



# NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA SYNOD

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. CHRISTOPHER deFOREST  
Bishop

Dearly Beloved of God,

Ash Wednesday 2026

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We live in a complex world. Often confusing. Frustrating. Heart-breaking. Full of conflict, conspiracy, catastrophe. It can be hard to look at. Harder still, to understand. "It's complicated," we say. It is. Human sin grows best away from the light, like twisted roots underground. Our histories are often hidden, and the hurts and the harms, go way back. It can become so hard we just can't keep looking. So hard, we can't keep doing, can't keep going on like this. We're exhausted, we're overwhelmed – it's all too much.

We long for easier days in the past. Easier answers for the future. But there are no easy answers. I'm sorry. That's the truth. And the further truth is, there were probably no "easier days." Not for all of us. Throughout history, rarely has the story turned out well for the folks who are not in power, who have limited resources and limited access to the basics of life, liberty, justice, and peace.

Even for us, who believe in and who seek to follow Jesus – the answers are not easy. It is not easy, to live in this world today or any day, even **among God's faithful people** – as we know we don't always agree on all topics and directions. It is not easy **to hear the word of God** and go out to **proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed** – to love all our neighbors, to welcome the stranger, to give all we can to others, to lay down our lives for our friends and our enemies. It is not easy to **serve ALL people**, not just those we know and like, **following the example of Jesus**. It is not easy, **to strive for justice and peace in all the earth**.

No, it is not easy, but – that's what we're signed up for. At some point in our past, some disciple in our lives – our parents, grandparents – brought us to be baptized. Just like Jesus commanded, in the Great Commission, Matthew 28: **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you**.

Feel free to go find the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* page 201, or the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* page 237. At the top of both pages, you'll find the promises made – by ourselves or through others – in our baptism:

1. To live among God's faithful people,
2. to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,
3. to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
4. to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
5. and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

We hear these words, not just at baptism. We hear them when confirmands are confirmed, or when church officers are installed, or on those other special occasions when we affirm our baptisms. We are called in those moments, to affirm those promises by answering this question: ***“Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism?”***

This is the question. I invite you to consider it again with me. And consider it together: we as leaders, we as congregations, we as the Northeastern PA Synod, and we as the ELCA. Let us consider it, especially now, as we enter into this season of Lent.

“Let there be peace on earth...” We all know the song, and we know how it goes next: “...and let it begin with me...” So I’ll start. As a bishop, I think most people assume I have more power than I really do. But my authority and options are quite limited. Congregations have a great deal of latitude and control over their own actions and directions, according to our constitutions and by-laws. And this is good and right.

I am granted a different level of authority with our rostered ministers (ordained deacons and pastors) and our licensed lay ministers. So as their bishop, how can I be more helpful to them, as they seek to help and guide you in these complex, difficult times?

First: I can answer the question with simple response: ***“I ask God to help and guide me.”***

Second: I can center myself in Christ, by asking: “How can we love like Jesus, heal like Jesus, and engage like Jesus?” These three values provide me a simple help and guide, as I consider how I can help and guide our rostered and licensed lay ministers.

So to them – to you, our rostered ministers and licensed lay ministers – let me take those five baptismal promises, and these three values, and make these commitments to you:

- If you are preaching according to the word of God, and you are proclaiming the good news of God in Christ – even if that word is hard to say or hard to hear – if it is loving, healing, and engaging like Jesus – as your bishop, I fully support you.
- If you are writing or speaking in other ways that also proclaim the good news; and you are advocating or showing care and support that seeks the good of all people, but especially those who are not being heard, or whose lives or livelihoods are in jeopardy – if this is loving, healing, and engaging like Jesus – I will stand with you.
- If you offer service to the downtrodden or oppressed, or engage in peaceful demonstration alongside those who are speaking out against or experiencing injustice, suffering, silencing, or hurt – if doing this is loving, healing, and engaging like Jesus – I will back you up and have your back.

This is what I can do, as a bishop, to answer the call of Jesus in these difficult days. I invite all of us who work alongside our pastors, deacons, and licensed lay ministers, to encourage them and support them in similar ways, as they seek to help and guide you, in your own baptismal callings.

To be a disciple of Jesus, is never going to be easy. But it can be simple, in a way that cuts through the complications of lies, deceptions, gaslighting – someone always trying to sell you something or get you to be afraid, so they can take more from you, even your very soul.

Jesus, instead, is inviting us, to take the “more excellent way,” – not to take it easy, but to take it simple. ***Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.***

And what has he commanded us? That’s right. **Love one another.** [John 15:12] That’s not easy. But it is – just that simple. And we do it, by following Jesus. As we say here in Northeastern Pennsylvania as synod together: we strive to love like Jesus, heal like Jesus, and engage like Jesus.

Keep it just that simple. Weigh everything we do, as a disciple, as a congregation, as a synod and a church, as a citizen, as a human being, as a parent or child, as a baptized child of the living God – all our actions and vocations, in the light of Christ’s simple command.

When you go online, when you watch the news, when you hear or see something you can’t comprehend or stomach, when someone says or does something harmful to you or your neighbor, when you are trying to decide what to do next – keep it simple. Come to worship, and find those words on page 201 LBW or 237 ELW. Take a Bible, and find the last paragraph of Matthew’s Gospel. And remember three simple words: Love, Heal, Engage like Jesus.

And you know what? I can promise you – together, we will find the simple, not easy, but simple ways to “GO, therefore” as Jesus says. How do I know this? Because of the one who goes with us, and the one who goes before us, and promises us this: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... So remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [Matthew 28]

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Christopher deForest

Bishop, Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA