

## **National Youth Sunday Resources 2021**

**“...lonely and afflicted.” (Psalm 25:15 - 17)**

Theme interpretation by Becky Ullom Naugle

This year’s theme, “...lonely and afflicted,” is from Psalm 25:15 – 17. Here are the words from the NRSV: “My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and bring me out of my distress.”

This year has been tough for many people, and perhaps especially for youth. Identity formation is a key developmental task for teenagers, and a key part of identity formation is peer interaction. What does it mean that teens, who struggled with increasing isolation in the morass of technology before the pandemic, were practically confined within that same morass for all forms of education and social interaction during the pandemic?

We do not really know how 2020 will affect today’s teenagers in the long term. Anecdotally, we know rates of depression and anxiety are up. Even before the pandemic, we knew that suicide rates were rising and alarmingly high for young people.

It is easy to scoff at teenage angst, but it real and devastating. Intellectually mature enough to see and understand how messed up the world can be -- but

without much practice navigating through profound change, this past year challenged teenagers in ways difficult to understand for many of us non-teenagers.

I hesitated with this National Youth Sunday theme because I did not want youth to feel pressured or exposed. It is unfair to ask youth to be brave in ways that we adults are not willing to be brave ourselves. Too often youth feel pressure to put on their best Sunday School smile when they offer leadership in their congregation. Yet more than ever, I hope youth feel empowered to be honest and vulnerable about where they find themselves these days. One of the blessings of being part of a faith community is realizing where our own individual experience overlaps with universal experience. Who among us does not catch our breath a little when hearing the plea “turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted?” All of us have felt lonely and afflicted within the last year - even if in different ways, and at different times, and to different degrees. How does God reach out to us when we are lonely and afflicted? How is the Holy Spirit going to move when your youth ask that question to the congregation and lead the conversation in worship?

As your congregation celebrates National Youth Sunday, encourage the body to remember to behold our younger sisters and brothers with an extra measure of compassion in this season.