

# Meeting God in the ruins

*A devotional for disaster volunteers*



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

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Before I go

# BEFORE YOU GO

“Meeting God in the Ruins” is a spiritual resource for Lutheran Disaster Response volunteers. It includes 24 devotions for you to use as you prepare to head out, as you work on-site, and when you return home.

You may read and respond to the devotions on your own or with your group. We encourage you to use the devotions, Bible readings, meditations, prayers and to keep a separate journal to help you reflect on your experience. We encourage you to keep a journal of your thoughts.

If you are volunteering with a group, you may turn to “Meeting God in the Ruins” when the group gathers to begin the day’s work or to reflect at night. The booklet offers a number of possibilities.

- Use the daily reflection questions as a basis for broader group reflection.
- Invite group members to share, as they are willing, what they did, what they are thinking and feeling and where they see God at work.
- Conclude group discussions with devotional prayers.

You will notice several themes running throughout the devotions: hope, servanthood, justice, building connections and maintaining relationships. As you encounter these themes, remember to reflect and ask:

- What am I thinking and feeling as I prepare for the work I will be doing?
- Where have I seen God at work in the ruins?
- What have I received from this experience and how have I been changed?

## Devotion 1.1

# HERE I AM LORD!

*EXODUS 3:1-12* When the Lord saw that [Moses] had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” (v. 4)

I feel called. Something like the voice of God is stirring in me. I have heard the stories of people’s pains, troubles and desperation. They need someone to care about them, someone like me. There must be something I can do to help, even if I only clean up or cook. My thoughts are occupied with the decision to go help. Repeatedly I ask myself, should I? What can I expect? Am I strong enough?

Then I realize that with God’s help, I can do this. God heard the misery of God’s people in Egypt. Moses was hesitant, because he thought Pharaoh and the people might not listen to him. Sometimes I feel scared, too. Now God is calling me to listen to the cries of those who are miserable in my own day.

The work may not be easy. Like Moses, I’m not perfect, but I can love and serve. God has given me gifts to share. God will give me the will and commitment to do the hard work that lies ahead. With God’s help, I can sacrifice my own comforts and time to serve someone else.

I can hear God calling me in the pictures and stories of the people who are suffering. God’s burning bush is glowing before me: “Here I am, Lord. Send me.”

Prepare me, Lord, for what lies ahead. Give me the strength and dedication that I will need in order to serve others unselfishly. Give me the energy I will need to follow through with the task. Give me strength to face my assignment, and put before me people who will support me. Open my ears and eyes and heart, so that I can sustain others and enable them to recover from their tragedy. Bless those who are suffering and give them hope, in Jesus’ name. Amen

## STANDING ON HOLY GROUND

*EXODUS 3:1-5* “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (v. 5)

I can’t really picture what I will face as I go on this mission to help others. I’ve been told that the destruction will be monumental. What can that mean? How will I react? Will I be able to handle it? What about the people? Will they resent my coming? Will my sympathy for them be helpful and appropriate – or paralyzing and insulting?

I have so many questions, and all this in a strange place. Will I feel like the psalmist who wept, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Do I have anything to offer? Will I be an instrument of hope and help? I am hesitant, yet eager.

Moses had this experience of doubt. Attracted to the burning bush and wanting to be God’s servant, he was nonetheless hesitant. God was calling him to do things he was not sure he could do. On God’s behalf and for the benefit of others, he was called to confront pain and oppression. But as he stood before the challenge, God reminded him, “... the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” When God comes to us, no matter where, we are on holy ground.

God has promised that the Spirit is with us at all times and in all places. God will bless what we do and give strength and hope to those we serve. I can go forward, not knowing where I go or what I will face, but knowing only that with God at my side in the destruction and rubble, I will stand on holy ground.

You have come to me, O God. You are sending me to meet you in a new place. May my words, actions and thoughts honor you as I approach this holy ground. Amen

## REFLECTING ON MY HOPES

What am I thinking and feeling as I prepare for the disaster response work I will be doing?

