeing others is important. It’s where we begin. Who and what we see can inspire us to faithful action. 🌸

# An outward-facing Lent

BY JULIA SEYMOUR

**THIS MONTH, WE CONTINUE** with “An outward-facing Lent,” a Lenten devotional series that began with days 1-12 in the January/February 2021 issue. We may be used to taking time during the Lenten season for inward reflection and contemplation. Adding these outward-facing daily devotions reminds us that we are never alone in our Christian journey. The Holy Spirit connects us to other people and to creation in ways beyond our imagination. Opening our prayer lives to reflection and supplication for others helps us to consider our own contributions in the world.

**DAY 13: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3**  
Mechanics use their gift of spatial awareness and understanding to shift, repair and build engines, machinery and tools. Their work creates a hum of traffic, heating and cooling systems, and other equipment. Their work is the background noise of our lives. How often we take for granted the gifts of this work, which creates the baseline of normal for many people.

*Repairing God, we glimpse your mystery in the interconnectedness of all things. Bless those who work to keep many things operational and safe. Amen.*

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**DAY 14: THURSDAY, MARCH 4**  
From piles of paper, fabric, yarn, paint, glue sticks, beads and more, those with the gift of crafting make beautiful, inspiring work. Their talents decorate homes, cover beds and warm bodies. Their creations draw our attention toward the One who makes all things, seen and unseen.

*Holy God, you knit all things together in your love. Guide us to our own inspired work by the beauty of your creation. Amen.*

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**DAY 15: FRIDAY, MARCH 5**  
Hospice workers are holy witnesses to the journey of dying. They help families and friends understand and be present to a life passing. Their work guides our understanding of a good

death as part of a blessed life.

*God of life, death and resurrection, we thank you for your presence in all the stages of life. Bless those whose work includes being present for those moving from this life into the next. Amen.*

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**DAY 16: SATURDAY, MARCH 6**  
The Bible tells us that God knows every hair on our heads. We give great trust to those who trim, curl, shave and shape those hairs. Barbers and hairdressers often listen to their clients, offering counsel and consolation alongside the paid services.

*Bless, O God, those whose work includes both grooming and companionship of others. Amen.*



**DAY 17: MONDAY, MARCH 8**

Park rangers hike the trails, view the animals and stay alert to changes in the land that others may never experience. Their dedication preserves the shared natural resources that belong to all people. They work on behalf of people whom they may never meet and who may never recognize their work, but who benefit from it all the same.

*God, we thank you for those who work on our behalf to care for your creation. Amen.*

**DAY 18: TUESDAY, MARCH 9**

Many people receive nourishment from food banks and similar food programs. Volunteers in food programs are part of how God distributes daily bread. Those working in food and meal distribution are doing God's work with their hands.

*God of plenty, we thank you for those who are dedicated to making sure others receive all the blessings you intend for your children. Amen.*

**DAY 19: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10**

Every day millions of trucks deliver food, mail and other goods around the world. Delivery and long-haul truck drivers spend long hours sitting, moving goods and hopping in and out of their vehicles. Every package on a shelf represents the many transportation workers who labored to get it there.

*Holy God, protect those whose vocation is transportation. Keep them alert, awake and safe in all they do. Amen.*

**DAY 20: THURSDAY, MARCH 11**

From quilt shops to independent bookstores to consultants, small business owners work for themselves while trying to provide goods and services to others. Without the safety net of corporate infrastructure, they take necessary and calculated risks to bring creativity and diversity into the business community.

*We give you thanks, O God, for small business owners whose pursuits create possibility and creativity in all communities. Amen.*

**DAY 21: FRIDAY, MARCH 12**

Librarians do more than organize, read and recommend

books. They help people complete job applications, navigate new towns, and research local and family history. Librarians are willing to carry and be part of the stories of their community. Their work holds space in the present for both the past and the future.

*Dear Jesus, through you we are all included in God's story of love and healing for the whole creation. Thank you for those who help carry our stories. Amen.*

**DAY 22: SATURDAY, MARCH 13**

Community gardens offer space for people to grow food for themselves and others. In working with soil, plants and water, we learn about God's call to us to be co-creators of life, beauty and joy. Those who organize, volunteer in and cultivate community gardens see grace in each shoot, pod and bloom.

*Spirit of God, you moved in the beginning of all things—bringing forth order and beauty. Bless the gardens of the world that feed both bodies and souls. Amen.*

**DAY 23: MONDAY, MARCH 15**

Administrators keep things moving in schools, healthcare facilities and offices. Beyond answering phones, they juggle schedules, building use and budgets. They memorize faces and names. They



know the emergency plans by heart. Keeping things running smoothly is a dance of grace that often goes unnoticed.

*Loving God, you have set all things in order according to your purposes. Guide us that we may cooperate with your gracious will for the flourishing of peace in our world. Amen.*

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**DAY 24: TUESDAY, MARCH 16**

Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, was a carpenter. Like many in that job today, he likely built window and door frames, crafted small furniture, and repaired stairs and ladders. The work of carpentry blends utility and artistry, moving from rough, raw wood to useful finished products.

*Shape us in your image, Jesus, that we may be useful to the will of your Holy Parent in the world. Amen.*

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**DAY 25: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17**

A grocery store is a busy place and rarely empty. During the day, cashiers, managers and department clerks are constantly at work. At night, stockers empty boxes and move displays, while janitors clean. All this work is part of how food gets from farms to our tables.

*Dear God, bless those whose work provides access to food for others. Amen.*

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**DAY 26: THURSDAY, MARCH 18**

There are many reasons people need or want wigs. People with medical conditions, like alopecia, may not grow hair. Some medical treatments cause people's hair to fall out. Some cultural and religious traditions value and encourage wigs. Skilled wigmakers bring comfort and joy to all kinds of people, across ages, races and creeds.

*Bless wigmakers, dear Lord, in their vocation of numbering hairs for each head their work will cover. Amen.*

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**DAY 27: FRIDAY, MARCH 19**

The job description of a teacher's aide is probably best summed up by "all duties as assigned." From making copies to helping individual students to supervising playgrounds, aides bring efficiency and greater functionality to classrooms and schools. Those who do full-time work are often compensated as part-time employees in both pay and benefits.

*Jesus, we seek your blessing on those whose work facilitates learning in schools. Encourage them in their vocations and keep them safe. Amen.*

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**DAY 28: SATURDAY, MARCH 20**

Many rural, some suburban and a few urban areas rely on volunteer firefighters and emergency medical personnel. These trained volunteers are willing to take shifts and be on alert to help neighbors and strangers through some of life's most difficult moments. Taking their scheduled turns, they never know what each phone call will bring. Their willingness to intercede and bring help is a blessing to their communities.

*God of hope and help, safeguard those willing to put their lives on the line for their communities, especially volunteer firefighters and emergency service personnel. Amen.*

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**DAY 29: MONDAY, MARCH 22**

For nearly anything we can buy, there are people who first try it out. Is the combination of fibers too itchy? How long do these batteries last? How does this flavor of chips taste? Is this joke funny enough or at all? Product testers stand in for all of us to check everything from car interiors to food to TV shows. We may complain about their work when we don't like a particular item, but we often forget that their input helped shape so many things we use and appreciate.

*Spirit of grace, thank you for people who test products before we ever see them. They offer feedback*

*to improve things in ways beyond our imaginations. Amen.*

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**DAY 30: TUESDAY, MARCH 23**

In Exodus 1, two midwives named Shiphrah and Puah trick Pharaoh and save a generation of Israelite babies. Today midwives might not have to be tricky, but otherwise they do the same work. They accompany pregnant people on their journey to becoming parents, through giving birth and afterward. Midwives also accompany expectant parents when the story doesn't end as hoped. Their dedication gives glory to God, who is attentive to the world's labor pains in becoming what the world is meant to be.

