

# Heartfelt HEBREWS

2025 Summer Bible Reading Plan



North Carolina Synod  
ELCA

## Welcome to *Heartfelt Hebrews*, the NC Synod's 2025 Summer Bible Reading Plan.

Join this summer's synod-wide Bible reading plan: a journey through one of the most poetic, profound, and mysterious books in the New Testament. The writers—both clergy and lay—are folks from across the synod and we give thanks for their contributions to this project!

We don't know who wrote Hebrews or exactly who first heard it, but we do know it speaks powerfully into our lives today. With rich imagery, deep theological insight, and a bold reimagining of Old Testament traditions, Hebrews invites us to wonder, to wrestle, and to worship.

Whether you've read it before or are encountering it for the first time, come along to explore timeless questions about Jesus, faith, and community—together.

**HOW MIGHT YOU RESPOND?** Consider also participating in an additional option of this effort: **a creative response**. God has given human beings the ability to create. How does your reading and reflection lead you to respond? Color, paint, sculpt, build, sketch, write, compose, perform, —any medium; every ability! See the final page of this compilation for additional details. And, remember: it's a creation, not a competition!

This Summer Bible Reading Plan is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry.

**Let's listen for God's voice in the unknown and discover anew what it means to be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.**



## Introducing *Heartfelt Hebrews*

The book of Hebrews is one of the most wonderfully lyrical, theologically rich, and scripturally imaginative texts in our New Testament. But there is so much we

simply don't know about it. And looking for clues in the text itself doesn't help as much as one would think it would.

Let's start with who wrote it. Most scholars do not think Paul wrote it even though tradition says he did. The text does not name an author like Paul's other letters. Nowhere does the author identify as "Paul." Some of the ideas that Paul and Paul's students wrote about frequently come out in the text. Echoes of the Christ Hymn in Colossians (1:15–17) reverberate throughout with the idea that Jesus will sustain all things. But Hebrews' author weaves Old Testament references into the text that don't sound at all like the Paul we know. In Galatians and Romans, Paul explains gentiles' relationship to God as inevitable because of God's covenant with Abraham. The writer of Hebrews is more attuned to Moses and Aaron. If Paul didn't write it, then who did? Some have suggested Priscilla, one of Paul's followers. But really, we just don't know.

Then there's the question of who would have first read it—or heard it, since most people could not read back then. The heading in our Bibles would suggest that it was written to people whose ancestors spoke or identified with Hebrew culture. But the author writes in Greek. It's quirky Greek, but it's not quirky in the way that native Hebrew speakers would write Greek. It has a deep awareness of the Greek version of the Old Testament. This means that the first readers were probably Greek speakers with Jewish roots.

Hebrews describes Jesus as the high priest, but not at any temple known in the first century CE when the text was written. Rather Hebrews describes practices and rituals from the wilderness tabernacle in Leviticus—thousands of years earlier. Hebrews does not describe Jewish ritual or belief in its time (nor does it describe Christian ritual for that matter). If we compare the descriptions of sacrifice in Hebrews to the way Jewish writers describe first-century CE sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple, they don't match up at all. Whoever wrote Hebrews was interpreting Leviticus and its instructions for sacrifice, not describing how sacrifices happened in the readers' world. Why does this matter? Too often Hebrews is used to elevate Christians over their Jewish ancestors, to critique Judaism. We should resist this idea. When Hebrews was written, there was no established church, no Christian traditions, no fully developed theology. The writer of Hebrews was trying (much like you and me) to figure out who this Jesus guy was in the lives of the community.

Speaking of when it was written, we don't exactly know that either. Some scholars think it was written shortly after Paul's letters (~60s CE). Some scholars think the Jerusalem temple was already destroyed (~70–80s CE). Some church elders quoted from Hebrews already in the late 90s CE, so we at least know it was written before then. There is, however, no location (city, province, etc.) or significant current event mentioned in the text. That makes it difficult to determine where the first writer was or when the first readers/hearers encountered it. Most of the letters in our New Testament have something to help us identify a more accurate timeframe.

Speaking of letters, Hebrews also lacks many of the markers of an ancient letter. There is no author, no recipient, no thanksgiving, no “grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:2)—the usual way that Paul writes his letters. The last verses greet specific people like other letters, but that could have been added months, years, decades, or even centuries later when the text was copied for friends. Many scholars think Hebrews is an ancient sermon. The beautiful word-images, the repetition of sounds, the attention to parallel sentences—these are all markers of how a preacher speaks rather than how a letter writer writes.

So, with all this uncertainty, should we just skip it?! Obviously not! That would make this summer reading series very, very short. If Paul didn’t write it, does that mean it is somehow dubious? Not at all. God’s presence in and through the text does not depend on who wrote it. If we don’t know who first read it, does that mean we can’t know what it tells us about God and Jesus? Absolutely not. Scripture does not depend on any kind of scientific or historical certainty in order to speak in our unpredictable, messy, unique context today. Scripture rather depends on us, as a community of faith, encountering the living God in and through its message. Hebrews has been a gift to us precisely because it describes the mysteries of our faith in ways that assure us of God’s unseen presence (Heb 11:1), draws us into a cloud of witnesses across millennia (Heb 12:1), and gives us glimpses of Jesus as the center of God’s eternity (Heb 1:4).

### Reflect:

1. What do you know about Hebrews? What were you taught about Hebrews in Sunday school?
2. How have you found Hebrews helpful in your faith formation? What do you hope to learn through your study of Hebrews?

*God of all people, open to us your Word as we study and question, as we love and learn, as we draw on wisdom from ancestors in the faith. Give us faith-filled curiosity and curiosity-filled faith, for the sake of Jesus, our high priest. Amen.*

Katherine A. Shaner is a pastor in the ELCA and a professor at Wake Forest University School of Divinity specializing in New Testament. She lives in Winston-Salem with her family. For more than fifteen years Karl Bark, the dog-theologian, brought silliness and uncomplicated love into their home. She imagines that Karl now howls his “Holy, Holy, Holy” with the great cloud of witnesses from Hebrews 11.