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# The ruins



Photo by Steven Zumwalt/FEMA

## Devotion 2.1

# GETTING STARTED

*PSALM 63:1-8 You have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. (v. 7)*

Traveling is interesting, but I'm tired. It's hard work carrying all that stuff, and finding my way took concentration and effort. I'm sure there's some organization to things, but I haven't figured it out yet. I guess I'll just have to ask questions.

Things are such a mess, and there's so much to do! It's hard to wait to get assignments. I'm excited and afraid I won't sleep much tonight. My mind is spinning with ideas and questions and the sheer surprise of all that surrounds me. I'm overwhelmed! I'm wound tight with eagerness and excitement. Maybe I can find someone to talk with or some way to help for a while. Or maybe what I need most is some quiet time by myself, time to think about what's going on. Perhaps I can learn by watching the people who have been here longer than I have.

I won't be much use if I'm in a dither. Maybe I'd better start simply. I'll find my place and unpack and try to create some order in my little corner. Everything around me is pretty chaotic, but I can create an island of peace in the midst of it. I can pray for a sense of calm and direction.

I'm so glad to be here. I'm still sort of scared, but I feel needed. There's so much to do, and I want to get started!

Thank you for this call to care about others, loving God. There aren't many times in life when I can feel this in touch with you and your mission for my life. Thank you for safe travel and your protection, God. Slow me down. Lead me and bless me in the watches of the night. Help me understand why I have come and how I should proceed in the days ahead. Amen

## Devotion 2.2

# A SATISFYING DAY

*PSALM 118:24-25 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (v. 24)*

This has been a satisfying day. We worked hard. I can already feel that I'm going to have some aches in the morning. I'm dirty and sore, but I'm glad I came.

It's frustrating not to know exactly what to do or how to help. I can't figure out if I'm supposed to do some specific job that's meant for me. Or if I'm here just to pitch in where I'm asked, even if I'm not very good at it. I am thankful for the people with experience.

I haven't had time to think much today. One task led to another, and we only had a few minutes for eating. Everything is down to basics: working, eating, sleeping, washing up when we can, staying dry and dealing with the power of nature.

People seem very grateful that we've come. I'm amazed by how much they've had to endure. Where do they get the strength? They're exhausted, and I wonder what they are thinking and feeling. It's hard to know what to talk about with them. Maybe the best choice is just to help, and if they want to talk, they will. At least our presence will remind them that they're not alone.

I've never had to comprehend so many things and try to put them into perspective all at once.

You have created me and given me each day that I live. Thank you, God, for the satisfaction that comes with the effort of serving others. Heal my physical strains, and give me a growing perspective on the meaning of this experience. Give me patience and your assurance that every day is a gift from you. Amen

## Devotion 2.3

# SMALL BEAUTIES

*MATTHEW 8:18-20 "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (v. 20)*

My heart and body ache. I've worked hard, and all I can see is how much there is left to do. It seems like we'll never finish. It's not just the work, though. I have an uncomfortable bed. I'm extremely tired. I'm longing for a normal meal at a nice clean table.

My enthusiasm is disappearing, and I feel miserable and afraid. What if I can't cut it? Do I have to put up a front; pretend I have a positive attitude and high energy? I just don't feel it.

I never realized how grateful I am for simple, beautiful things. I'd love to see a flower garden or even just a thriving, blooming plant. I miss the familiarity of my neighborhood, a hose sprinkling fresh water, the way the sun sets out the west window, the kid down the block bouncing his basketball. I feel estranged, like a wanderer without a home. I hardly noticed the sky today.

That's it! The sky here is the sky of my home. I may not find a flower garden in this disastrous situation, but I can look for small beauties.

Jesus understands what I'm going through. He sounds wistful as he says, "... the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus understands that I feel out of place and lonely. He's with me in this struggle, and with his support I can continue. I will be able to do this.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** What do you turn to when you seek comfort? What comforts do you miss? What are you glad to take a break from?

