

boundless

# theological exploration of daily themes

2022 ELCA YOUTH GATHERING



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.



**boundless: God beyond measure**

Savanna Sullivan

PAGE 3



**boundless love**

The Rev. Sunitha Mortha

PAGE 5



**boundless creation**

The Rev. Dave Ellingson

PAGE 7



**boundless forgiveness**

The Rev. Alejandro Mejia

PAGE 10



**boundless invitation**

The Rev. Louise Johnson

PAGE 12



**boundless promise**

The Rev. Mark Vitalis-Hoffman

PAGE 15

We are excited to share with you the daily themes for the 2022 ELCA Youth Gathering! God is boundless in so many ways it was hard to narrow it down to just five. In the end, we decided topics that we believe are important and relevant to our young people's lives, experiences, and passions — God's boundless love, boundless creation, boundless forgiveness, boundless invitation and boundless promise. Familiar and maybe less familiar Scripture texts from the Old and New Testament accompany each theme.

To introduce the 2022 Gathering theme of "boundless: God beyond measure" and these daily themes, we have invited six amazing theological minds to write reflections. We are thankful for their willingness, their wisdom of Lutheran doctrine and theology, and their passion for this ministry and for young people.

Gathering participants will have variety of ways to explore these daily themes. The daily themes are the framework for our Getting Ready Materials that congregational groups will use to prepare for the Gathering and grow together as a group. Additionally, the Gathering blog will feature posts about the daily themes in the coming year. At the Gathering, the daily themes will be present in Interactive Learning, Synod Day, Service Learning, Mass Gathering, Final 15 and more.

Blessings as you dive into these themes and your preparations. We know God will "do far more than we dare ask or imagine" through this ministry.

In Christ,

*Molly Beck Dean*

Molly Beck Dean  
Director, ELCA Youth Gathering



# boundless: *God beyond measure*

BY SAVANNA SULLIVAN

## EPHESIANS 3:14-21 CEV

*<sup>14</sup> I kneel in prayer to the Father. <sup>15</sup> All beings in heaven and on earth receive their life from [God]. <sup>16</sup> God is wonderful and glorious. I pray that [God's] Spirit will make you become strong followers <sup>17</sup> and that Christ will live in your hearts because of your faith. Stand firm and be deeply rooted in God's love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you and all of God's people will understand what is called wide or long or high or deep. <sup>19</sup> I want you to know all about Christ's love, although it is too wonderful to be measured. Then your lives will be filled with all that God is.*

*<sup>20-21</sup> I pray that Christ Jesus and the church will forever bring praise to God. [God's] power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine. Amen.*

**H**umans measure A LOT. Measuring can help us understand the world in important ways — it helps us make scientific discoveries such as new vaccines; it helps us bake cakes that do not just fall apart. Of course, vaccines and cakes are gifts from God, but this constant measuring can also be limiting; it can be binding. We can spend our days measuring ourselves against others, judging our worth by test scores or run times or hours spent at work.

That human impulse to measure ourselves and each other can spill over into our relationship with God, pushing us to try to measure the edges of God, to find where God ends. Maybe we know that God loves our friends, but what about the people that we don't like very much? Maybe we can believe God has forgiven the silly things we do, but what about the things of which we are most ashamed? Maybe we know God invites some people, but where does it end? A national border?

A gender identity or sexuality? What about the very real ways we feel bound? Is God present there?

This text from Ephesians has an answer for us. The apostle Paul writes, "I pray that you and all of God's people will understand what is called wide or long or high or deep. I want you to know all about Christ's love, although it is too wonderful to be measured."

Christ's love is beyond measurement, beyond containment. Now, Paul doesn't say this in a naively optimistic way. Paul knew something about being bound. This passage is part of a letter he wrote to the church at Ephesus while he was in prison.

Other faith leaders have been bound, too, from Martin Luther, who called for an end to measuring God's grace, to Martin Luther King Jr. and countless other religious leaders who have

called for an end to measuring a person's worth by their skin color. These prophetic leaders were imprisoned. They pointed out where they and their neighbors were bound by injustice.

We cannot pretend that, because God is boundless, we are all magically unbound in this world.

Because we live in a world where we are still so often bound by unjust systems, by sin or by the measurements of ourselves or others, it can be hard to wrap our minds around something as boundless as God.

Yet this is our hope, this is our promise.

However deep a love we can imagine, God loves more. However much forgiveness we think we could deserve, God forgives more. However wide an invitation we believe could exist, God invites more. However much justice we think could reasonably exist for God's people, God wants more.

