

# ELCA 2026

## LENTEN SERIES:

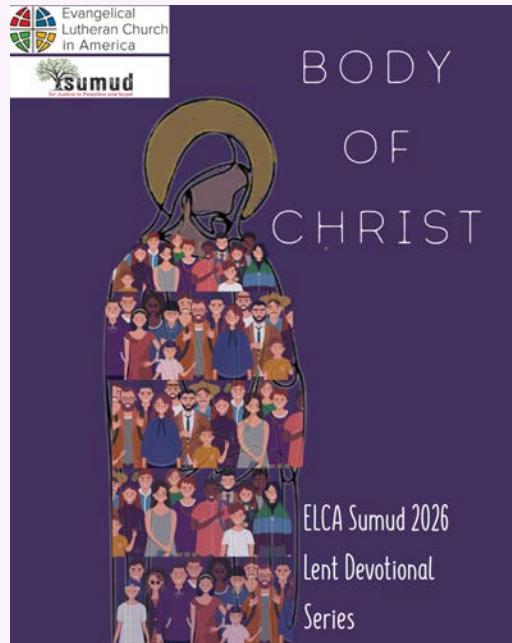
### BODY OF

### CHRIST

#### Week 5: “Cry of the Cross”

Passage: John 9:1-4

Bishop Meghan Johnston Aelabouni of  
the Rocky Mountain Synod



*“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”*

The disciples' question to Jesus here is misguided in a way that may tempt us to feelings of superiority: we all have sinned and fallen short, but at least I've never said something like that out loud. Of course the human diversity of the body of Christ, including disability and differences of ability, is not a sign of sin. Thank you, Jesus, that we know better.

If we're honest, however, we can recognize in the disciples our own human tendency to rationalize what seems to us like misfortune. If we can tie life circumstances to preventable causes, we might insulate ourselves or others from sharing such a fate. A similar process occurs when we do not want to believe or accept that someone in a position of trust and authority would abuse their power. When we ask, out loud or in our hearts: “Who sinned, this person or their parents, that they have been detained, shot, bombed in their home?”

As a former ELCA missionary pastor in Jerusalem from 2019-2024, returning to Palestine and Israel this January with colleague bishops and leaders from the ELCA and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada was a joyful homecoming. Yet, only eighteen months after leaving the Holy Land, I was deeply troubled to hear how the pain of our Palestinian colleagues and their neighbors had only deepened in the intervening months. We heard of the ongoing destruction of human life in Gaza despite an official ceasefire; the aggressive multiplication of gates and checkpoints making West Bank residents increasingly isolated and fearful; and the growing boldness of violent settler attacks on Palestinian farms and villages that comes from knowing the Israeli military is likely to defend the attackers and to

arrest the victims—simply because the attackers are Israeli and the victims are Palestinian. One of the pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land asked us: how can people look at what is happening in Gaza and deny it is a genocide, when genocide scholars and human rights organizations in Israel and around the world have stated that it is? How can Christians look at what is happening to people in the West Bank and say that it is justified? How can so many ask: Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born Palestinian?

Jesus declares: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” What does this mean? In the gospel of John, the miracles of Jesus are signs: not merely proof that Jesus is “magic,” but actions that reveal who Jesus is and why he has come. As the man born blind regains his sight, religious leaders attempt to obfuscate the facts and discredit Jesus; and it is the man blind from birth who offers clarity of perspective: “one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see... if this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” What enables the man born blind to “see” Jesus more clearly than the so-called spiritual experts?

Martin Luther’s theology of the cross teaches that to find God and the presence of Christ in the world, we should look not to the powerful and privileged but to the places and people of the cross. Like the religious leaders in John’s gospel, our desire for things to make sense, our longing to feel safe and secure, can sometimes lead us astray: so that we side with the powers of this world and fail to recognize the power of God at work on the margins, among the vulnerable and suffering. Luther might caution us against a Christianity that sees Jesus hanging on the cross and asks, “well, did he do something to deserve it?”

The God who “so loved the world” sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it. Jesus’ response to the question of how the man was born blind was not a theological treatise on divine punishment: it was an act of care that healed the man, called him into belonging, and recognized him as a witness to the Gospel. As I return from the Holy Land to the lands and communities of my own synod, I am renewed in my call and pray for wisdom to listen for the cry of the cross, wherever it may be—and to seek and find Jesus there.



## PRAYER

*God of justice, your son Jesus revealed to the world a way of love that recognizes your image in all people and treats them with dignity and compassion. Heal the people of Palestine and Israel who are suffering; strengthen the church in the Holy Land as your body of Christ for its neighbors. Help us, wherever we are, to be faithful to the Gospel in our accompaniment and our advocacy: that with your help and by your grace, justice might be restored to all people in this land, and in all lands. Amen.*