Loving savior, you have known the anguish of feeling estranged from friends and family and from life. Walk alongside me, giving me hope that tomorrow can be better. Help me see the beauty that presents itself to me. Give me patience as I accustom myself to new surroundings. Help me feel at home, even here. Amen



## Devotion 2.4

# ...IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE PEOPLE

*1 KINGS 19:1-8 [Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die. (v. 4)*

How could people who have gathered for the sake of a common cause be so different? I should be totally engaged in the important work we have before us.

So why is my emotional energy captured by the annoying styles of my coworkers? Why can't I let go of my irritation about the whining of the complainers? Why am I fixated on measuring the work and enthusiasm of those around me? Who put me in charge of keeping score?

Maybe I have something in common with Elijah. He watched God rain down fire on the altar he had built and drenched. He watched God's power totally overwhelm the prophets of Baal. But Queen Jezebel threatened him, and suddenly he could see nothing else. He took off into the wilderness, the queen's snarling mantra playing in his mind. He found a solitary broom tree, collapsed beneath it, and asked God to let him die.

These other people are driving me nuts, and my energy for ministry is being derailed by my frustration. But perhaps I, like Elijah, am just pouting. If that's the case, I'm embarrassed. But this is what's happening. I guess I'm facing the truth of my own frailties.

God, do you still want me? Can you use me to do your work? Give me the nourishment I need to trust that you are still in charge and that you can use even people like me to accomplish your holy work. Make me receptive to the angel you will send to me. Help me see the food and drink you set before me, in whatever form it comes. Forgive me these petty annoyances, and lead me to be forgiving toward those with whom I work today. Amen

## Devotion 2.5

# THE BODY AT WORK

*1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-13 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (v. 12)*

I see what kinds of gifts some of my colleagues bring to this task. I wonder if we are becoming a work group that does good ministry. Can God fashion us into ministers and what we do into ministry?

One gift I bring is the urge I felt when I learned about this opportunity – the call to adventure, to service, to give. Something about this work captured my attention. It's not a mistake. And I am here, chosen to be here.

The church has called me, too, to serve these people in this time and this place. I trust the image of the body of Christ. We each play our part. My job is to figure out what part I have in this ministry. Perhaps I'll be the organizer. Perhaps I'll be the teacher of skills. Perhaps I'll be the encourager, or the one who makes everyone feel welcome. My job will unfold, as will the jobs of those who are with me here, volunteers and residents. All of us will become the body to accomplish this work.

I don't have to be everything to everyone. And they don't have to be that for me. We are here to pool our resources, both skills and styles, to be Christ here. We are here to give and to receive.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** In what new ways are group members working together? What are you learning about each other? How well does your group work with other disaster response groups?

God of justice and mercy, I don't know how this will turn out. I know I'm here and that I feel called to do your work. Reveal to me the work you have chosen for me. Help me to rejoice in the gifts I bring, so that I might also rejoice in the gifts others bring. Open my eyes to the diversity you have brought together here, and help me to see us all as one in you. Amen

## Devotion 2.6

# SO MUCH TO DO!

*ROMANS 5:1-5 Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. (vs. 3b-5a)*

I almost stepped on a nail today. It was as if the nail were waiting for me, ready to cause havoc with my foot and my circulation system. It was just a small problem, and I was able to avoid it, but it became a symbol. How in the world will we ever accomplish what needs to be done? The people, the destruction, the losses, the fragile spirits. And everywhere I walk lies another nail or board or slippery spot that can add to the chaos.

How will we ever achieve our goals? I rage against the power of nature that can bring humanity to its knees in despair. The people who have lived here have so little to cling to, to hope for and I don't feel like I'm much help. I want these people to have a comfortable home and health and a reason to get up in the morning. They need jobs and equipment – and they need love and encouragement. How in the world will they ever feel hopeful again?