And in God's boundlessness, we find the courage and creativity to work for a world where we, our neighbors, and all creation WILL find boundlessness, too.



**Savanna Sullivan serves as Program Executive for Youth Ministry with the Lutheran World Federation. She has a master's degree in theology from Wartburg Seminary and is passionate about following the lead of young people of faith to realize a more equitable world and build communities of meaning and belonging. She loves singing with friends, American football and her puppy – Violet.**



# boundless love

BY THE REV. SUNITHA MORTHA

## EPHESIANS 3:14-21 CEV

*<sup>14</sup> I kneel in prayer to the Father. <sup>15</sup> All beings in heaven and on earth receive their life from [God]. <sup>16</sup> God is wonderful and glorious. I pray that [God's] Spirit will make you become strong followers <sup>17</sup> and that Christ will live in your hearts because of your faith. Stand firm and be deeply rooted in God's love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you and all of God's people will understand what is called wide or long or high or deep. <sup>19</sup> I want you to know all about Christ's love, although it is too wonderful to be measured. Then your lives will be filled with all that God is.*

*<sup>20-21</sup> I pray that Christ Jesus and the church will forever bring praise to God. [God's] power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine. Amen.*

When we think about boundless love, we often think about unconditional love — perhaps the love God has for us or the way we might love our parents or siblings. Ephesians 3:14-21 invites us to expand upon this notion of love. This Scripture presents an understanding of love that is immeasurable, while also lifting up the trinitarian nature of God. In doing so, these verses open up an opportunity to dig deeper into this understanding of God as three in one and of their interrelating as boundless love.

We can understand boundless love by looking at the interrelating among the divine three — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is not a solitude of one, but a communion of the divine three. These three in one engage with one another in a specific kind of loving relationship, a perichoretic relationship: they indwell in one another, each expressing love by carving out a space for the

others while honoring their distinctiveness. This indwelling, reciprocal, communal dance of love for one another, culminating in radical union, becomes foundational to our understanding of boundless love.

Because God is a community living out boundless love in relationship, we who are created in God's image are also called to this loving, communal way of being. When we say we are created in the Image of God, we may think we are to emulate either Christ, God or the Spirit. However, our Lutheran Confessions remind us that God is three in one, not one separately or sequentially. So, we are made in the image of the triune God.

When we recognize that this is who we are and live this out in the world, we find ourselves part of the divine dance of boundless love with God and our neighbor. We discover ourselves in this boundless

love in beloved communities that celebrate difference and create space for the indwelling of others within ourselves, and when we recognize our interdependence with one another. We get a glimpse of the boundlessness of this love when we come to empathize with and experience the world through the eyes of someone different from us, and when we accompany those in our communities who suffer oppression or injustice. In so doing, we participate with God and our neighbor in perichoretic relationships.

In the face of a broken and suffering world, God continues to break into this reality, beckoning a new humanity, a new earth and a new heaven. When we, as followers of Christ, participate in perichoretic relationships in communities, we find ourselves, as Ephesians 3:20-21 declares, participating in this boundless love that is beyond our imagination and daring.



**The Rev. Sunitha Mortha is a pastor, educator and curator of spaces where leaders are empowered by work at the intersections of witness, healing, art and justice. Currently she serves as Associate to Bishop with the Metropolitan Chicago Synod.**



# boundless *creation*

BY THE REV. DAVE ELLINGSON

## PSALM 104:1-34

<sup>104</sup> *I praise you, Lord God,  
with all my heart.  
You are glorious and majestic,  
dressed in royal robes  
and surrounded by light.  
You spread out the sky  
like a tent,  
and you built your home  
over the mighty ocean.  
The clouds are your chariot  
with the wind as its wings.  
The winds are your messengers,  
and flames of fire  
are your servants.*

<sup>5</sup> *You built foundations  
for the earth,  
and it  
will never be shaken.*

<sup>6</sup> *You covered the earth  
with the ocean  
that rose  
above the mountains.*

<sup>7</sup> *Then your voice thundered!  
And the water flowed  
down the mountains  
and through the valleys  
to the place you prepared.*

<sup>9</sup> *Now you have set boundaries,  
so that the water will never  
flood the earth again.*

<sup>10</sup> *You provide streams of water  
in the hills and valleys,  
so that the donkeys  
and other wild animals  
can satisfy their thirst.*