*We live in hope, O God, for safe delivery from all our fears and from external threats. Amen.*

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**DAY 31: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24**

At any given point in time, someone somewhere is cooking for others. In prisons, in hospitals, in factories, on military installations, in homes, everyone needs to eat, and someone has to prepare the food. A cook makes lunch while thinking about dinner and makes dinner while thinking about breakfast. And just like Jesus, they stretch small quantities of food to nourish many.

*From loaves and fish to pans of lasagna, we give you thanks, dear Lord, for all who work to feed others, from one hungry person to a gathering of thousands. Amen.*

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**DAY 32: THURSDAY, MARCH 25**

Opticians design and fit the tools needed to correct vision, like eyeglasses and contact lenses. Hearing aid specialists help people select the best tools to improve their hearing. People with these vocations help others adapt to new realities of vision or hearing loss. Their work requires sensitivity, patience and an encouraging attitude.

*Lord of life, you know the ebb and flow of our senses. Be with those whose work it is to care for our senses. Strengthen our spirits, that we may perceive others and the world around us through your love and compassion. Amen.*

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**DAY 33: FRIDAY, MARCH 26**

A good coach praises what is going well, gently corrects what is flawed, and inspires us about what can be. No longer limited to athletics, coaches are available for life transitions, academic subjects and professional development. Being coached helps us see ourselves through someone else's eyes—and know that we are worthy of time, attention and discipline.

*Coaching God, you love us as we are, and still your Spirit helps us become ever more fully the people you have made and called us to be. Amen.*

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**DAY 34: SATURDAY, MARCH 27**

“Domestic engineer” is a modern, formal title for someone we once called a stay-at-home parent or house spouse. This new label attempts to honor the breadth of work done to maintain a household. This work includes, but is not limited to budgeting, calendar keeping, facilities maintenance, menu planning and execution, and laundry. The unpaid labor of domestic engineering makes possible everything else that happens in a household.

*Jesus, you looked with love on Martha of Bethany, whose work made others feel comfortable and cared for. Grant your peace to domestic engineers whose work makes shelters into homes. Amen. 🌿*

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## WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?

The faith community  
needs to talk about  
suicide.

BY SARAH CARSON



TO CALL 2020 a “difficult year” would be an understatement.

From the COVID-19 pandemic, to the economic upheaval caused by lockdowns and safety measures, to the bright light shining on the systemic injustices in America and elsewhere, is there any part of our planet that has not been flipped upside down in the past 12 months?

Many of us are juggling far more than we thought we could handle. We are trying to work and care for loved ones, or we are trying to navigate the unemployment system while our emergency funds dwindle. We’re living in fear of the virus and in fear of losing our livelihoods. The turmoil seems as if it will never end.

So what if I admitted to you that I didn’t think I could keep going?

What if I said that life had become so difficult, I’d end it if I had the opportunity?

What would you say to me?

Would you tell me it’s not so bad? That we all have our problems? Would you be too scared to get involved? Would you know how to get me the help I might need?

### **NO ONE IS IMMUNE**

Despair and hopelessness touch us all at some point. Perhaps you know someone who has acted on suicidal thoughts—who has attempted or completed suicide. Or perhaps you don’t realize you know someone who has been touched by suicide. Suicide and

mental illness aren’t common conversation topics, after all.

“When it comes to suicide we can often feel uncomfortable,” says Adam Renner of Lutheran Suicide Prevention Ministry (LSPM), an organization based on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s “Message on Suicide Prevention,” which urges members, congregations and affiliated institutions to work to prevent suicide—calling upon this church’s educational and advocacy programs to make suicide prevention an important concern.

“If somebody is trying to reach out or give us cues that they’re contemplating suicide, we may shy away from that person out of our own discomfort,” Adam says. “We simply do not know what to do in a lot of cases.”

Jerry Weyrauch, one of LSPM’s founders, experienced this intimately when his 34-year-old daughter died by suicide. “We learned early on that the people who weren’t afraid to talk about suicide were those folks who had been touched personally,” Jerry says.

“[LSPM believes] that faith communities have the possibility of being more than the organization that helps the family deal with the end result of a suicide. The faith community has an important future in becoming part of the prevention,” he shares.

Because suicide is often a taboo topic, people may not realize that suicide occurs among people of all demographics. The

National Institute of Mental Illness reports that suicidal thoughts span all age groups and genders. Depression, which is the leading cause of suicide, also does not discriminate. But only half of all Americans experiencing depression get treatment. And depression can look different from person to person. Could the person who cut you off in traffic actually be acting out of their personal struggle? When your friend canceled your plan for a Saturday walk, was she just busy? Or was she in need of something more?

“It’s hard to imagine for some of us that we could ever be in that place,” says Adam. “But when hopelessness and despair take over, when your coping skills are overwhelmed, when you feel like you don’t have anything to live for...any one of us can be susceptible and at risk depending on life’s circumstances.”

#### **FAITH COMMUNITIES CAN HELP**

“Faith communities are where the majority of people turn to when they are facing a mental health crisis,” says Jessica Dexter of Pathways to Promise, an interfaith cooperative founded in order to facilitate the faith community’s work in reaching out to those with mental illnesses and their families.

Faith communities have a mixed track record, though, when it comes to helping those in crisis. A study by Baylor University in 2008 found that of 293 Christians who approached

their local churches for help with their or a family member’s mental illness, more than 32 percent of them were told by a pastor that their mental illness was spiritual in nature. The study also found that “those whose mental illness was dismissed or denied were less likely to attend church after the fact and their faith in God was weakened.”

“That’s why it is so important that we are educating faith communities, congregations and churches about this,” says Jermine Alberty, executive director of Pathways to Promise.

“If we don’t, when [someone goes] to that place where they are seeking comfort, they are turned away and told that what they are experiencing is not real or is their fault.”

“Church is supposed to be a place where people feel like they can be heard and understood Adam adds. “Faith communities are typically not as well prepared when it comes to addressing mental illness. We often rush to ‘Sunday,’ rush to ‘Easter’ without acknowledging the very real [Good Friday-like] pain that takes place.”

#### **WE ALL CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

So how can people of faith respond? There are a number of ways both individuals and congregations can make a difference. First and foremost, anyone can educate themselves about the realities of this devastating issue.

The websites of both

Pathways to Promise ([www.pathways2promise.org](http://www.pathways2promise.org)) and Lutheran Suicide Prevention Ministry ([suicidepreventionministry.org](http://suicidepreventionministry.org)) offer a number of ways to get started.

Secular organizations such as National Suicide Prevention Lifeline ([suicideprevention-lifeline.org](http://suicideprevention-lifeline.org)) and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention ([afsp.org](http://afsp.org)) also offer helpful resources—including concrete steps you can take if someone you know needs help, including:

- Take any comments about suicide seriously—even if the person is downplaying the severity.
- Try not to act shocked or alarmed. Stay calm.
- Do not assume another person will intervene. Even if you don’t know the person well, don’t rely on someone who knows the person better to step in.
- Do not try to handle the situation on your own. Call a trained mental health professional, such as those at 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-273-TALK. If immediate help is needed, call 911.

Individuals can also talk to their health care providers: “We know that most people who complete suicide have depression,” says Jerry. “And they’ve seen a doctor within 30 days of the completed suicide. So the more that we can do to get people to screen

for suicide and to get people help for that depression...the more impact we can have on reducing suicide.”