## Images of Power *and* Service

So many phrases from Hebrews resonate deeply in my heart. As I encountered these first few verses of Hebrews yet again, I have to admit feeling some conflict as I felt my way through the images in this chapter.

On the one hand, the wonder, mystery, newness, giddiness of Jesus coming into the world bubbles up from deep in my soul. The images of worlds being created (v. 2), of Jesus as the image of God (v. 3), of angels exalting him (v. 4), swirl like streams of sparkling water in my heart. Twinkle lights, stardust, and angel songs connect us to beloved ancestors through whom God spoke and dazzled our imagination.

On the other hand, I feel a little off-balance when Jesus is portrayed as an aloof, off-in-the-clouds, sitting-on-a-throne, apart-from-the-world king. I don't know how to relate to this image of Jesus. It is distant. It is impersonal. It is inaccessible. Royal images, images of kingly figures, scramble my sense of Jesus's nearness, of Jesus's companionship, of the body of Christ.

Hebrews starts with familiar words that we often read during the Advent and Christmas seasons. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son..." (Heb 1:1-2a). These words are the start of an ancient sermon, perhaps one preached as God spoke to our ancestors—ancestors in Christ who were still trying to figure out who this Jesus guy is. As we read through the chapter, a clear question surfaces: Is Jesus just another messenger angel? Or is there something extra about Jesus?

The preacher answers by painting Jesus in the image of the most powerful figure known to the first readers: the Roman emperor. She quotes Psalm 45:6-7: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom." Eternity. Thrones. Scepters. Kingdoms. These are all terms of political power in the world of the Roman Empire. These terms certainly get the point across that Jesus is God's begotten one, God's son. There is power in that, for sure. Jesus is extra. But the end of the chapter suggests what might make him *extra* extra: all the messengers of God, including Jesus, "are sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Heb 1:14). While the images of imperial majesty illustrate Jesus's power, he shows that power in the way he *serves* the creation he saves.

### Reflect:

1. How does Jesus live in your imagination? What sparkles about Jesus? What draws you away from Jesus?
2. What is your image of Jesus' power? How does that image relate to you, to the church, to the world?

*Speak, God, in our imaginations. Show us Jesus in both power and service. Connect your people to each other in many and various ways. Draw us into your mystery through Christ. Amen.*

Katherine A. Shaner is a pastor in the ELCA and a professor at Wake Forest University School of Divinity specializing in New Testament. She lives in Winston-Salem with her family. For more than fifteen years Karl Bark, the dog-theologian, brought silliness and uncomplicated love into their home. She imagines that Karl now howls his "Holy, Holy, Holy" with the great cloud of witnesses from Hebrews 11.



## Signs & Wonders

*<sup>4</sup>God bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His own will.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning observed that, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with

God. But only those who see take off their shoes.” Moses took off his shoes when he encountered God at the burning bush. Not only did he realize that he was standing on holy ground, but also, he was experiencing the sacred presence of the Lord who was calling and commissioning him for service. This was just the beginning of the “signs and wonders” God would carry out in and through Moses as an instrument of God’s divine purposes.

How much greater are the “signs and wonders” evidenced in the life and ministry of Christ! In this text, the writer to the Hebrews warns believers not to ignore or neglect the words and deeds of Jesus, knowing that the object of faith is Christ himself. The miracles are signs that command attention *and* point beyond themselves to the person whose message and mission they accompany and celebrate.

Beyond the supernatural, spectacular effects of the miracles, stands the Lord who shines with far greater splendor. So, don’t get so wrapped up in the bows and ribbons of the gift that you miss the real treasure, the Giver.

Take off your shoes—and marvel and revel in who God is and all that God wants to accomplish through you.

As with Moses, God will provide everything needed for the tasks and challenges that lie ahead. The burning bush is still burning, and the Spirit is ready to gift you with holy fire for witness and service in God’s Kingdom.

### Reflect:

1. What are the signs and wonders through which God has been revealed in your life?
2. How has God spoken and acted in unmistakable ways?
3. How is God equipping you to serve God and God’s people? How have you responded?

*Lord, so touch and influence my life that I may take off my shoes in awe and wonder of who you are and who you want me to be. Amen.*

Joseph A. Miller is a retired pastor living in Salisbury. He and his wife Marcia are celebrating their Golden Wedding Anniversary and the 50th Anniversary of his ordination this summer.





## Open, Tender Hearts

*<sup>7</sup>Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "<sup>8</sup>Today, if you hear his voice, <sup>9</sup>do not harden your hearts...*

In the first two chapters, the author of the book of Hebrews sets before us the case for Jesus' supremacy. That is, before we get started on this

sermon or letter about Jesus, let's remember who Jesus is and is not. Jesus is above all things, and through him all things were created. So, you can contemplate creation, angels, and all divine and holy things, but do not lump Christ in that category. And yes, Christ is our friend, our sibling, but be careful for reverence, be sure to remember that Christ is something, someone else altogether: the Son.

In chapter three, this pattern is echoed with Moses. While Moses was a called and faithful leader, he was not the Messiah. Moses was a servant in God's house, but Jesus is the Son over God's house. (vs 6-7)

Because this same Jesus, who is above the angels and humans, even humans like Moses, saves us from sin, let us spend our energy on encouraging one another in lives of faith. Since Christ has rescued us from the power of sin, let us remind each other not to wallow in sin with hardened hearts.

Instead of allowing our hearts to harden against our neighbors, the writer of Hebrews calls us to actively strive against that. The writer knows how difficult it is, so we are invited to work on it together. We read in this chapter to encourage each other; remind others to protect their hearts from forming the calloused shell that might keep them from vulnerability.