<sup>12</sup> *Birds build their nests nearby  
and sing in the trees.*

<sup>13</sup> *From your home above  
you send rain on the hills  
and water the earth.*

<sup>14</sup> *You let the earth produce  
grass for cattle,  
plants for our food,  
wine to cheer us up,  
olive oil for our skin,  
and grain for our health.*

<sup>16</sup> *Our Lord, your trees  
always have water,  
and so do the cedars  
you planted in Lebanon.*

<sup>17</sup> *Birds nest in those trees,  
and storks make their home  
in the fir trees.*

<sup>18</sup> *Wild goats find a home  
in the tall mountains,  
and small animals can hide  
between the rocks.*

<sup>19</sup> *You created the moon  
to tell us the seasons.*

*The sun knows when to set,  
20 and you made the darkness,  
so the animals in the forest  
could come out at night.  
21 Lions roar as they hunt  
for the food you provide.  
22 But when morning comes,  
they return to their dens,  
23 then we go out to work  
until the end of day.*

*24 Our Lord, by your wisdom  
you made so many things;  
the whole earth is covered  
with your living creatures.  
25 But what about the ocean  
so big and wide?  
It is alive with creatures,  
large and small.  
26 And there are the ships,  
as well as Leviathan,  
the monster you created  
to splash in the sea.*

*27 All of these depend on you  
to provide them with food,  
28 and you feed each one*

*with your own hand,  
until they are full.  
29 But when you turn away,  
they are terrified;  
when you end their life,  
they die and rot.  
30 You created all of them  
by your Spirit,  
and you give new life  
to the earth.*

*31 Our Lord, we pray  
that your glory  
will last forever  
and that you will be pleased  
with what you have done.  
32 You look at the earth,  
and it trembles.  
You touch the mountains,  
and smoke goes up.  
33 As long as I live,  
I will sing and praise you,  
the Lord God.  
34 I hope my thoughts  
will please you,  
because you are the one  
who makes me glad.*

A young boy sat under the stars, tending a flock of sheep. Gazing into the heavens, he was so moved with awe and joy that he composed a song praising the Creator. We sing that song of boundless creation today. In Psalm 104, we sing with David, the shepherd boy, of the vastness of creation, with its skies, clouds, oceans, mountains, valleys, winds and rains. We delight in the amazing array of creatures, from the great Leviathan/sea monster to “small animals who can hide between the rocks” (v. 18) and who all depend on this abundant creation. We are all called to join the chorus “As long as I live, I will sing and praise you, the Lord God” (v. 33).

This song of boundless creation is on my lips as I paddle my kayak, witnessing the vastness and beauty of creation. I view creation as the first

bible, which teaches me about God and my fellow creatures. As a boy I learned from the stories of creation in Genesis that creation is “good . . . very good.” As I have studied in the great outdoor classroom, I have learned that we humans were given the blessed job of caring for creation but have not done it very well. Today our world faces many environmental crises created by climate change.

So how will we continue to sing the song of “boundless creation,” of our Creator God, and become faithful stewards of creation?

The ELCA’s social statement *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* explains our teachings on ecology and the environment, grounded in a biblical vision of God’s intention for the healing and wholeness of creation.



We can rejoice that we are not singing this carol of creation alone. We are joined by people of many faiths, traditions and cultures who treasure this gift and can teach and partner with us.

Native people have long recognized and honored the Great Spirit, and they too sing the song:

*“The Great Spirit is in all things, is in the air we breathe. The Great Spirit is our Father, but the Earth is our Mother. She nourishes us; that which we put into the ground, She returns to us.”*

—Big Thunder Wabanaki, Algonquin

African American theologian and poet Barbara Holmes writes, “The worlds of cosmology and quantum mechanics offer us the resonance and rhetoric of a multi-dimensional universe, and give us new ways to talk about the individual and communal quest for moral fulfillment.”

St. Francis sang praise in his canticle to brother sun and “sister moon and the stars, in the heavens you made them bright and precious and fair.”

Martin Luther adds to the boundless creation chorus: “Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.”

John’s Gospel shares the heart of the good news: “For God so loved the world.” A better translation of the Greek text would be “For God so loved the cosmos.” And God’s love for the boundless cosmos came to us in Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection show us the way to love each other and care for creation.

Jesus encourages us to do so, and young people are already leading the way.

Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. —Mark 16:15

Long ago a young boy named David sat under the night sky and sang the praises of God’s boundless creation. Today we join with all creation to sing that song with great joy. Empowered by God’s Spirit, we serve together in the vital work of caring for all creation “as long as we shall live.”