When you visit your doctor, take note of whether or not you are screened for depression. If your doctor doesn't do so, ask him or her if this is a part of their practice—or if they've thought about including it. Diagnosing depression can save lives.

#### **WHAT FAITH LEADERS CAN DO**

Pastors and faith leaders are often the first place people turn when they are struggling with feelings of hopelessness.

Both Pathways to Promise and Lutheran Suicide Prevention Ministry offer a number of resources faith leaders can use to educate themselves about suicide and advocate for its prevention, including the following:

- Sermon texts and samples. (Lutheran Suicide Prevention encourages pastors to preach at least twice a year about suicide and mental illness: once in September during Suicide Prevention Awareness Month and once in May during Mental Health Awareness Month.)
- Clergy-specific training guides and videos that demonstrate how to help someone in need.
- Best practices for counseling and caring for veterans, those struggling with mental illness

and suicide survivors.

#### **WHAT CONGREGATIONS CAN DO**

Some congregations have developed specific ministries centered on mental health wellness and awareness. Pathways to Promise can work with congregations to create ministry programs to meet their unique needs and contexts.

Congregations can also:

- Offer workshops where individuals equip themselves to recognize and respond to a crisis. Common intervention programs include the “Question. Persuade. Refer.” method offered by the QPR Institute ([qprinstitute.com/](http://qprinstitute.com/)) and the ASIST and safeTALK programs offered by LivingWorks ([livingworks.net](http://livingworks.net)).
- Engage in discussion around the ELCA's social messages on mental health and suicide. The messages and study guides can be found at [elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages](http://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages). Bishop Elizabeth Eaton has also created a video message on suicide that can be used to inform your study. View the video at [suicidepreventionministry.org](http://suicidepreventionministry.org).

#### **ONE LAST THING**

If you've ever struggled with depression or suicidal thoughts or known someone who has, you know that living with this illness may not feel so cut-and-dried.

Our culture sends us mixed messages about happiness and mental wellness—often making it easy to believe depression is our fault.

I was first diagnosed with depression as a teenager. It took me nearly 15 years of reading self-help books and trying new and different “paths to happiness” and to realize that depression wasn't something I could fix on my own.

Even after years of therapy, I didn't truly realize that depression wasn't my fault until I found myself waiting for a train on an otherwise perfectly normal, uneventful day, and thought to myself, “Maybe you should jump.” I made an appointment to see a psychiatrist, and after finding the right medication, the road to recovery has been much easier to walk.

Everyone's wellness journey and needs are different, but depression and suicidal thoughts are treatable. If you are experiencing depression, please speak to a doctor or a mental health professional. Or if you or someone you know is considering suicide, reach out to a professional now at 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-273-TALK. If you need immediate help, call 911. 🌸



### OPENING PRAYER

All-powerful and all-compassionate God, throughout the ages you have sent angels to comfort, coach, encourage and protect us. In these last days you have sent your beloved Son, Jesus, who himself was served by angels. Make us mindful of and present to the depth and height of your love for us. May your Spirit guide us today in this study of your heaven-sent servants. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

### SUGGESTED HYMN

- “Oh, Love, How Deep”  
(ELW 322, verses 1-4, with special attention to verse 2)

### FOCUS VERSE

“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

(Psalm 91:11)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

### CLOSING HYMN

“On Eagle’s Wings”

(ELW 787, verses 1-4)

# Journeys with angels

## Session three

Comforting, encouraging,  
protecting angels

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

### INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Whenever I’ve mentioned the study of angels, I’ve received questions such as: *Are there guardian angels? Will angels do our bidding? Should we call on angels? How can we harness the power of angels?*

Of all the heavenly host, none are probably so misunderstood as guardian angels. If you go to a store that sells crystals, tarot cards and incense, there’s a good chance they also sell guardian angel statuettes and laminated prayer cards picturing winged white women in frilly dresses. (People, angels in the Bible are not once described as white women with wings!) I did once find a clever angel-themed visor clip that read, “Don’t drive faster than your guardian angel can fly.” I was less charmed by a guardian angel bath & floor wash available online for \$5.95. The instructions said to either pour the lotion into bathwater and “soak yourself for 15 minutes while concentrating on your desire” or use it to “mop your floors from the front of your home to the back.” No further explanations were given, but one customer review said the angel bath & floor wash smelled “heavenly.” I did not order a bottle to try myself!

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. What are your initial thoughts on “guardian angels”? What have you been taught

on this subject?

2. Can you think of any protecting angels in the Bible?

### ANGELS — NOT INDEPENDENT AGENTS! (2 minutes)

This month, in our Journeys with Angels Bible study, we are looking at “comforting, encouraging, coaching, protecting angels.” I usually shy away from the term “guardian angels” because of the many nonbiblical associations with it, bordering on the occult. Famously, the devil himself tempted Jesus to put his trust in guardian, or saving, angels.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Michael Rogness, professor emeritus of preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, is one of our contemporary experts on biblical angels. He cautions us:

*Angels are mysterious beings, but the one incontrovertible assertion from the Bible is that there is no such thing in the Bible as an angel acting independently. Angels do God’s work. All the advice in popular books about “getting in touch with your angel” is twaddle. The biblical view is: Forget about getting in touch with an angel—get in touch with God! Don’t ask angels to do anything—ask God! Wherever you find an angel in the Bible, there is God acting.<sup>2</sup>*

I appreciate Professor Rogness’ rigorous theological analysis: *twaddle!* And it’s true, we often find much ado about angels in the most sentimental corners of religious bookstores or New Age boutiques.

Nevertheless, we are “people of the book,” and comforting and protecting angels do exist in the Bible. They don’t work like genies or fairies,

granting wishes if you use the proper formula or mop your floors in the right direction! Rather, these angels are messengers of God—messengers who usher us into the goodness of God. Let’s meet some of them in Scripture.

### HOLDING HAGAR: AN ANGEL OF COMFORT AND COACHING (25 minutes)

The first comforting and coaching angel we meet in the Bible (and the first use of the specific word *angel*<sup>3</sup>) is the angel who swoops in to encourage a woman who has gotten short shrift in life. Hagar is a left-out woman, a sent-out woman, a bereft woman.

Just as many North American history classes used to focus only on conquering colonialist European-descent “heroes” and only recently began to pursue the many hidden stories of the Americas—the richness and suffering of Native American cultures, the slavery-entangled strands of African American builders and resisters—so too has there been a tendency to plasticize the biblical narrative into a chain of “hero” stories. No Sunday school program was complete without heralding the father and mother of our faith, Abraham and Sarah. Yet how many of us ever learned about Sarah’s mean streak, Abraham’s apathy or the way God intervened to send God’s personal representative—an angel—to Hagar, the mistreated, pregnant woman who was enslaved?

The Bible is relentless in pushing us to face the truth of our complex histories. Although we have pride in our mother Sarah with her faith, sassiness and sense of humor, we can love our ancestors without ignoring their vicious and even deadly sins. It’s not by accident, I think, that the first angel in the pages of the Bible arrives to comfort and strengthen

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1 See Matthew 4:5-7.

2 Michael Rogness, “A Fascination with Angels,” *Word & World* 18, no. 1 (1998), 60. [https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article\\_id=1037](https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article_id=1037). Emphasis in the original.

3 In Session 1 we discussed the word *malakh* as the specific and common Hebrew word for “angel” that also means “messenger.”

a woman too long pushed down into the footnotes of our Bible studies.