This is the call of Christian community, right? We are a group project. On our own, our energies are spent on surviving, on making it through each day, each encounter. Together, we are more. We can protect each other, remind each other, and build the necessary scaffolding to support all our tender and open hearts.

And with tender, open hearts, we can follow Jesus into unfamiliar places with people we don't understand. With tender, open hearts, we can listen with love, hoping to understand others. With tender, open hearts, we can practice hospitality in ways we may have never considered.

A heart open to the needs of my neighbor is a worthy offering to the Son, who has set me free from sin's power.

### Reflect:

1. God has given you people who encourage you to keep your heart tender and open. Who are they? What do they say or do to encourage you? (Reminder: we do not have to know in-person those who nourish us.)
2. Imagine a day when your heart is tender and open. Is there a person or people God might call you to engage with when your heart is that way? Is there a conversation or some forgiveness in your life that needs a tender, open heart?

*O God, your heart is ever-tender and open to me. I long for a heart like yours, and yet my fears sometimes harden it. Soften my heart, Lord. Amen.*

Pastor Jennifer Shimota is a lifelong city girl loving life in the country, while she serves Coble's Lutheran Church in Julian. She is an avid gardener, but that doesn't really mean she knows what she is doing. Her dog, Eleanor Rigby, is her steady companion, ever-hopeful Jennifer will drop (sometimes intentionally) a morsel of food.



## The Rest That God Promised

The 4th chapter of Hebrews provides a detour from the familiar themes like faith and hope or the superior efficacy of Christ. This chapter provides a unique look at the importance of peace and rest. At first blush, it is surprising that the author

of Hebrews gives such priority to these two characteristics of God.

It reminds me of the little girl who just became a big sister. She ran into her new baby brother's room and was peering over the crib, asking the newborn questions. When her mom overheard, she asked what she was doing, and the little girl responded, "Since he just came from God, I am asking him what God is really like."

Good question. So many attributes come to mind, but we might overlook God's commitment to Shabbat and Shalom. I am so grateful that the author of Hebrews included this. How often have we needed those words of Jesus, "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and in Me you will find rest."

I will never forget one memorable confirmation night with some 30 teens, after just returning from the COVID-19 isolation period. I asked everyone to share what gave them stress and fear. The result was a long list of everything from pressures to measure up in school, in sports, with peers, family, and social media. In minutes we had filled the whiteboard to overflowing.

We all looked at the list as I read those familiar words of Jesus, heard now as an invitation, "Come unto me..." Then I asked, "Ok, we wrote our list of things that capture our attention, what might God's list look like?" There was a long pause until one girl shouted out, "Names!" "God's would just be names, because God cares about people...about us! That's all." Exactly.

They all agreed and discussed how our lives would be more peaceful if we too cared just for what God cares about. If we sought first God's kingdom, all else would truly come. We erased the whiteboard and wrote instead a challenge to us all, CARE FOR WHAT GOD CARES ABOUT...one another. That special night ended with us holding hands and praying for the person to the right of us. We experienced firsthand God's peace and that rest that only God can give us.

### Reflect:

1. Do you think your life might be simpler and more peaceful if you cared for what God cares for, namely one another?
2. How does this relational peace fit into the notion of seeking first God's Kingdom and of the two primary commandments to love God, ourselves, and one another?
3. How does it make you feel to know that peace (*shalom*) and rest (*sabbath*) are not only characteristics of God, but gifts God desires for us?

*Lord, we are so grateful for your faithfulness to us in so many ways. Today, we are particularly thankful for the reminder that you want to give us your peace and rest. As the Scriptures remind us, to know You is to know Your peace. Give us a heart for what You care for, that we truly can have that peace that passes human understanding. In the name of the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.*

Michael Stone is a retired Lutheran pastor who has served four churches in 38 years of ministry. He is married to Laura, his bride of 45 years, and they are blessed with two sons and two granddaughters.



## Jesus, the Great High Priest

I have always found Hebrews a difficult book to understand, perhaps because I am not a first-century Jewish follower of Jesus. For that is to whom this letter or sermon is addressed, and being Jewish, they

would have clearly understood the meaning and importance and role of a high priest.

These verses in chapters 4 and 5 describe Jesus as the Great High Priest, the one who mediates between humans and God. For that was indeed the role of the Jewish high priest: to offer sacrifices and prayers of atonement for the sins of the community as well as the sins of individuals. And those early Jewish Jesus-followers would have had a deep understanding of this.

They were, after all, people who were enduring persecution for their beliefs, both from the Romans and from orthodox Jewish believers. How tempting it must have been for them to revert back to their Jewish faith. Many may have questioned: Why follow this Jesus? When it is so difficult, even life-threatening?

Being aware of this, the writer of Hebrews, whomever that might have been, described Jesus as being both superior to them—supremely superior—and able to relate to their struggles and suffering since he, too, had struggled, suffered, and died. He was tempted, as they were tempted, to renounce it all, but had triumphed over temptation.

The hope offered to those early followers of The Way comes in chapter 4:16: “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” And for those early Jewish-Christians, help in the time of need was what they longed for, what they most desired to keep firm in their faith during those difficult days.

May it also be so for us.

### Reflect:

1. Does the presentation of Jesus as the Great High Priest, without sin, resonate with you? Bring you comfort?
2. Do you find a contradiction with the seeming need for the High Priest being an intermediary between humanity and God and the encouragement in 4:16 to “approach the throne of grace with boldness”? If so, how?

*Holy and Gracious One, May we always find comfort in knowing that you—both human and divine—understand the difficulties and temptations of human life. May we pray boldly, live boldly, love boldly, serve boldly, that by so doing we may walk the Jesus Way each and every day. Amen.*

**Linda writes:** I reside in Greensboro, and have finally fully retired, after twenty years of interim ministries following my official retirement. Now I have more time for family, friends, and writing for my own pleasure. It is quite lovely.