**Dave Ellingson is a pastor, professor, paddler and poet. Known as the “paddle pilgrim,” he celebrates life caring for God’s creation and creatures. A married father of five adult children, he was just blessed with a fifth grandchild.**



# boundless forgiveness

BY THE REV. ALEJANDRO MEJIA

## LUKE 15:11-32 CEV

Jesus also told them another story:  
Once a man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, “Give me my share of the property.” So the father divided his property between his two sons.

<sup>13</sup> Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. <sup>14</sup> He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat.

<sup>15</sup> He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing.

<sup>17</sup> Finally, he came to his senses and said, “My father’s workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will go to my father and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers.’”

<sup>20</sup> The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> The son said, “Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son.”

<sup>22</sup> But his father said to the servants, “Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals[c] for his feet. <sup>23</sup> Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found.” And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> The older son had been out in the field. But when he came near the house, he heard the music and dancing.

<sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants over and asked, “What’s going on here?”

<sup>27</sup> The servant answered, “Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father ordered us to kill the best calf.” <sup>28</sup> The older brother got so angry that he would not even go into the house.

His father came out and begged him to go in. <sup>29</sup> But he said to his father, “For years I have worked for you like a slave and have always obeyed you. But you have never even given me a little goat, so that I could give a dinner for my friends. <sup>30</sup> This other son of yours wasted your money on prostitutes. And now that he has come home, you ordered the best calf to be killed for a feast.”

<sup>31</sup> His father replied, “My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we should be glad and celebrate! Your brother was dead, but he is now alive. He was lost and has now been found.”

The story of the two sons is a good example of humanity's captivity to sin, the sinner and saint paradox in which we live, and God's response, moved by an endless love reflected in boundless forgiveness that sets us free.

Jesus begins by mentioning how sin is reflected through the poor decisions the younger son makes, then goes beyond in the story, explaining where such bad choices can take human beings: hurting those whom we love, hurting ourselves, putting us in a humiliating position, then having this deep sense of guilt and shame, then experiencing total brokenness.

As one reads this first part of the story, it is worth stopping to ask, "Haven't all of us made poor decisions?" Decisions that later we have regretted, that make us feel so embarrassed that we cannot even look in the eyes of our parents, our best friends, our pastors or even people in general? Our bad actions or reactions always hurt us and those whom we love. We have the tendency to make bad choices because of our condition as sinners. So even when we try to be good, we have our lapses!

Then, there is the older son. The text does not say anything about him checking with his brother about what he was doing. Later he decides to speak out but from a place of anger, jealousy and overall judgement, because he did not accept his father's unconditional and seemingly boundless forgiveness to the younger son, his brother.

Humanity's bondage to sin is reflected in the tendency to remain silent while witnessing

something that feels or appears wrong, unfair, unjust or dangerous. It is difficult for humans to accept the fact that God offers forgiveness to all because this world continually tells us that it is okay to hold grudges and look for revenge, thus perpetuating pain, shame and suffering.

It is impossible to measure or understand God's boundless forgiveness according to our human ability to forgive and love others. God's love and forgiveness go beyond human love. Through forgiveness, God wants to remind us that, no matter our sins, God loves us unconditionally because we are precious treasure. It is boundless forgiveness that gives us the assurance that new beginnings are possible.

Regardless of what each son did or didn't do — the younger coming back dirty after losing all that his father gave him or the resistance from the older son to accept his brother and his questioning of his father's love for him — this loving father is able to reach out to both of them. He runs to the younger one to welcome and forgive him, then he runs to the older one to remind him how much he loves him, too.

We live in this paradox wherein we are sinners and saints at the same time. Sinners because of our inability to be perfect. Saints because, despite our imperfections, God keeps running toward us in order to meet us where we are, in order to embrace us and freely forgive us. With a love that sometimes might be hard to understand, God welcomes us and tells us: "You are my child and all mine is yours."



**Originally from Colombia, South America, Rev. Mejia moved to the United States after being invited by the South Carolina Synod to serve as a Mission Developer in the midst of the Latino community. Rev. Mejia has been deeply involved as an advocate and activist for the LBTQIA+, Latino, and Immigrant communities. Currently, Rev. Mejia is a Chaplain Resident at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland.**



# boundless *invitation*

BY THE REV. LOUISE JOHNSON

## LUKE 1:26-56 CEV

<sup>26</sup> One month later God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee <sup>27</sup> with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. <sup>28</sup> The angel greeted Mary and said, “You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you.”

<sup>29</sup> Mary was confused by the angel’s words and wondered what they meant. <sup>30</sup> Then the angel told Mary, “Don’t be afraid! God is pleased with you, <sup>31</sup> and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. <sup>33</sup> He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end.”

<sup>34</sup> Mary asked the angel, “How can this happen? I am not married!”

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God’s power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. <sup>37</sup> Nothing is impossible for God!”

<sup>38</sup> Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant! Let it happen as you have said.” And the angel left her.

<sup>39</sup> A short time later Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. <sup>40</sup> She went into Zechariah’s home,

where she greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, her baby moved within her.

The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. <sup>42</sup> Then in a loud voice she said to Mary:

“God has blessed you more than any other woman! [God] has also blessed the child you will have. <sup>43</sup> Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. <sup>45</sup> The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise.”

<sup>46</sup> Mary said:

With all my heart  
I praise the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and I am glad  
because of God my Savior.  
<sup>48</sup> [God] cares for me,  
[God’s] humble servant.  
From now on,  
all people will say  
God has blessed me.  
<sup>49</sup> God All-Powerful has done  
great things for me,  
and [God’s] name is holy.  
<sup>50</sup> [God] always shows mercy  
to everyone  
who worships [God].  
<sup>51</sup> The Lord has used

*[the Lord's] powerful arm  
to scatter those  
who are proud.*

<sup>52</sup> *[God] drags strong rulers  
from their thrones  
and puts humble people  
in places of power.*

<sup>53</sup> *God gives the hungry  
good things to eat,  
and sends the rich away  
with nothing.*

<sup>54</sup> *[God] helps his servant Israel  
and is always merciful  
to his people.*

<sup>55</sup> *The Lord made this promise  
to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and his family  
forever!*

<sup>56</sup> *Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months.  
Then she went back home.*

In Mary, God, Creator of the universe, comes to dwell in us and with us, giving us the courage and power to live, fully redeemed — healed, forgiven, freed. The move from holy to human is nothing short of miraculous, and its power extends through Mary to us. In Mary, God invites us to sing our own brave and transformative songs that change the world. Notice the opening sentences of the text: Gabriel comes from God to a small town, to a young, unknown woman. The telescoping images communicate the lengths to which God goes to save us.

Gregory of Nazianzus, a theologian and the archbishop of Constantinople in the fourth century, helps us understand that “what God does not assume, God does not redeem.” Gregory wanted us to know that when God became human in Jesus, God became fully human — body, mind and spirit. Jesus made a home with us and in us, so that the power and presence of God would transform the fullness of human life and experience. When Jesus shares a meal with his friends, when Jesus grieves the death of his friend Lazarus, and when Jesus goes to the cross and to death, he brings to bear the full presence of God, redeeming that experience for all of us. And when Jesus is resurrected, we are resurrected, too. The apostle Paul says, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5).

Mary, then, comes to know the presence and power of God dwelling in her own body, mind and spirit, redeeming her. She knows in her bones what the apostle Paul writes, that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” She needs no longer worry about her safety or salvation. God has redeemed her, healed her, saved her. Nothing can ever separate her from God. God is with her whatever life brings. Freed from the need to worry about her own redemption, Mary is invited to live fully for God and to be part of the work God is doing in the world. God has invited her to live a life of service, to live for those who are suffering.

Mary accepts this invitation and, in the latter part of this text, sings a song envisioning God’s reign, a time when those of us who are in power and whose systems of authority oppress, harm and deprive others will be brought low. And how those who have suffered for so long will be raised up. This is a difficult song for many of us, at least at the beginning. Dismantling our systems of power and places of privilege is painful work but also life-giving, freeing resurrection work. Mary sings a brave song, a countercultural song, a revolutionary song about how God’s reign will come, destroying the systems of power and authority of this world that harm us and raising up those who have been suffering. As Rory Cooney puts it in the hymn “Canticle of the Turning,” “the world is about to turn.”

When God takes up residence in human flesh, God invites us, too, into a new way of life. With Mary and with us, God begins by assuring us in our heart of hearts that we are deeply loved, valued and favored by God. Secure in that love, we are invited by God into the way of Jesus that overturns the structures of power, so that, as we pray in our Lord's prayer, "thy kingdom come,

thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In Mary, God invites each of us to be part God's coming kingdom, to sing our own songs of healing, forgiveness, love and justice. Secure in God's love, what will you sing?