📖 **Read:** Genesis 16:1-13

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. Hagar is called a “slave-girl,” yet she’s old enough to become a wife and a mother. What do the words “slave” and “girl” tell us about her status in the eyes of the household?
4. Hagar is an Egyptian slave, apparently acquired during Abram and Sarai’s sojourn in Egypt, when there was a famine in their own land (see Genesis 12:10-20). What might Hagar’s status as a foreigner suggest to us about her situation in Abram and Sarai’s household?
5. It is Sarai who tells Abram to go have intercourse with Hagar in order to provide her, Sarai, with a child. This was a feature of marriage contracts of the time: to protect a wife against abandonment in the case of infertility, she could use another (subservient) woman’s body to produce a child for herself. Often we think of women as having a special responsibility to care for the well-being of other women. How does this legal sexual contract hurt the relationship between Hagar and Sarai?

Hagar is a slave, a foreigner and a sexualized competitor to Sarai. After Hagar makes the mistake of flaunting her fertility, she promptly loses Sarai’s care and protection. Sarai treats Hagar harshly, and Hagar runs away.

That’s the moment the angel of the Lord steps

in, just when Hagar seems abandoned and out of options. Like a great coach, the angel asks Hagar to assess where she’s been and where she’s going. The angel gives Hagar a tough assignment from God: to return to Abram and Sarai’s household and accept their protection for the time being. But the angel also gives Hagar a tremendous promise: The son she is carrying won’t belong to Sarai; he will be Hagar’s son. He will bear a proud name of faith: “Ishmael,” meaning “God hears.” And Ishmael will be a “wild ass of a man” (v. 12)—which may not sound like such an angelic promise but must have been music to Hagar’s ears. It appears that Ishmael will stand up for himself; perhaps he will take after Hagar more than after his “go along to get along” dad, Abram!

The crowning touch of this story is when Hagar realizes she was not only comforted and coached by the angel of the Lord, but that truly it was Godself who had visited her—a mark of favor and incredible distinction. Moreover, Hagar has the honor of giving a new name to God: El-roi, which means “the God who sees.” God sees the one who is left out, sent out, bereft, and God sends her the first comforting angel of the Bible.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. Count the number of times Genesis 16:7-11 says “the angel of the Lord.” Yet verse 13 says it is the Lord who speaks with her, and Hagar says, “Have I really seen God ...?” Can you think of a time when you were comforted and encouraged by someone (a human “angel,” perhaps) and only later recognized it as the presence of God?

Things didn’t end “happily ever after” for Hagar, even after that remarkable encounter with the angel of the Lord. Angel sightings don’t always solve all our problems, or even most of them.

**📖 Read:** Genesis 21:9-10

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. What name is Hagar given by the text in verse 9? What name is Hagar given by Sarah in verse 10?
8. Why does Sarah want to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael? How do the names used for Hagar show us Sarah's shading or interpretation of the situation?
9. What correlations do you see between Hagar's situation and that of refugees and migrant workers today?

**📖 Read:** Genesis 21:14-19

This second time Hagar flees into the desert wilderness—with her son now—there is no going back. Worse, this time they've run out of water, and it appears the death of Ishmael is imminent. However, God is true to the name given by Hagar: *El-roi*, "God sees." And God is true to the name given to Ishmael: "God hears."

Again, God intervenes and sends an angel into this desperate situation. Again, the angel brings a promise: Ishmael will be the founder of a great nation. The angel also brings some practical help—a whole well full of life-giving water.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. Have you ever run out of water? Describe your situation and feelings. Who helped you get water again?

I moved to the southwest part of the US just a couple of years ago. Immediately, I was confronted by two new realities. One was the need to

continually drink water in a climate with humidity levels in the single digits. My husband and I once went for a day hike that turned out to be both longer and hotter than we'd expected. We carefully rationed our water and still ran out with two miles yet to go in 100-degree temperatures. I used my cellphone to call our young-adult son, who ran up the mountain path to meet us, carrying two icy-cold water bottles. I'll never forget the sweet taste of that water. He was our angel from the Lord, no exaggeration!

The second new reality we confronted in the Southwest? Refugees with young children who cross the border, fleeing the drug and sex trades, extreme poverty and often the threat of death, in order to start a new life in the United States. Crossing the border into the southwestern US sometimes means crossing the desert under brutal conditions. Soon after we settled in New Mexico, we heard about an American citizen named Scott Warren, who was arrested and charged with felony crimes for providing water and food to two migrants who had just crossed the desert into Arizona. Mr. Warren worked with a faith-based organization called No More Deaths. He was acquitted of the charges in late November 2019, as it was decided he was acting according to his religious convictions. Perhaps some in that courtroom recognized an angel when they saw one!

The ELCA AMMPARO program (*amparo* is Spanish for "protection") takes the angel role even further, by "accompanying migrant minors with protection, advocacy, representation and opportunities." God's people can get involved by praying, becoming a Welcoming Congregation to help migrant families transition to new lives in the US, or offering the physical presence of *El-roi*, the God who sees, in courtrooms, through the AMMPARO Guardian Angel Program. You can see a video about this at <https://vimeo.com/157458987>.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

11. In what ways do these two contemporary examples of protecting angels—No More Deaths and the ELCA AMMPARO ministry—parallel the Hagar story? In what ways do they differ?

**ANGELS WHERE NEEDED MOST (10 minutes)**

The book of Daniel features several visions of angels, including a mysterious vision of “ten thousand times ten thousand” heavenly attendants (Daniel 7:9-10), and the only Old Testament mention of the angels Gabriel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21) and Michael (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1). Both angels wondrously reappear in the New Testament, Gabriel in Luke’s Christmas story (1:19, 26) and Michael in a gripping battle scene in Revelation (12:7). Let’s look briefly at two well-known Bible stories of protecting angels: the stories of the three men in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lions’ den.

**THE FIERY FURNACE**

📖 **Read:** Daniel 3:16-28 (or if time allows, all of Daniel 3)

The delightful tongue-twister story of Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, is another Sunday school classic, and for good reason. Who can forget the three who refused to fall down and worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s statue? This story is considered so important that it is one of the appointed readings of “the Old Testament’s Greatest Hits” during the Easter Vigil. God’s people peacefully protested a tyrant’s orders and laid their bodies on the line rather than worship a golden image. In the end, King Nebuchadnezzar himself recognizes what has happened when he says, in verse 28, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his

servants who trusted in him.” If we wonder whether the Bible teaches anything about angels protecting us, here is a clear example of God sending one at just the right moment.

**THE LIONS’ DEN**

Just three chapters later, Daniel himself goes through a similar ordeal. There’s a new king in town, King Darius, who has rather carelessly signed a decree that, according to the law of the land, even he can’t change. Anyone caught worshipping anyone besides the king will be thrown into the lions’ den. King Darius’ advisors had plotted to get this new law because they were jealous of Daniel, who had become a rapidly rising star in the kingdom. The conspirators knew that Daniel was a faithful Jew who worshipped God three times a day. When the king realized he had put Daniel’s life in danger, he was devastated, but it was too late. Daniel was caught, and as the sun went down, he was put into the lions’ den, and the opening was sealed shut. King Darius himself spent the night fasting, sleepless, and hoping against hope that Daniel’s God would somehow prove true.

📖 **Read:** Daniel 6:19-22

Again God sends angels. In this case, they come to shut the mouths of the lions. God sent angels to rescue Daniel.

I recently went through a weird period in my own life when, within a few weeks, I was: 1) struck by a car, 2) bitten by a dog, and 3) by myself in the desert when I came within feet of a rattlesnake! In the first instance, I was swept onto the hood of that car, and I walked away without a bruise (after giving a calm, firm lecture to the young driver about the importance of stopping for stop signs). In the second instance, I walked away from the dog with only a bruise but no broken skin (and after giving another calm but firm lecture to the owner). In

the third situation, I backed away from that snake, rattled but not bitten (and without giving that snake any lecture at all)! Could angelic intervention have been at work? Or did I get lucky in the first two chance happenings and use my God-given ability to choose wisely to step away in the third one?