## How Not to Fall Away

I consulted numerous commentaries to prepare this lesson, all of which agreed with the text itself: “much to say that is hard to explain.” It reminds me of lessons I taught about English, especially poetry and theater interpretation. Students would whine they wanted something simple so

they could just “get over,” not have to strain their brains—be sluggards who do the minimum and still pass—the same as the “milk” in verse 13. But while a bowl of crushed graham crackers bathed in milk is comforting, it doesn’t lead to growth. That takes biting into real food, and chewing on it, food that is sometimes very tough.

The author of Hebrews is concerned that those he is writing to are all too happy to be content with pabulum and not move on to real, meaty food. And by being so, are at great risk of falling away—of apostasy, the rejection of all they have learned and a return to their old ways from which there is no coming back into the community of believers. He asserts that they have the basics down, but are avoiding digging deeper—that, like the seed in the parable, their roots are shallow, and they will wither and die. The ground of their hearts has been plowed, seeded, and watered, but what will their crop be? Things useful to the continued growth of them and their church and community? Or thistles and thorns, which are to be burned?

So, how does one avoid falling away, or worse, rejecting all that has been learned? It’s the very thing we want to avoid—keep studying; you must be a lifelong student. Much like Paul’s admission of having thought like a child and matured to being an adult but still seeing “dimly,” we must be perpetual students of the Word. Students of literature and poetry will remark on new insights gained upon repeated reading of a work—it unfolds slowly like a flower blossoming to reveal its beauty. So too, God’s Word unfolds as we repeatedly study it, discuss it, share it. Hebrews’ author asserts that by that study, greater things of loving work are to come for them and for us. The greatest promise of all—salvation—will be theirs if they press on toward the goal of eternal life in Christ, through dedicating themselves to the patient study of the Word. That promise is ours too, if we’re willing to do the same.

### Reflect:

1. How could you make the study of the Word more of a priority in your life? What specific actions could you take?
2. Think of a passage of the Word that you have wrestled with to understand or to apply in your life. What specific steps can you take to continue toward fuller understanding and then incorporate that understanding into your life and share it to help others understand it as well?

*Lord, your Word is a lamp unto my feet. Help me to keep that lamp blazing brightly through the continued study of your Word and bringing it to life in works of love for all those around me. When I despair that I “just don’t get it,” calm my spirit with your Spirit so that I may persevere to attain the goal of eternal life with you.*

After 43 years of teaching that included grade 4, high school, and college, as well as directing many theatre productions, the author, Doug Fox, is now retired and filling his days with assisting in multiple ways in his congregation, St. Mark’s, Lumberton.

# Heartfelt HEBREWS

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Hebrews 6:13-20 | R. Carlos Cavazos



## Is Not the LORD Your God with You?\*

*\*King David said to the leaders of Israel (1 Chronicles 22:18, NRSV).*

In my youth, much of my life was steeped in darkness as I vaingloriously sought after the vagaries of this world by attempting to excel in all I tried to do. That all

changed one night when I asked Jesus into my heart on a hillside outside Austin, Texas. It was decades even before I truly saw change in my life as I struggled with what I knew of making a living and how I would live by faith. God never gave up on me.

Today's passage offers profound lessons of faith, hope, and the reliability of God's promises characterized by God's unchanging nature, our patient endurance awaiting God's perfect timing with hope as our "sure & steadfast anchor for the soul," and with Jesus as our high priest, the first fruits of our faith (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

The passage establishes the immutable nature of God's purpose and commitment to fulfill God's promises. God reassures believers by confirming God's promise with an oath, demonstrating God's reliability and truthfulness. The passage underscores that it is impossible for God to lie. Believers can hold fast to the hope set before us.

This hope is described as a steadfast anchor for the soul, offering stability and security amidst life's trials, tribulations, and uncertainties. It leads believers into the inner sanctuary, symbolizing closeness to God and the assurance of God's presence. Pointing then to Jesus, who has entered this inner sanctuary as a forerunner on behalf of believers, we see Him as a high priest forever, following the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:3), signifying His eternal and perfect priesthood, unlike the flawed, temporal, imperfect Aaronic priesthood.

Overall, this passage reassures believers of the unwavering nature of God's promises and the hope we can confidently place in Him just as Jesus tells believers in John 14:1. It encourages patience, faith, and perseverance, using Abraham's example and the ultimate assurance found in Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Messiah.

### Reflect:

1. How can the understanding that God's promises are unchangeable and trustworthy—what that means to you, personally—help you persevere in life with faithful endurance following Abraham's example? (See Romans 4 & Galatians 3 for help.)
2. Describe what your relationship with God and loving your neighbor looks like while your soul is anchored in hope with Jesus as your high priest?
3. What concrete steps can you take this week to live out the lessons in this passage that might encourage others with the truth found in these verses?

*Holy Father, all glory, honor and praise with thanksgiving for you are faithful and true. Anchor my hope in your promises and strengthen my trust in your son, Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, who has gone before us. Amen!*

**R. Carlos Cavazos writes:** I was born in Texas to immigrant parents from Mexico, with a European/Jewish/Asian heritage. Born Roman Catholics, my two brothers and I were altar boys for many years until I joined the infamous "None" denomination during which I turned to Jesus and then became Lutheran. I have a Master's Degree in the Social Sciences and retired as an Associate Professor in Sociology decades ago. Not surprisingly, my 4-year Letterman's Jacket in Scholarship, did not help much in Academia..



## God Is Calling

How do we hear God's voice when God calls us? Would we even recognize it as God speaking to us? We have so many voices coming at us daily, all claiming to be "the Voice of God."

"God wants you to donate your life savings to support this ministry."

"God wants America to be great again."

"God wants..."