I have to find some way to take courage myself. I need to know I'm not helpless and that there is hope for tomorrow. Paul's words bring me comfort, because the apostle went through torturous periods in his life. He experienced imprisonment, beatings and deprivation. Still, he held steadfastly to the promise of God that we will never be abandoned, because in Christ we have received all we need – forgiveness and new life. Our despair was nailed to the cross and overcome. I can take courage in the word of God.

Help me to cling to the everlasting truths of our faith: that God loves us and will never abandon us and that we are able to do all things in Christ who saves us. Amen

## Devotion 2.7

# THINGS TAKE TIME

*NEHEMIAH 1:1-11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to your servant. . . . Give success to your servant. (v. 11)*

I once had a poster that showed a rock formation standing above rushing sea water, washed and shaped daily by the pounding of the waves. Below the photo were the words "Things take time." A friend gave me the poster because I always wanted to accomplish things immediately.

I haven't learned much since then, it seems. Yesterday I felt discouraged by how much we have to do. Today I remember the poster. Thank you, God, for the reminder. Things do take time. When we first begin an undertaking, we have great goals. As time wears on, we realize that all accomplishments – playing the piano, developing a prayer life, cleaning up after a disaster – take time.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem after the exile, the city was a mess. He might have given up, as many others did. But he prayed about what to do and led his people toward recovery. There were setbacks, and people sometimes worked against him. But day by day, steady work and prayer upheld the workers until the task was finished. No one would have expected such success. But Nehemiah was grounded in faith, and the work was accomplished.

Rather than concentrating on a finished successful project, I can focus on this fact: things take time. We didn't finish today, but we did achieve some objectives. We haven't done all things, but we have done some things. Tomorrow I'll try to set smaller, realistic goals for myself, and I'll remind myself that finishing even one of them, with the help of God, is a sign of progress.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** How do group members' expectations differ about how to get things done? How is the work going? How well are you working with others?

Send me patience, the fruit of your Spirit, Lord. I can do small things and over time see large things come to fruition. You have led us to this task; you will help us finish it. Amen

## Devotion 2.8

# GOOD PEOPLE, BAD THINGS

*GENESIS 50:15-21* Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good. (v. 20)

I am surrounded by such chaos. Lives have been devastated. The people with whom we are working have lost nearly everything. What if it had been me? When I am finished here, I can return to an orderly world. Why am I the one who gets to go home? Why not these people? After all, God loves us all the same.

I find myself looking for fault. I need something or someone to blame, some reason for this disaster. If I can't explain it, then that means this kind of chaos is unpredictable and could happen to me. What kind of world is this, God, where such trauma can befall people who do not deserve it?

If I look to you, God, I can imagine that you are the god Job's friends imagined, the god who stood by while Satan destroyed his home, family, friendships – all for the sake of “testing” Job's faithfulness. I have heard people around here trying to make sense of it like this: These people are being tested, God wanted something from them, and somehow it's their fault.

But I don't think that's how you work, God. I believe you will bring good from this mess, for these people and their community – and for me. I don't think you manipulate nature to teach us lessons (though there might indeed be lessons to be learned from these kinds of situations). I agree with Joseph's assessment of God's way with us – God meant it for good. That's what God did in Jesus: God redeemed an awful situation by bringing new life from death.

Disaster is capricious, and it might be me next time, but you will bring new life, good God. Fill my every breath with this confidence. Make me a beacon of hope. Amen

## Devotion 2.9

# ALIENS, ALL

*LEVITICUS 19:33-34* You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (v. 34b)

We are all aliens here. There would have been a time, before the disaster, when only I would have been a stranger in this community. But now, even those who call this place home are living in a foreign land. In some ways, I am less a stranger, because I have a home to which I can return. I have a place to be moored, from which I roam. The people who once called this place home do not have that mooring place anymore, at least not as they once knew it.

After languishing as aliens in Egypt for so many years, the people of Israel were especially sensitive to those who were strangers in their midst. Over and over again, Old Testament writers exhorted the people to care for the stranger, to bring justice and provide hospitality.