**The Rev. Louise Johnson, a native of Akron, Ohio, and a graduate of both Wittenberg University and Wartburg Theological Seminary, serves the ELCA as assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for administration. Louise got her start in ministry working as a camp counselor and program director at Camp Mowana in Mansfield, Ohio, and in several congregations as a youth minister. Louise has also served as director of leadership development with LEAD, as president of Wartburg Theological Seminary, as vice president for mission advancement at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (now United Lutheran Seminary) and as pastor of Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church in Spragueville, Iowa.**



# boundless *promise*

BY THE REV. MARK VITALIS-HOFFMAN

## JOHN 11:21-27 CEV

<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” <sup>22</sup> Yet even now I know that God will do anything you ask.”

<sup>23</sup> Jesus told her, “Your brother will live again!”

<sup>24</sup> Martha answered, “I know that he will be raised to life on the last day, when all the dead are raised.”

<sup>25</sup> Jesus then said, “I am the one who raises the dead to life! Everyone who has faith in me will live, even if they die. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die. Do you believe this?”

<sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord!” she replied. “I believe that you are Christ, the Son of God. You are the one we hoped would come into the world.”

Jesus said, “Everyone who lives because of faith in me will never really die.” That seems demonstrably wrong because there are a lot of people who have really died. How can it be true? Is there a way to make sense of Jesus’ words?

Some background first: The story begins in John 11.1. Lazarus, whom Jesus loved, is ill, and his sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus. Jesus dismisses the message, saying that the illness doesn’t lead to death, and it’s all for God’s glory and the glorification of God’s Son. Two days later Jesus decides to go to Bethany in Judea to “awaken” Lazarus, despite the disciples’ concern that the authorities seek to kill Jesus. When Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethany, they learn that Lazarus has already been dead for four days, and here is where we pick up the story.

You may be more familiar with the New Revised Standard Version’s wording of Jesus’ response to Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” The Contemporary English Version (CEV) tries to address the problem of how believers “never die” by rendering it as “never really die.” I don’t think that helps. Note that Jesus is not talking about someone’s immortal soul. That’s neither a Jewish nor a biblical concept. Nor is Jesus talking about an eternal life someone experiences after death. Rather, it’s clear in John’s Gospel that eternal life is something that believers experience now, in this life. Still, what does it mean to say that believers will “never really die” but will instead experience eternal life? How can this be true and not simply a word game?

We need to remember that “eternal” means not endless in time but timeless. For our eternal God, there is no past, present or future. Everything is comprehended at once. As mortals, we are temporally oriented, always bound by time, always gauging things by past, present and future. But what if we could catch a glimpse of eternity? What if we could see beyond our death, our personal end of time, when we step into an eternal existence? What if we perceived everything that was and is and will be? In that moment everything—every triumph and tragedy and mundane thing—would make sense as part of God’s amazing plan of salvation. Death would no longer be feared as a dead end but understood within the scope of all existence.

That insight is precisely what Jesus has given us in his death and resurrection, which are prefigured in the story of Lazarus. Like others who have survived near-death experiences, Lazarus must have undergone a profound change in his perspective on life. When Jesus tells the people to unbind Lazarus, it’s not just that Lazarus is freed from the grave cloths; he is freed from the bondage of knowing only temporal existence, as if he has one foot in the temporal realm and the other in eternity. As believers, we know that Jesus is (not just will be) the resurrection. Jesus is (not just will be) life. In fact, the issue is no longer “not really dying” but the promise of really living.

That’s the boundless promise we have in Christ, the Son of God!



**Mark Vitalis Hoffman is professor of biblical studies at United Lutheran Seminary, where he has taught since 2002. Prior to that he was a parish pastor for 14 years in Minnesota and North Dakota. You can read some of his writings by visiting ScrollandScreen.com.**



2022 ELCA  
YOUTH GATHERING

# boundless

GOD BEYOND MEASURE

***VIEW GATHERING RESOURCES HERE.***

Website: [elca.org/Gathering](https://elca.org/Gathering)

Facebook: [fb.com/YouthGathering](https://fb.com/YouthGathering)

Instagram: [@elcagathering](https://@elcagathering)

Twitter: [@elcagathering](https://@elcagathering)

Snapchat: [@elcagathering](https://@elcagathering)



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

theological exploration  
of daily themes

2022 ELCA YOUTH GATHERING