The truth is that what these voices say God wants is what they want, and it usually has little to do with God. Yet people listen to these voices and follow without question, because someone they believe is trustworthy said this particular action is what God wants. Because I said so, that's why. Because I said so, and I am God's messenger.

And who are these people, preaching at us about what they want us to believe God wants? Who are these self-appointed authorities, who claim they know the word and will of God?

I think they're like the Old Testament priests. The role of priests was an important one to the Israelites. They represented the people, intervening before God and offering sacrifices to atone for the people's sins. But they were not themselves without sin. They were flawed. Their authority was a human construct. The people didn't realize that the guys who were supposed to be their representatives to God were committing the same sins they were. They trusted the priests. And when a priest died, his work as mediator would cease.

Melchizedek was not a priest of Israel, as that nation did not exist yet. He was not a priest because he was born into it. He was a priest because God called him to service. But he was not the Son of God.

Only Jesus is.

Jesus is both priest and king. He is eternal, while the traditional priesthood was not. Jesus did not appoint himself a high priest. He was, however, appointed by God. He is our mediator, but also our sacrifice. Death does not interrupt His work. Resurrection means that Jesus remains our eternal High Priest.

I don't know how to silence all the racket of people who claim to be God's voice on their own authority. I just don't listen to them.

And I wait for the voice I trust.

### Reflect:

1. Whose voice do you trust?
2. How do we know when God is calling us?

*Dear God, you speak to us at times, in ways, and in places that we don't expect—and sometimes miss—in this noisy, distracted world. At those times, gently put your hand on our shoulder and whisper our names, that we might listen. In your name, Amen.*

A happily retired middle school teacher, Julie Arndt is a fan of all things literary, "Star Trek," Harry Potter, the Beatles, and country music. She enjoys road trips with her husband, Robert, a reference librarian at the University of North Carolina-Pembroke. Julie and Robert are members of St. Mark's, Lumberton, where both are active members. Julie produces the weekly newsletter and a monthly newsletter for the Sandhills conference of NC WELCA.



## A New Covenant

The author continues his argument that Christ is the great High Priest. Earthly priests offer gifts and sacrifices for the sins of the people according to the law. Christ, who sits at the right hand

of God, does not need to be a priest on earth, since there are priests on earth to offer sacrifices. Christ did offer a sacrifice, himself. This once-for-all sacrifice is not according to the law but is superior to the old offerings.

Christ's sacrifice follows the pattern established by God and Moses on Mt. Sinai; however, a new covenant was needed because the old covenant was inadequate. In the old covenant, God said, "I will be your God, and you will be my people, I will care for you, and you will follow my commandments." Both the people of Israel and the people of Judah did not obey the commandments, and so, a new covenant was needed.

The author gives a long quote from Jeremiah in which Jeremiah foretells the coming of the new covenant. According to Jeremiah, the law will be within the hearts of the people. The new covenant will not do away with sin and the need for forgiveness. The people will experience this within themselves. In the new covenant, God will continue to be their God, and they will be God's people. The law will not be done away with; God will be merciful and not remember their sins. Mercy and forgiveness of sins will be the marks of the new covenant.

Jeremiah's words were good news to the people in exile. The fulfillment of this prophecy is good news for us.

### Reflect:

1. Lutherans do not have priests. Does this passage support that? Explain.
2. God has a new covenant with us. Are we upholding our end of the contract? Explain.

*Lord Jesus, we thank you for your eternal sacrifice and the new covenant that it brought. Amen.*

Judy Schlegel has been a physical therapist, a United Methodist pastor, a Legal Services attorney, a college instructor, and a reader. I do not know what I will be when I grow up.





## The Lice and Rules for Living

My husband and I were fostering four siblings. The youngest was just 11 months. When she came to us, she had lice, and we had to go through the tedious process of removing the lice in her fine, blond hair. It was traumatizing for the child and for us.

The mom had weekly visits with her children. Every time we got the child back, she had lice again, because Mom had lice, and they would jump to the baby she was holding. And we would go through the tedious process again.

Finally, the Department of Social Services asked the judge to order the mom to get treated and checked by the health department before she could see the children again. She never saw her children again and gave them up for adoption.

I thought of this story as I read today's passage. In the Old Testament covenant, people were under the law. They were required by law to do offerings of sheep and other animals so that blood would cleanse them. But our passage in Hebrews tells us that these offerings only cleansed the outside of people, not the inside. The covenant of the Old Testament demonstrated that "the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed." People did not have a way directly to God—only the high priests had this opportunity.

But now, we are SO blessed. Christ is our high priest, and we have ready access to him at all times, because he shed his blood for us. That means that Jesus can cleanse us inside with forgiveness, no matter what we do. Jesus cleanses us completely with his own blood to "cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so we may serve the living God." All we have to do is confess and sincerely ask for forgiveness.

The rest of the story? The four children were actually adopted together by an incredibly loving family that already had five children. The family had a large church family, and they helped the adoptive family with everything. God brings us this happy ending in his incredible blessing of his blood. Praise to our living God!

### Reflect:

1. What do you need to consider inside yourself that you need forgiveness for? Have you confessed it and asked for forgiveness?
2. There is NO sin too great to be forgiven. What are you holding inside from your past that you need to consider asking forgiveness for?

*Blessed Jesus, thank you for the gift of your son to cleanse us inside, to make our souls clean. Forgive us our sins, both things we have done, and things we have left undone. Thank you for your forgiveness. You have set us free! Amen.*

Peggy Terhune is a lifelong Lutheran who lives in NC and is the CEO of Monarch ([www.monarchnc.org](http://www.monarchnc.org)). For fun, she teaches a leadership class at Duke University, and a mental health course at Wingate University. She and her husband Bob have seven grown children (two adopted as teens), 10 grandchildren, and fostered many children for over 20 years. She is also a lay preacher for the NC synod and studying to become qualified as a SAM. For fun, she knits, reads, and travels extensively, having been to over 35 countries.