**Share aloud or reflect:**

12. The two stories in the book of Daniel have to do with God's angels protecting people of faith. Are you aware of any such protection stories in modern times?
13. Have you had a near-accident experience in which it seemed an "invisible hand" saved you? Do you identify that experience with angels who protect?

**DOES JESUS NEED ANGELS? (12 minutes)**

Now we turn again to angels in the New Testament. Last month we looked at warning angels, like those who appeared to Joseph, fiancé of Mary. For Joseph, angelic appearances took place in dreams. Jesus himself, however, apparently received angel visits in person. The devil, historically considered a fallen angel, found Jesus out in the desert wilderness and tempted him with the broad promise of guardian angels: After all, shouldn't God provide protection for someone who claims to be the Son of God?

📖 **Read:** Psalm 91:1-4; 9-12 and Matthew 4:1-7

The devil taunts Jesus. Instead of carrying a message from God, the Tempter is the anti-angel, bending the stories and words of holy comfort to his own purposes. He tempts Jesus to commandeer God's holy angels into a trivial role as his personal security detail. Growing up in a Jewish household, Jesus would have known Psalm 91 by heart. He would've been familiar with the stories of the

protective angels of Daniel 3 and 6. We can see how the temptation would have been real—why not show the devil who has the real power? Yet Jesus puts the promise of Scripture in context: Angels are not at the beck and call of human—or devilish—capriciousness. Angels do God's work, for God's purposes, in God's time.

📖 **Read:** Matthew 4:11

After Jesus endures the temptations, God sends angels after all! They wait on Jesus, and I like to imagine them providing him with delicious food, a cool breeze and maybe, as for Hagar during her time in the desert, fresh water from a well. Remembering that the word "angel" simply means messenger, I wonder if these were human or heavenly beings. Could they have been "just" a group of day hikers who offered food and drink to a hungry stranger—who happened to be the Son of God?

**Share aloud or reflect:**

14. Can you remember any sort of "angel" (God's human or heavenly messenger) who brought you comfort after a physically challenging time?

📖 **Read:** Luke 22:39-44

The first comforting angels came to Jesus at the very beginning of his public ministry. Only the Gospel of Luke includes this bookend appearance of an angel also at the end of his ministry. We see Jesus pouring his heart out in agonized prayer on the Mount of Olives. He appears to still dare to hope God's plan might not have to include a full crucifixion. An angel arrives. This is no picnicking stranger, but specifically "an angel from heaven." The angel doesn't rescue Jesus but strengthens him. Jesus' anguish continues, but he knows he can face the

heavy task at hand.

📖 **Read:** Matthew 26:53-54

Also at the end of Jesus' ministry, when one of his followers tries to protect him through violence, he points out that he could call out "twelve legions," or a whole army of angels to defend and rescue him. But Jesus has already resisted the temptation to bend angel actions to his own will. God has a higher purpose for Jesus, a plan that doesn't, this time, include an angel rescue.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

15. What kind of angels might our world most need today: comforting, coaching, encouraging or protecting angels? Which type of angel ministry are you, or members of your church, most motivated to offer to others?

**CONCLUSION (1 minute)**

In this leg of our "Journeys with angels" Bible study, we have been uplifted and encouraged by *El-roi*, the God who sees. God sent angels to comfort, coach and minister to Hagar. We've observed a silent angel who protected three men from death in a fiery furnace and another angel who shut the mouths of lions. We also met angels who didn't protect anyone from harm, but who served and strengthened Jesus to face the trials set before him. Apparently we *all* need angels to journey with us! Next month, we will study the feasting and rejoicing angels who bring the best news ever to God's people and to us. 🌿

# Journeys with angels

## Session three

Comforting, encouraging,  
protecting angels

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

### OVERVIEW

This session takes us through most of the season of Lent, looking closely at angels who attend to people in distress: Hagar in the desert, three friends thrown into a furnace, Daniel shut into a lions' den, and Jesus: first, amid the agonies of temptation, then years later, the night before his crucifixion. We explore the difference between the temptation to passively expect guardian angels to fix our problems, and Scripture's witness of angels who respond to our genuine human needs but also strengthen us for God's toughest assignments.

### REACH OUT

Try sending regular and potential new participants a short text message, email, video link or a simple postcard to remind them of and invite them to the upcoming study. Encourage them to invite a friend. We all have something to contribute—that's how Bible study works!

### PREPARE FOR THE SESSION

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit to accompany you in your planning. Pray also for the Spirit to prepare the hearts and minds of all participants for this session.
2. Read through the entire study. Look up the Bible passages. Consider assigning passages in advance,

so participants can practice reading the passages aloud if they wish, especially for longer sections such as Genesis 16:1-13 and Daniel 3 (you will want to get your very best reader or a seasoned storyteller for that one).

3. Decide which questions you will focus on. You won't have time for everything, and that's OK. The Bible is like that—there's always another layer to consider. As always, be sensitive to those who may have reasons to be especially affected by the conversation or may simply wish to stay silent. However, don't allow any voices to dominate—including your own!

#### **HOLDING HAGAR**

In our study, you will find that Hagar's story is an intense one. It also intersects with current societal conversations about culture, political history and faith. Be on high alert to yield space and time to participants whose ancestors or family members come from a background affected by slavery. We need to hear such voices, just as God heard Hagar's voice.

Again, be aware of the need to yield space and time to participants who may be personally affected by the experience of refugees or who have been refugees themselves. Do make a point to educate yourself and others on the ELCA AMMPARO program and/or other refugee assistance programs, such as those coordinated by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) or local Lutheran social service organizations. If you can squeeze in some time, the 3.5-minute video referenced in the study ("Guardian Angels: An introduction," <https://vimeo.com/157458987>) is on topic and will enrich your study immensely.

So does Jesus need angels? Do we? The answer to this question is yes—yes, Jesus certainly needed angels, and God sent them to him. The biblical

witness strongly suggests that angels do indeed still appear. Sometimes we ourselves might be those angels.

#### **CLOSING HYMN**

"On Eagle's Wings" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship 787, verses 1-4)

Since this hymn is particularly difficult to sing as a group (and it might not yet be safe to sing together in person), consider finding a recorded version of this much-loved hymn to share.

#### **ACTIVITY: SNACKS (OPTIONAL)**

Whether gathering in person or online, consider sending the recipe to participants in advance and asking them to prepare their own snack with what they have on hand.

#### **The Comfort of Angels Pasta Dish**

- 1 stick (8 T.) butter or margarine
- 8 oz. angel hair pasta
- 3 c. hot chicken stock
- 1 t. (or to taste) freshly ground pepper
- Juice of 3-4 lemons

Melt a stick of butter in a 2 ½ qt. (or larger) pan on your stovetop. Break up the angel hair pasta and stir it into the melted butter. Add chicken stock and pepper. Cover and let simmer on low for 10 minutes until the liquids are nearly gone. Finally, add lemon juice. Voilà—a comfort food classic! You can add other ingredients at the end, such as veggies or herbs, if you choose. There's something so basic, delicious and melt-in-your-mouth comforting about this simple recipe! 🌿

Angels



among us

Sister Elisabeth Fedde brought  
God's good news and mercy.

BY LAURAJ. GIFFORD

**THE FUNNY THING ABOUT ANGELS** is that we paint them as lovely and sweet, charming and even cherubic, yet whenever they appear in the Bible, their first words tend to be “Do not be afraid.” Sometimes we see artistic depictions of a fierce Gabriel or an imposing Michael. However, most depictions of angels, particularly female ones, seem created for looks, not for action—hardly the formidable messengers of God we read about in the Gospels!