We bring justice when we watch for those who have become foreigners in their own community and advocate for those whose voices are lost in grief. God calls us to love these aliens as ourselves, to bear justice for those who are too weary to speak for themselves and who need someone to be their voice.

Even if we are not the most articulate advocates for the stranger, hospitality is one thing all of us volunteers can provide. We offer a vision of normalcy and order in a place and time of overwhelming chaos. Those among us who have lived through and survived our own disasters are ourselves signs of hope that even this disaster will be redeemed, and life will find balance again.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** When have you felt like an alien? Who are the aliens in your home community? In what ways are the people you are helping “aliens”?

God bless my efforts for the sake of the people I serve. Help me listen and respond to the needs you put before me. Give me eyes for justice and a warm and open heart. Amen

## THE WAY OF JESUS

*JOHN 13:3-17* “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (v. 14)

At times, I’ve been a leader; at others, a follower. In this endeavor, I’m a servant. But what do I know about genuine servanthood?

Jesus often instructed his followers to serve others, to pick up the cross, whatever it might be, and follow him. He washed the feet of his followers, touched and healed lepers, listened to those rejected by society, and welcomed children and women. Jesus served by putting others first.

When I came on this project, I arrived with an idealistic view that I would be a “helper.” I would pitch in and work hard and help solve problems, and people would appreciate my efforts. Perhaps all those things have been true. But I’m not here as a “helper.” I’m called to be a servant – one who sacrifices and gives without regard for status or reward. A servant.

It’s not easy. I have to swallow my pride when my leader is not doing what I prefer. I have to do unpleasant things that make me physically or emotionally uncomfortable. Sometimes my leadership isn’t needed or valued, and I have to bend in order to follow someone else. It’s not easy.

But it’s the way of Jesus. Often he reminded people by his actions that he came to serve all people without the promise of reward or higher status. He showed us what God was trying to tell us from the start – that all humanity is beloved by God, and we are intended to serve one another. When we recognize a need or hear a call for help, we are sent to serve, to follow the way of Jesus.

Awaken my humility, Lord. You have served me with your ultimate sacrifice. Let me take my role as servant to others, in your honor. Amen

## DOING IT TOGETHER

*ROMANS 12:1-13* We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. (v. 6a)

Today I found myself clenching my teeth and walking bent forward, as if resisting a strong wind. They’re signs that I’m taking this challenge very seriously. I’m working hard and trying to do my best. But my clenched teeth and earnest walk remind me that I’m thinking it’s all my responsibility. I have to do it all – save the world, clear the disaster, heal all wounds. Who do I think I am?

My sense of responsibility is a strong part of my personality, but sometimes I go too far and lapse into thinking I can do “it,” whatever needs to be done, all alone. Such thinking changes responsibility from a virtue into an unattainable burden. The joy of serving is replaced by martyrdom or drudgery.

I have to rethink my relationship with God. I’m not here to save the world. We human beings can’t even manage our own lives, let alone fix all other problems. But each of us can contribute in some way to the redemption of humanity and creation.

I may not be good at carpentry, but maybe I know how to comfort. I may not be able to restore someone’s home, but perhaps I can bring others hope by pitching in to clean up. When I struggle with a task I can’t seem to master, someone who is good at it can help me. It’s a wonderful plan (God is good). I need to let go of my earnest attempts to do it myself and accept God’s plan for all of us to do it together.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** When and how do you let go of disaster survivors’ emotions? How do you let go of tensions that have arisen at the disaster site?

Release me from my false belief that I can do it alone. You accept me as a human being who needs your sustaining love. Let me rest in that acceptance and work with others to enable change in the world. Amen

## Devotion 2.12

# STILL SO MUCH TO DO!

*DEUTERONOMY 27:11-14, Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice. (v. 19)*

Our time here is almost over, but the work seems to multiply. There is more on the to-do list than there was a week ago. How can I leave when so much is left undone?

It's not just the clean-up, although there is plenty of that left. Ahead is far more – applying for aid, filling out paper work, standing in lines. Once the water is clean and people have a safe place to sleep, they have only set the stage for survival. How will they piece together a life from these ruins?