## In Anxious Times

<https://bit.ly/Hebrews-Reading-11>  
*Today's reading is actually a podcast.*  
*Type the link above in*  
*your browser.*  
*Or use this QR code:*



If you're unable to listen,  
the transcript is below.

Sometimes when you read some of the epistles or letters in the New Testament, it can feel like reading other people's mail. You can study about their context, but we're so far removed from the original audience, it gets tricky.

We don't know a lot about this book. It's not a letter or an epistle. Paul didn't write it. We have no idea who did. In the words of Origen, an early Church father: Only God knows.

Hebrews is, more than anything else, an exhortation. It's a sermon. And it was written during an anxious time. It's an anxious text.

Are we anxious now?

We might not have the same anxieties today, but clearly, we have them.

One of the things people seek in alleviating anxieties is how to get rid of them, but that never has to mean giving up your faith.

One of the telltale signs of the book of Hebrews is repetition. The author repeats themselves a million times, which begs the question: In anxious times, what are you repeating to yourself?

In anxious times, our attention spans are so caught up in that dis-ease that we may need to hear things again and again and again.

Hebrews continually paints a picture of priests doing the same thing over and over again without accomplishing anything. Christ did it once, and it was accomplished for all times and all places. Today, we also have religious leaders who are going through similar motions while nothing substantial is happening—no actual communal liberation or forgiveness of sins takes place within the community. It's just a shell.

One of the central questions of this part of Hebrews is: what are you doing by God?

What are we doing by God? And in our doing, are we following Jesus or are we following the talking heads?

There are other questions to ask.

Where do the stories we tell ourselves come from? Where does our authority come from? What do we do in anxious times? What do we say to ourselves in anxious times? Where is our attention drawn in anxious times? What is captivating us? (At that same time: what is grounding us?)

The church can be a good laboratory for these questions—if we are honest enough to ask them, to name the deep anxiety present all around us. *(continued...)*

## Reflect:

1. How does the church practice truth-telling?
2. How does it embody being a beloved community?

*Holy God, guide us through the anxieties of this world with a strong and soft hand. Give to us your peace, a peace beyond human comprehension. May we be attentive to the ways in which you are still speaking to us, and alert to the ways you still operate in our world. May we do all these things in the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus.*

Pastors Tim Brown, Tuhina Rasche, and Jason Chesnut are pastors of Anam Cara (“soul friend” in Gaelic) is a digital-first mission start in the North Carolina Synod of the ELCA.

TIM BROWN is a pastor in the ELCA. He’s deeply steeped in his Celtic roots and finds beautiful symmetry between ancient spiritual practices across the world that focus on peace, grace, and love (you know, the things Jesus practiced). He blogs regularly at [Reluctantxtian.com](http://Reluctantxtian.com), has a weird obsession for learning about the saints of the church (both official and unofficial), and is a writer at heart (and, hopefully, by profession).

TUHINA VERMA RASCHE is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. She is in a constant search for the holy in the Word, written words, and words turned to art. When asked if she can reconcile her Hindu faith with her Jesus-following present, she wonders why is there an automatic reflex to reconcile? She dreams of the divine in donuts.

JASON CHESNUT is (somehow still) ordained in the ELCA, and divides his time between preaching, filming, reading, and writing. He also watches a lot of movies. His company, ANKOSfilms, is committed to (a) (n)ew (k)ind (o)f (s)torytelling, and films through a lens of liberation, equity, and justice. He lives as close as possible to mountains, and in an alternate timeline would be a wildlife photographer.



## A Trust-Based God

Over the past couple of decades, there has been a shift from fear-based parenting to trust-based parenting. Fear-based lists consequences first, hoping that with a threat, someone will do the right thing, but it inevitably creates doubt and does not allow children to

explore and cultivate their sense of self. Trust-based indicates that through kindness, security, and safety, kids will follow through on the trust they experience and do good. Trust-based begins to give the child freedom to explore, to trust their instincts, and learn from their mistakes. Now I am not a parent, so I don't know the ins and outs of making parenting decisions. But this is what the Gospel does: it offers us a trust-based model, showing us that love motivates us to pursue goodness. Any of our goodness that we do comes out of the relationship of trust and security that is established from the love of God.

This world is filled with things to fear, in the midst of that, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross offers us hope because we have experienced such a powerful demonstration of love, enabling us to persist in our weary world, even in the face of great trials (v. 23-24). That sacrifice allows us to live a life of faith and love rather than one of fear and control.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we hear of their fear, as the suffering they have experienced is experienced as insults, affliction, and theft (v. 33-34). This fear-based reality invites them to recount the punishments that will be put on those who insulted and mocked Jesus, judgment, and vengeance. The telling of consequences is a natural reaction we have when we find ourselves in fear. I find myself hoping and longing for consequences to befall people today who bring about wickedness and cause harm to those whom I care about.

But the Gospel points us to something more profound. Hebrews invites us all to remember the good news of Jesus, which invites us to receive love and respond by giving love. The churches we hear of were motivated to have compassion on those who hurt them, visiting them in prison and "cheerfully accepting" those who stole from them (v. 34-35).

We are called not to shrink back to the world of fear but to pursue the boldness God's love brings (v. 35). As we experience this trust-based parenting, we respond by doing good and pursuing righteousness, rather than giving threats and bringing more fear to the world. We are not left alone; the Holy Spirit guides us and gives us each other to persist in bringing more love and life into our world.

### Reflect:

1. How does you see fear seep into your life, and what does it do to you?
2. What are ways you can invite trust? How do you see God's love in your life today?

*Center yourself and take a few deep breaths, notice the Spirit of God centering you in each inhale and exhale. Holy One, breathe life and peace into our lives. Guide us to see your love each and every day and to give that love in return, Amen.*

Rachel Geddes, who currently lives in Washington, DC, and serves on internship at Christ Lutheran Church, there. They are a recently-approved candidate for ordination into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. She loves days adventuring in mountains, or more often small hills in local parks, making art with friends, gardening, exploring museums, and going on neighborhood walks with her wife and dog.