Real messengers of good news and mercy not only come in all shapes and sizes, but would rarely be described as shrinking violets. Think about the most beloved woman of valor you can recall from your family or congregation, neighborhood or community. Chances are she’s not only a vessel of grace and goodwill, but also someone you wouldn’t want to mess with when she’s on a roll. “Do not be afraid,” indeed. Give these women some room to maneuver!

One such angel of Lutheran heritage is Sister Elisabeth Fedde, a deaconess from Norway who spent much of her working life in the United States. Sister Elisabeth tussled with the men put in charge of her missions and delivered strong words when she needed to (also maybe sometimes when she didn’t). Combining her tireless personal ministry to impoverished Norwegian Brooklynites with her organizational acumen, she founded two

major hospitals.

Elisabeth was born on Christmas Day 1850 in the small town of Fedde, Norway. When she was only 13 years old, her mother died. Like many young women of limited means, she prepared to enter domestic service. She took a position in the home of a Stavanger shoemaker and local leader in the mid-19th-century Lutheran Pietist movement. Deeply impressed by her employers’ heartfelt faith, young Elisabeth prayed for a way she might serve God. One day a visiting seamstress remarked that the conscientious young maid ought to be a deaconess. This was a new idea for Elisabeth, but soon she recognized God’s call. Elisabeth entered the Deaconess Motherhouse in Christiania (modern-day Oslo) in 1874.

The Christiania motherhouse was an outgrowth of the Lutheran deaconess movement established in the 1830s by German pastor Theodore Fliedner. Lutheran deaconesses remained single, lived together in community and trained primarily as nurses. Previously, nurses were typically women with few resources who were regarded as slovenly and untrained. The deaconess movement was one of many 19th-century developments in the nursing profession, alongside the reforming efforts of England’s Florence Nightingale and the work of Clara Barton during the American Civil War.

Sister Elisabeth had much to learn as a nurse and as a minister—for the duties of a deaconess were spiritual as much as medical. While the women’s male pastoral overseers might not have appreciated deaconesses as ministers, deaconesses experienced a call and provided pastoral care to those they encountered. Deaconesses were a vital component of the “inner mission” movement in Europe and the United States. Sister Elisabeth would play a pivotal role in the latter.

Sister Elisabeth spent her first years in a number of posts at the motherhouse and elsewhere in Norway. In October 1882, however, she received an intriguing letter from her brother-in-law in New York City. The wife of the Norwegian consul in Brooklyn was promising a \$150 annual contribution for “a Bible woman who would work here with the poor and lost sheep among the Norwegians,” according to Gracia Grindal, author of *Sister Elisabeth Fedde: “To Do the Lord’s Will”* (Lutheran University Press, 2014, p. 79). After careful prayer and discernment—and with the approval of her mother superior in Christiania—Sister Elisabeth answered the call. She arrived in Brooklyn on April 10, 1883. Nine days later she met with local Norwegian pastors to establish the Voluntary Relief Society for the Sick and Poor among the Norwegians in New York and Brooklyn.

Now Sister Elisabeth had an organization with a name. She had the oversight of three Lutheran pastors who served as chairman, secretary and treasurer. What she didn't have was a place to work. Over the next several weeks she located a small apartment that served as her first headquarters. She began to develop her new charity from scratch.

The conditions Sister Elisabeth faced in the immigrant communities of Brooklyn were nothing short of shocking. Exhaustion was a common theme in the journals she kept of her early years in Brooklyn. She purchased a basket to carry that would always be full of food and clothing. One scholar noted that if Florence Nightingale was “the Lady with the Lamp,” Sister Elisabeth quickly became known as “the Lady with the Basket” (Grindal, p. 96). Initially Sister Elisabeth traveled miles on foot and by trolley to serve impoverished immigrants. Soon she realized a more established hospital would better meet people's needs. So in 1885, the Relief Society established a nine-bed hospital that grew into the Deaconess Hospital in Brooklyn.

While Sister Elisabeth enjoyed the support of the Norwegian immigrant

community, she sometimes clashed with the pastors who oversaw New York's inner missions. An eminently practical woman, Sister Elisabeth pushed stridently for any measures that might raise much-needed money for her hospital—including raffles and games of chance. Such fundraisers gave her frequent nemesis, the pious Pastor Carl Everson, fits. Others were frequently called upon to adjudicate these quarrels.



Even so, Fedde's work continued. On April 19, 1888, Brooklyn's Norwegian community not only celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Norwegian Relief Society, but also laid the cornerstone for a new Norwegian Hospital and Deaconess Motherhouse.

Sister Elisabeth's work in Brooklyn brought her increasing renown in other parts of the United States. When she made an 1888 trip to visit family and friends in the Midwest, local Lutheran leaders urged her to

visit Minneapolis. In September 1888, Minneapolis was a busy place: One of the largest associations of Lutherans at the time, the General Council of Lutherans in America, was holding its convention in the city. Sister Elisabeth found herself in a room with leading lights of the Norwegian Lutheran community in the Midwest. They urged her to bring her gifts to Minneapolis, which needed a Norwegian hospital.

Lutheran leaders wanted a deaconess motherhouse to run it. Would Sister Elisabeth oblige? Reluctantly she agreed to help, and by November 1888, the new Deaconess Institute was up and running in Minneapolis.

Discord and conflict marked Sister Elisabeth's two-year sojourn in charge of the Minneapolis

institute. Not only was the stalwart deaconess starting to suffer the effects of what later scholars believe was rheumatoid arthritis, but Sister Elisabeth's strong opinions about how to run the institute clashed with a male leadership that was itself beset by conflict and controversy. Norwegian Lutherans in these years grappled with doctrinal and cultural pressures that produced a series of significant shifts in denominational structures. Amid this unrest, leaders

in Minneapolis, Chicago and elsewhere jockeyed for influence, not only in congregations but also in the church's burgeoning social service ministries. Sister Elisabeth—never a submissive personality—found herself embroiled in these broader crises. Yet the work she initiated bore lasting fruit. (Fairview Deaconess Hospital grew out of these efforts and served the city for decades before it was absorbed by the University of Minnesota medical system.) By spring 1891, the weary sister was happy to return to Brooklyn and resume her role at the hospital there.

Sister Elisabeth spent the next several years forging an ever more prominent institution in the heart of the city. She decided that Brooklyn's expanding Deaconess Hospital needed an ambulance to better serve the surrounding neighborhood. Securing the city government's support, she designed her institution's new transport right down to the gold lettering on each side, then turned her attention toward finding a horse that could pull it. After shrewd negotiations with the local horse dealer, she took home what the stable boy confided was "our best horse." At the end of the trial period, Sister Elisabeth returned to the stables,

money in hand. Before handing over the payment, however, the savvy deaconess noted that the stable's own trams tended to cause the most accidents in the neighborhood and thus generated the most use for an ambulance service... so "I am thinking you could give us a horse" (Grindal,



p. 269). Sister Elisabeth left with both horse and money firmly in hand.

Sister Elisabeth served several more years in Brooklyn, helping the Deaconess Hospital transition from an institution serving Norwegian immigrants to one meeting the needs of a broader, more diverse community. By 1896, however, her health no longer allowed her to meet the

demands of hospital life. Sister Elisabeth returned to Norway, where she married Ole Andreas Pederson Slettebø, an Egersund farmer she'd known since childhood. While her work as a deaconess had concluded, Elisabeth's call to service continued. She was known throughout her community for her work with children and those who were ill.

On March 3, 1921, the American *Nordisk Tidende* newspaper announced Sister Elisabeth's death the previous week. "There was no woman and very few men who had such a powerful influence on the Norwegian community in Brooklyn as Sister Elisabeth," the reporter reflected. "She was gifted with a keen understanding, firm will, clear administrative talents, a rare person with a self-sacrificing sense and strength to give her community her brand"

(Grindal, p. 326-327). Deaconess Hospital survives today as New York University's Langone Hospital—Brooklyn.

Sister Elisabeth's story reminds us that service among God's angels is not for the faint of heart. She was faithful, tough, strong-willed and very, very human. Moreover, she left a wonderful legacy to those of us who follow. 🌿

# At the table

BY KAITLIN B. CURTICE

*If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world. —J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit (Ballantine Books, 1966, p. 290).*

ONE DAY, ELIOT AND I GATHERED in our tiny kitchen to bake bread. He scooped the yeast into the big green bowl—one, two, three, four, five—until it covered the water and honey.

We stirred in the flour.

“What does yeast mean, Mommy?” Eliot asked.

“Yeast makes it really yummy and fluffy when we bake it,” I said.

I could have told him more, if I understood it myself. But the truth of baking this bread is that it is just as magical to me as it is to my toddlers. I wait an hour and watch how the flour, heavy as it is, becomes consumed by little bubbles, light as a feather, overflowing the top of the green mixing bowl.

Now that he is a little bigger, Eliot makes his own bread, mixes a little yeast with flour and honey and salt and water and rolls it out on the counter. We pop it into the oven for fifteen minutes and cut it into fourths when it is just browned. It is a celebration of his newfound love for baking, for touch and sight and smell.

The table is slowly becoming a place of simplicity, of vegetables and ripening fruit, cheese and bread, of constant conversation over what kind of day we’re having and negotiations over how many bites Eliot has to take before he can leave the table and go play again—where my other son, Isaiah, climbs up on top, trying to grab the pepper grinder and eat the grains of salt as they fall to the

tablecloth from our little red star-shaped salt dishes.

And sometimes, in a moment of quiet when I see my own family huddled around me, I sit back and think of them, my Native American ancestors who lived so long ago in the peace of their own spaces.

I think back to my great-great-grandmothers and the crops they toiled over, the long work over pits of fire, beating out dough every single day, the food that came to their tables for their families to gather and tell stories, to rest from the work and take small, slow breaths together before digging back into their work again.

I think of how they used every bit of everything they had, using corn husks to make sleeping mats and dolls and clothing after the hominy was cultivated by those same hands.

They reached for God, too, in the callusing of their fingertips.

We watch for hours as the dough rises, as we eat meals and play games and read books. The yeast works constantly, the honey marinates, seeps into the flour’s very being.

Yeast brings that dough to life, calls every fiber to the surface, billowed up and over its own edges.

Hours later, I take three loaves of honey wheat bread out of the oven and slather them with butter, and Eliot watches and Isaiah reaches for it, because it’s all ours and it’s all holy, that space we share in the corner of our kitchen where our souls billow up, asking for grace to rise and cover us. 🌿

*Excerpted from Glory Happening by Kaitlin B. Curtice. Copyright 2017 by Kaitlin B. Curtice. Used by permission of Paraclete Press, [www.paracletepress.com](http://www.paracletepress.com).*

*Jesus,*

*It will take us our whole lives and all of eternity  
to understand how exactly you  
came to be the bread and the wine.*

*It will take us our whole lives and all of eternity  
to understand how exactly you  
offer yourself to us in such a way.*

*We do not fathom it,  
and so we cannot fathom you.*

*But we will spend our whole lives and all of eternity trying.  
Amen.*





# ‘You are messengers of God for me’

ELCA AMMPARO helps congregations sponsor asylum seekers.

BY MARY CAMPBELL

**A MOM WE’LL CALL CARMEN** and her two daughters fled Honduras after gang members began stalking her oldest daughter, whom we’ll call Ana. The gang’s leader wanted Ana, a teenager, to be his girlfriend.

Before this, the gang had threatened the family, demanding weekly “protection” payments from their family business. At first, they’d made the payments. Then the price increased, with more and more due every week—to the point that their business was hardly viable anymore. When Carmen stopped paying, gang members showed up at her house, demanding money. Ana was there that day, and from that moment on, the gang members began following the teen whenever she left home for school or other activities. They would walk behind her, cat-calling and trying to stop her,

even when other family members accompanied her. If she left the house in a car, they followed the car. Constant fear caused her to lose sleep and eventually to become unable to leave her home. Then came the death threats to the family. It was the final straw. Carmen made the difficult decision to take her two daughters and go to the United States for their safety.

At the U.S. border, the family was arrested and separated. Each of the three found herself in a different detention facility. Carmen had no idea where her daughters had been taken. Nearly 60 days after arriving in the U.S., she learned that her 9-year-old daughter had ended up in Chicago. They were finally reunited through the efforts of pro bono lawyers. The same lawyers were able to find 19-year-old

Ana as well. She had been separated from her mother in Arizona because she was technically an adult. Later she was brought to Texas, ending up right down the road from the Family Detention facility where her mother was. Even so, it took weeks to find her.

While Carmen’s brother agreed to sponsor the family, he needed help to obtain food and legal representation for them, so he turned to his church. The congregation was able to help the family get an immigration lawyer, contribute toward some financial costs and accompany Carmen to her ICE check-ins and other appointments. While the congregation didn’t need to officially sponsor the family, they undertook some of the tasks of asylum-seeker sponsorship.

And then there is the situation of a young man we’ll call

Jaime. Twice he fled to the U.S. from El Salvador. He'd been living in San Salvador, where a local gang extorted his business until he had to close, having no resources to pay them anymore. With his livelihood gone, Jaime was forced to move back in with his mother in another town in El Salvador.

The last time Jaime had lived in this town, he was shot by gang members and then testified against them in court. The police told him that although the gang member he'd testified against was in prison, they couldn't protect him from the rest of the gang. This was the first time he had to flee to the U.S., where he stayed for a few months to let things cool down before going back home.

Last October, gang members noticed that Jaime was back in town. Someone called his cell phone and told him that if he didn't leave immediately, his whole household would be killed. So once again he fled to the U.S. This time Jaime was detained and sent to various private detention facilities, ending up in a facility in California, where crowded conditions and a lack of sanitation allowed the COVID-19 virus to spread quickly. Jaime contracted the disease. He was fortunate to be isolated from others while he battled the virus for weeks. Only partially recovered, he was sent back into the general population, where the virus was now spreading like wildfire.

In fact, the first COVID-19

death in detention occurred in early May 2020, just as I began to work with Jaime on a statement to try to get him paroled out of the private detention facility. He had already filed an asylum case to stay in the U.S., but he had no lawyer. My task was to try to get him out so he could save his life and have time to get an immigration lawyer and prepare an asylum claim.

As we worked on his statement, I learned that while he had a solid case for release from detention, he had no place to go. He needed a sponsor who could take responsibility for him before the court. That was when doors began to open. Some congregations in the ELCA AMMPARO network said they would

## *You can help*

Does your congregation or small group want to help asylum seekers? You will need:

Approval of congregational leadership to explore asylum-seeker sponsorship.

A team of people committed to work together for a year or more to walk with the asylees who will be sponsored. The team needs to have no fewer than five people involved, including several who can communicate in the asylee's language.

The capacity to raise funds for food, clothing, shelter, housing, medical care, legal fees, immigration case expenses, transportation and incidentals.

To ensure that cross-cultural training and racial justice work has happened or is happening, not only for the team but for the congregation.