I also think of people elsewhere in the world who struggle to put themselves and their community back together. What about those who do not have access to the kind of help available here? How do I respond?

Now that the shock is over, this place is no longer newsworthy. What will happen to these people I am beginning to know as friends? Will their neighboring communities forget about how much need remains? Will I, once I am back at home?

I know that I cannot carry the whole burden. I could not “solve” this even if I gave it my all. I know that I need to care for myself so that I can continue to care for others. But when the need is right in front of my nose, it's hard to turn away, to stop for the day, to go back home.

God of justice, you have issued a command to do justice for those whose voice is drowned out. Give me the wisdom to find a balance between my own need for refreshment with my deep desire to right the wrongs I see. Keep me restless for your people and full of your peace. Amen

## Devotion 2.13

# COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES

*2 PETER 3:11-13 In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. (v. 13)*

We go home. It feels like I'm graduating. I have been through an ordeal, certainly physically, but also spiritually. In many ways, my work here is done.

But this experience is not over, not for me and not for these people, and leaving will be a commencement – a beginning. From now on, these visions, memories and relationships will influence my daily choices. They will be a part of my stewardship of God's gifts to me. Their ongoing influence is one of the ways God will bring new life out of the death we have seen and heard here.

One day, this place will be home again, and the people here will not feel like strangers to their spaces. One day, I will have integrated all that I have learned here. I will develop a new understanding of how God works in the world. Then I will see a vision of the new heaven and new earth I wait for.

Meanwhile, there is so much to do. My hands-on work is nearly finished, but now I can tell the story of what I have seen and heard. Now I can be a witness to the miracles I experienced – miracles of hope and endurance and hospitality. Now I can be an advocate for those who minister to and recover from disasters.

I am proud to have been here and also very humbled. This recovery is so much bigger than I am, but I am very much a part of what has happened and what will happen here.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** How do you feel about leaving? What is easy to leave? What is difficult to leave?

God, you have promised a new heaven and a new earth. Keep working in me. Mold me into the person you intend. Give me the words and voice to tell the story of your work in this place, to give witness to your redemption. Amen



After I'm home



Photo by Andrea Booher/FEMA

## Devotion 3.1

# I'M SO TIRED!

*MATTHEW 14:22-23 He went up the mountain by himself to pray. (v. 23b)*

People ask me about my experience. What can I say? I'm absolutely exhausted. I can tell I am stronger and have more endurance than I thought I could develop. The whole thing pretty much wore me out, and I'm so glad to be sleeping in my own bed again.

But more than that, I am exhausted from feeling so many emotions! I've cried to see such pain. I've been angry that people suffer so much. I've laughed with those I work with, sometimes over the silliest things, sometimes out of a desperate need to feel relief from the stress. I've been disappointed with people and afraid of the future. I've felt guilty and proud and confused and lonely. How can I tell people about all those feelings?

Things take time, I remember again. I can't possibly put all this together overnight in a neat package. I have to sort through the events and faces, the feelings, and what I believe about God's place in this. When people ask, perhaps I can just tell them a few stories that stand out in my mind.

Meanwhile, I ask for the calm that comes with gradual healing. I want to let my body and mind relax again, without dreaming about the on-going needs we left behind. I need to commit myself to time alone and taking moments to ponder what has happened. Jesus continually withdrew from the crowds and prayed. He reflected on life and sought the counsel of God. I want to take the time to do the same – to rest, to heal.

Calm my spirit, loving god. Let me breathe deeply again and see the goodness around me. Renew me and bless me as I consider these experiences in light of your hope and care for the world. Amen

## Devotion 3.2

# MAKING SENSE OF IT

*PSALM 103 The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. (v. 17)*

Now that I have a little distance from my experience, how do I make sense of it? What did all those emotions and events mean? What shall I take with me into the future to enlighten my life and faith? My first impulse is to say, I don't know. But that doesn't seem honest. Surely I gained and lost in this process. But what?