## When You Don't Know Where to Go...Take the First Step in Trust

In the 11th chapter of Hebrews, we are introduced to a list of biblical heroes and heroines who demonstrated great faith despite challenges, limitations, and impossibilities. The

writer of Hebrews lists the faithful actions of individuals who lived and learned to fully entrust themselves to the faithfulness of God. The writer highlights their perseverance, hope, and irrational confidence in the sovereignty of God. These are our cloud of witnesses. Our forerunners. Our examples of great faith. Abraham stands out with multiple instances of great faith recorded in the chapter. The act of faith by Abraham that stands out for me and will serve as our anchor for this devotional is verse eight.

*<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going.*

**What kind of faith is required to respond to a sure call to go and not know where you are going?**

**How can we have certainty that there is a God-given inheritance, plan, and place for us and yet see no probabilities of anything different than what is in front of us?**

I think Abraham would remind us that our response to the call of God and our certainty of sovereignty are not matters of sight nor circumstance. It is not what we see, it is in whom we have believed. It is not according to our need for immediate answers, but according to our ability to entrust ourselves wholly to a faithful God. Abraham's first steps from his father's house were in grace and trust. His second steps were according to the direction of God. When we don't know where to go or what to do, we can follow Abraham's example. Let's take the first step in trust.

### Reflect:

See the questions in bold in the text of the devotion.

*Dear holy, triune God, thank you for seeking us through the Holy Spirit, Your word and prayer. When we listen, you bring forgiveness, love, and hope to us and end bonds of our human condition that would lead us on a path away from you. Help us to listen and use your Word as a foundation for our lives every day. In Your holy and precious name, we pray. Amen and Amen.*

The Rev. Dr. Shanitria Cuthbertson is the pastor of Emmaus Church in Kannapolis, NC. She loves coffee, books, and sports.



## God Disciplines God's Children

Throughout my life, my father would test me with small battles of wits or brawn. Being a math teacher, he loved to teach me new math formulas and equations far beyond my grade level on car rides home. I would often struggle with these little

math lessons, and he would always respond the same way: "Do not let this defeat you." Eventually, these lessons turned into him giving me a task, me thinking I couldn't do it, and him repeating this phrase. And every single time, I would complain a little bit, call him unfair, say it was impossible. Yet, he continued to tell me, "Do not let this defeat you," and every time I succeeded when I thought success was impossible.

This passage reminded me of all those little challenges my father gave me. It is so easy to quit when things get hard. It is human nature to throw in the towel at even the slightest stumble. Similarly, faith is put to the test in this way as well.

I have heard many stories of these challenges with faith. Most of these challenges arise from simple questions. From what I've heard, these questions end one of two ways: the person struggles to cope with the answer, yet their faith grows stronger because of it, or they are shamed for asking questions, and they turn away from faith altogether. These questions, these doubts, test the endurance, the perseverance of faith.

The passage states, "If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate." These questions, these tests of faith, are normal, in fact, they are expected. God knows and understands that the hardships we go through and the questions that stem from them are to be expected. God puts us through these hardships and hard questions so that we may, in turn, work to grow closer to God in faith. Sometimes the doubts, the struggles, the challenges get to be too much, sometimes we walk away from belief. Yet, God is there even through these times. God shows God's love through this discipline, as God knows this is what will draw us closer to God.

The tests of faith are never-ending. No matter what, there will always be challenges, it will always feel easier to settle, to quit trying. During these times, it is important to remember that peace will come to those who endure, who persevere.

### Reflect:

1. When is a time you remember struggling with your faith?
2. How did you overcome this?

*Dear God, thank you for teaching us about a love that endures. Help us to remember this as we struggle through our hardships. Be there with us through these difficult times and help us to see you at the finish line. Amen.*

Hannah Covell is currently a high school senior who attends Morning Star Lutheran Church in Matthews, NC. She has worked with the synod on the LYO Board for the past two years and plans to continue her faith journey with the campus ministry that serves NC State.





## Renewing Fires and Destructive Burns

A few months ago, the entire state of North Carolina was under a state-mandated burn ban. For places like Camp Agapé in the Sandhills, this meant that our retreat groups and campers could not have campfires. No singing around the flames, no

s'mores, no charred hot dogs or marshmallows, no fire-warmed faces or smokey clothes. After the state ban was lifted, Agapé remained under a fire ban for a couple more weeks. It was one thing for someone to tell us that it was safe to have a campfire, but for those of us who hike the woods daily, we knew that the ground cover was brittle and dry, ideal for catching fire and spreading quickly through our beloved woods.

In this section of Hebrews, I think we are called to similar noticing and actions. We are warned of acting rashly or selfishly without considering the larger consequences of our piety without faith. Following the letter of the law without the spirit of the gospel is cause for concern and consequences. When God shakes the heavens and earth, all that remains is what is true, and good, and necessary. The brittle and dry and dead is blown away, and the lushness of life lived with God's grace remains.

The fires that burn naturally in our woods and forests have a purpose. They renew the earth, clear away what is dead and dry, cleanse the forests of what is not necessary for life, and create space for new life to flourish. But more often, the fires that rage and destroy are caused by our own carelessness or impulsiveness. Or just as often, by our own fear of what is painful but needed, fires to cleanse and take away the rubble and leave the living.

It's God's wisdom that shakes the heavens and the earth, but it is our obedience and our cautious and brave natures that choose what to burn away from our lives of faith and grace. This is not a gentle or comforting process, but we do not do it alone. In the burning and shaking, there is God. There is God who is steadfast and loving, fierce and bold, present here on earth and in heaven, bringing us to truth and love even though we crowd our thoughts and sanctuaries with the dry and brittle. God comes again and again to show us what is real and necessary for life everlasting.