Capacity to connect the asylees with legal services, either pro bono or paid.

If your congregation or its Women of the ELCA unit

can meet the above criteria, consider signing up for ELCA AMMPARO's asylum-seeker sponsorship training for congregations. For more information, contact Mary Campbell, AMMPARO program director at [mary.campbell@elca.org](mailto:mary.campbell@elca.org) or Jennifer DeLeon, director of justice, Women of the ELCA at [jennifer.deleon@elca.org](mailto:jennifer.deleon@elca.org).

help. AMMPARO stands for Accompanying Minor Migrants with Protection (amparo is a Spanish word meaning “protection”), Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities, primarily serves children and youth. one congregation involved with the network had a place for him to live. Another assumed fiscal responsibility for the donations and expenses related to helping him. Still another congregation provided the sponsorship letter and accompanying information. Sometimes it takes a village! Suddenly Jaime had what he needed for his release. Upon learning that these congregations would sponsor him, Jaime said, “This is the first time since

October 2019 when I arrived that I have felt any sense of hope. I give thanks to God for you and these churches willing to help me. Truly you are messengers of God for me!”

Jaime had a strong case for parole, but before the motion for parole could be filed, he received a court date for a final hearing. Without counsel and sufficient time to obtain the documents he needed, Jaime was deported within 10 days to El Salvador.

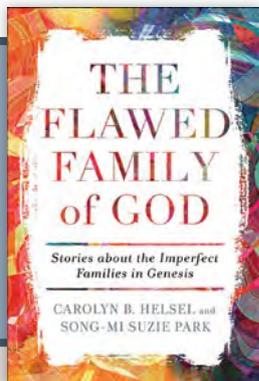
The congregations hoping to help Jaime were disappointed, but now they are ready for asylum-seeker sponsorship and are waiting for the next opportunity to sponsor someone else.

What about children under

the age of 18 who need sponsorship? The ELCA AMMPARO program works with a network of congregations, some of which are welcoming, and others of which are sanctuary. The situation is still evolving, but congregations are finding a variety of ways to walk with asylum-seekers, most of whom are already living in the U.S., as well as others, like Jaime, who need sponsorship.

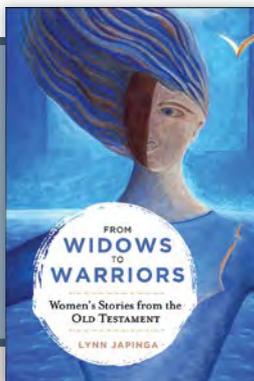
AMMPARO and its partners provide training in how to sponsor an asylum-seeking individual or family already in the U.S. through the work of congregations, synods, shelters and immigration legal service organizations. 🌿

## NEW IN BIBLE STUDIES!



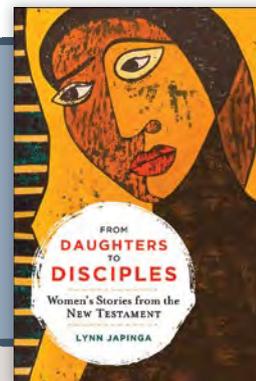
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# Fear of missing out

BY LINDA POST BUSHKOFSKY

RECENTLY A MEMBER OF MY QUILT GUILD posted an announcement on our guild’s Facebook page. She was downsizing her considerable collection of fabric, notion and patterns and would be holding a “destash” giveaway. Women quickly posted more than 80 comments with enthusiastic responses. I was about to join in. Then I caught myself. My quilt studio is filled with fabric—probably more than I’ll use in this lifetime. I don’t need more patterns, books or notions. Why was I so ready to jump into the destash?

This was a plain case of FOMO, or “fear of missing out.” It was the giveaway of the decade, and I wanted to be part of it! I wanted to share in the stories, show a finished quilt using some of the fabrics and rub (virtual) elbows with the “cool” quilters. If I’m honest, there might have even been a little bit of envy. How much stuff must the quilter have had in order to graciously give away so much? Clearly, I was about to miss out on something big.

Maybe you’ve experienced FOMO a few times too. Perhaps it was a particular party or concert or blowout sale at a popular department store. Or maybe it was “needing” to have the latest cell phone or tablet or...? You didn’t want to miss out on something big. You wanted to be there, having the seemingly great experience of your peers.

Social media has added another dimension to FOMO. Social media

amplifies our fear of missing out by allowing us to compare our normal lives with the often highly curated lives of others shown in social media. A lot of people brag through their social media posts, and those picture-perfect posts can lead some to wonder what they are missing.

This got me thinking. Have you ever heard anyone speak of FOMO and faith? I haven’t. But why not? When we think about God’s gift of eternal life, isn’t that the ultimate big thing we don’t want to miss out on? Isn’t life in Christ even more exciting than a quilt destash or a blowout sale?

Or have you heard anyone speak of FOMO and our women’s organization? Can’t say that I have. Again, why not? Think about the learning, service and fellowship that happen when we come together in Women of the ELCA. Fueled by the Holy Spirit, extraordinary things take place and lives are forever changed. Who would want to miss out on that?

During the season of Lent, we are invited to reexamine our lives and realign them with the way of Jesus. This is the perfect time to rekindle the excitement of our faith. We don’t compare our lives with some picture-perfect, highly curated social media posts. We work toward aligning our lives with what Jesus has asked us to do and to be. Best of all, there’s no need to fear missing out on the redeeming and reconciling love of God in Jesus! 🌿



# Angels to help us

BY CATHERINE MALOTKY

**GOOD AND GRACIOUS GOD**, we all need some comfort these days. We are launching into Lent, coming off a year of phenomenal political turmoil, and almost all of us know someone who has been stricken by or has even died of a virus none of us had heard of just a year ago. The last 12 months have been really tough!

We know we're not the first of your children to be in a difficult place. Like our ancestors in faith, we struggle with complications of competing values that become ethical challenges. We fret. We work to make things as clear as a bell, but too often they are not. Sometimes the challenges we find ourselves caught in are not of our own making, which is even harder.

Where can we look for resilience? Patience? Clarity? Empathy? Compassion? Joy? How do we position ourselves and our attitudes when the deck seems stacked against us, and sometimes is? Where are your angels to help us?

Some of us retreat in times like these. We find a place to hide and surrender to the inevitable. Hagar did this. Her situation felt impossible. She had no power except her body's ability to reproduce, and even that was used against her. She fled with her son, found a quiet place and prepared to die. But you found her, God. You spoke to Hagar, and her life was changed, not because her circumstances turned around but because she clung to a promise of a better future, a promise from you. She began to see her world differently.

I wonder whether we give ourselves time and space to grieve, dear God. Or does our cultural expectation that we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps cheat us, in this situation, of an opportunity to feel our losses, to grieve and to process them? Are we so committed to preserving the past that we are unable to welcome a better future, one promised by you? Are we missing the angels you send, God, because getting help is not in our emotional vocabulary? Because we can sometimes be so sure we know better?

What kind of humility does it require to wait, to listen, to be influenced, to change? Perhaps when we can surrender, when we can let

ourselves be vulnerable to you, God, and to each other, we can, in humility, gain a new perspective. Perhaps we can begin to see a vision of the future you offer, God: a vision

that assumes that all have enough, that none are mocked or dehumanized, that creation and we humans are in balance with each other, and that both justice and mercy prevail.

It takes tremendous courage to cling to this vision, especially if the world around us marches on with a short-term, "get what you can" value system. We need to find our own better angels, because in the long run, this kind of survival orientation will not serve us, our children or their children.

Surround us, God, with your angels of hope, justice and mercy. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear and courage to respond to your messengers. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿





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