I learned that life is far more complex than I thought. There is pain and suffering beyond what I had imagined. Nature and human nature can disappoint and frighten us. I can't run from that reality any more.

On the other hand, I am thrilled by the depth and strength of the human spirit. We adapt and we survive! We have hope in the midst of darkness and try to lighten the loads of others, even when our own burdens seem too heavy. God has created a fearsome world but given us the gifts of love and grace so that we not only survive but thrive.

I have discovered many things about myself. I let myself down at times when I was annoyed, tired or angry. I couldn't be perfectly loving in all situations. I'm only human, after all. But I am also able to turn compassion into service, sadness into hard work. I have overcome moments of weakness, loneliness and fear, which gives me a sense of confidence I haven't had before.

What was God's intention for my experience? I will discover that, over time. For now, I know this: God led me to this event and was with me every step of the way. That is enough.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** What comforts can you enjoy to help you adjust when you return to life at home?

Gracious God, thank you for giving me this complex and enriching experience. Make me a stronger person with a wider perspective on life because of what has happened. Amen

## Devotion 3.3

# FINDING A NEW NORMAL

*PSALM 51:10-12 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. (vs. 10-12)*

I am different now. I am home, in a familiar place, with familiar people, but I am different because of what I have seen and heard.

Some people don't understand why my thinking has changed. Some people think it odd that I need to spend so much time mulling and talking about my experience, retelling the stories and sorting out my questions. Some people don't even understand why I have questions.

The big question is this: Where was God? Based on my experience, I do not have an easy answer, a clear explanation for how God works in our daily lives. I know that chaos can strike at any time – if not through a natural disaster, then in the death of someone dear to me. How do I live with hope and confidence given that this is true? How do I walk each day the journey God sets before me and attend to God along the way when I live with such uncertainty?

In so many ways, this experience has pushed me toward God. At the same time, I have wondered why God didn't spare the people with whom I just was with. Maybe this is how it works. Maybe the gift of my experience is to learn to live in the midst of the mystery of God. Maybe what it all means is that although bad things happen, God is not "absent without leave" but right beside us.

**FOR GROUP DISCUSSION:** What things do you want to keep from this experience? What did you see in yourself that you'd like to develop or change? What aspects of the volunteering challenged you?

God, you are closer to me than I ever imagined and yet also beyond my comprehension. Walk with me as I reflect on this experience of ministry, and teach me fully what there is to learn. Amen



Devotion 3.4

# GOD’S FAITHFULNESS

*GENESIS 22:15-18* By your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing. (v. 18)

My “tour of duty” is over. Did it matter? Has my work made a difference?

I think of Abraham and Sarah as they struggled to understand what it meant to be chosen by God. They had received significant promises from God, not the least of which was that their offspring would be a blessing to the world. But at the time these promises were made, the couple did not have children and seemed well past childbearing.

In my most faithful moments, I want my “offspring” to be a blessing to the world, too. Offspring can be biological children, of course, but they can also be my work – whatever God calls me to do. Will the disaster work I’ve done be a blessing to the world?

I can say with confidence that I helped. There was so much grunt work to do, and I contributed muscle and spirit to that cause. But have I helped beyond the immediate disaster? Did I help people feel more at home, even in the midst of the chaos? Did they trust that I was there more for them than for me? Did I, and do I, concern myself with the justice issues the experience raised?

Perhaps I will need simply to trust God’s ability to bless my work, as Abraham and Sarah trusted. Yes, they laughed when God said they would have offspring, but God was faithful to them. Maybe my work will bless in small ways, but I trust that it made a difference. I know it has to me.

God, I wanted to be a blessing and came away having been blessed more than I know. Be with those who continue to recover and those who continue to help. Grant all of us your shalom. Amen

# REFLECTING ON MY EXPERIENCE

As I reflect on my work, these are my thoughts and feelings about what I have received from this experience and how I have been changed.

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