### Reflect:

1. When has your faith been subject to a fire? When did you have to lose a part of your belief system in order to become more faithful?
2. Where have you felt God when life has been shaken?

*Loving and present God, when our faith is shaken, you are there. When fires burn to destroy or to cleanse, you are there. Keep us mindful of your presence and give us both courage and caution to live as you would have us live—to love, to serve, and to respond to all suffering with mercy and hope. Amen.*

The Rev. Heather Bachelder is the interim executive director of Agapé + Kure Beach Ministries based in Fuquay-Varina. She divides her time via highway 64 between F-V and Winston-Salem where she lives with her spouse, Aaron and their two dogs, Fred and Xenakis, now that their daughters have taken up lives in New York City. Heather likes to avoid fires of all kinds and lives a life that is both cautious and chaotic.



## Keeping it Simple & Looking Towards the Future

It's easy to get bogged down by all the negative news we see on our screens daily, especially in the U.S. right now. There's a lot of evil in the world. When I start feeling

hopeless about the world around me, I turn to Bible passages like Hebrews 13:1-19: a never-ending source of grace, hope, and love that God has for God's people. In his closing message to the Hebrews, St. Paul encourages them to focus on the simple things they can do to live in Christ. He instructs them to love "one another as brothers and sisters," "show hospitality to strangers," and "be content with what you have." Paul also warns against being "carried away by strange teachings." There's a lot of noise that can cloud our belief—lots of strange opinions and all sorts of headlines everywhere we turn. Focusing on loving and serving our neighbors and ourselves allows us to live simply in the way Jesus did. I've found that focusing on these simple things, while it doesn't solve everything, helps keep me closer to Christ and live a more intentional and fulfilling life.

It is certainly harder to get bogged down by the news when we remember that this isn't the end. Something greater is coming, and our work to live simply and love others is not in vain. In verses 13-14, Paul writes, "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace [Christ] bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." Governments of this world may not be an "enduring city," but Paul reminds us that we can have confidence living our Christ's simple yet radical love because this is not the end. There is a glorious kingdom coming in which all will live in love, justice, and peace. What better confidence to have than that! Thus, while we focus on living simply in Christ's love, we can also encourage each other about what is to come. Despite the headlines and the noise, we can live together in trust and hope, patiently awaiting the day Jesus comes.

### Reflect:

1. Do you have a favorite Bible verse that you turn to when you feel overwhelmed or despairing?
2. What's something you can do to live simply, for yourself and for your neighbors?

*Loving God, you remind us to take it back to the basics. Help us to continually love & support one another in love, live in the present moment, and remind us of your glory to come. Sustain our hope and faith in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Ainsley is a born-and-raised Lutheran church nerd who enjoys theatre and serving her community inside and outside of church. A recent alumna of Meredith College, she's happily living in Raleigh, NC, working in theatre and educational fundraising. When she visits home, she enjoys worshipping at Christ Lutheran Church in Charlotte with her family.



## Hebrews Benediction

If “benediction” means the speaking of a blessing at the conclusion of a religious service, then this seems surely fitting for me as I reflect on this—in many ways—mysterious letter to the Hebrews. We don’t know who wrote it, though with all of its Old Testament quotations, we can glean

that it was meant for early Christians with a Jewish background, or “Hebrews.” Which Hebrews who lived where we don’t know, nor does it really matter, as the message is clear that Jesus is superior to all of the revered holy ones of the Hebrew scripture—greater than prophets, priests, even than angels! The book seems to invite devout Christians of Jewish heritage to think of the most devout and Godly beings they can imagine and then to know that Jesus is greater than all of these put together! There is also the familiar New Testament encouragement for those being persecuted for the faith to hang in there with this all-powerful Jesus.

While you’re reading this, I’m in my last week on the territory of the NC Synod as bishop, and we’re looking forward to our new bishop (whose identity as of this writing is yet to be determined), so this Hebrews closing section or benediction seems particularly poignant for me. Next week we’ll be at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly (July 28-August 2) electing a new secretary and presiding bishop and voting on all sorts of other important matters, but I will pass the bishop’s cross there unceremoniously (the ceremony part will come November 15!) to the new bishop, even as Hebrews commends us all to keep the faith.

Our reading today contains a blessing that is directed to candidates at their ordination service, “May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ....” You know where else this is read within our liturgies? At the graveside committal service. Talk about your benediction in the sense of last words! In the meantime, I leave you with verse 23 of chapter 13. “I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released.”

### Reflect:

1. What blessing or benediction gives (or would bring you) the most comfort? To whom might God be calling you to speak a blessing/benediction?
2. The book of Hebrews makes a sustained argument that Jesus is “superior to” any previous stalwart of the faith we can name. But what does that superiority look like for Jesus, and how is it different than our usual assumptions of “superior?”

*Gracious God, who in great love sends us Jesus as the center of how to live this life and in giving hope and promise for the next life, give us the grace to live like Jesus in manifesting greatness by including, serving, forgiving, and loving others. Amen.*

Tim is about to be a former church bureaucrat whose wife knows that she loves him but is about to find out with him at home if she likes him.

# How will you respond?

## Create!

Come along on an artistic journey of response by creating your own *visio divina* or *audio divina* of one or more of the daily devotions.

The God of creation has made us beings with the capacity for creation. How does your reading and reflection lead you to respond? Color, paint, sculpt, build, sketch, compose (prose, poetry, music)—any medium; every ability!

## Share!

- **Share in your congregation.** Gather and showcase artistic responses from all ages: perhaps as a narthex display or bulletin board!
- **Share with the world.** Post your creative response on Facebook or Instagram. Please tag your post #2024GenesisCreations @ncsynod
- **Complete your creation and share by Wednesday, September 4.** Remember: it's a creation, not a competition!