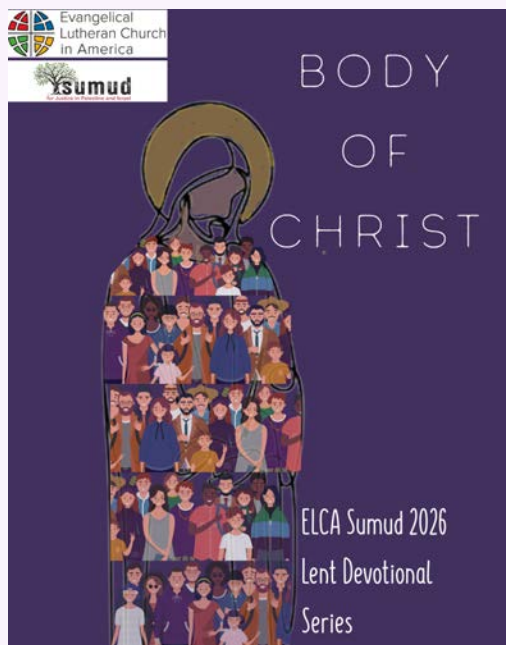


ELCA 2026 LENTEN SERIES: BODY OF CHRIST

Week 3: "Land and People"

Passage: John 3: 1-17

Bishop Scott Alan Johnson of the
Nebraska Synod



I lift up my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come?

My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

The Lord will not let your foot be moved

nor will the one who watches over you fall asleep.

Psalm 121.1-3

Psalm 121 was one of the readings at my grandmother's funeral. After marrying my grandfather she came to love the hills of our family's farmland in northeast Nebraska. I, too, love the land my family has called home for over 100 years. There's a hill just south of our farm from which, looking northeast toward my hometown, you can see miles of land that was all farmed by descendants of my great-great-grandparents for many years.

I thought of those hills as we traveled around the West Bank during our trip to Palestine this month, particularly when I met with Palestinians who have farmed their land for even longer than my family has farmed ours. They, too, can climb the hills and see their family history spread out across the acres they've stewarded for generations, each sunrise revealing a living reminder of the sacred toil to which God has called them. They know the faith that is needed to tend the land, not knowing if drought or flood or wind or disease or any of a thousand other factors will strike without warning and bring an entire season of work to naught.

There is one crucial difference between my family's farm and the farms of our Palestinian siblings. My family has been encouraged and supported in our stewardship of the land we've farmed. We've partnered with our neighbors, worked together through tough times, and received and given help as needed. My Palestinian siblings, however, have often been required to fend for themselves. They look to the hills and see illegal settlements encroaching on land their family has owned for decades. They are separated from their neighbors by barriers, walls, and checkpoints, which are erected with little or no warning. They are viewed with suspicion and misunderstanding, both locally and around the world, forced to fight for the right to farm land that has been in their care for far longer than the government that constantly threatens to take that land away.

This is not a story many of us hear in the United States. We hear about checkpoints and security walls as a deterrent to violence, when in reality they are often the means by which land is stolen from Palestinians who have peacefully farmed it for generations. As people of faith who seek to walk in the light of truth, these are stories of our Palestinian siblings we need to share. Part of the body of Christ is suffering a slow genocide masquerading as measures to enhance security and prevent violence. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer, and we bear a holy responsibility to alleviate that suffering when we can.

Jesus told Nicodemus, *"very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."* We often think of that rebirth as a spiritual awakening. Take a minute, however, and consider what Jesus says from a geographic standpoint. Imagine ascending to the highest point of an olive grove in the West Bank, with acres of trees that your parents, grandparents, and others have tended for decades, if not centuries. See how your place in God's kingdom is rooted in the soil with olive trees, wheat, alfalfa, soybeans, corn, or apricots. To see the land "from above" is to understand there is a holy connection between all who steward the land for the sake of feeding others. In meeting my Palestinian siblings who share a love a farming, I was reminded that we are truly one in Christ, united in God's kingdom across the miles between a West Bank olive grove and the rolling Nebraska prairie. I'm thankful to have been born from above yet again in these encounters, gifted with a wider perspective to see the church alive and active in people who lovingly look to the hills just as I do, trusting in the same God for help and guidance, living in the same body of Christ.