

Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013

Called To Be Christ's Witnesses

**Called to perceive by faith and to proclaim the unseen works of God
amidst the things that are seen.**

Participant's Guide – February 2013

Topic: God's Witnesses to the Unseen Works of God in the Sacraments

1. Focus of This Study

This study will focus on witnessing to the unseen works of God in the sacraments. The intriguing thing about sacraments is that they are both seen and unseen. God wraps up his unseen gifts in stuff, in things that are definitely seen: water, bread and wine. Why does he do this? What is the importance of such outward coverings? How do we as pastors faithfully witness to the marvelous unseen works God accomplishes through the humble means of water and his word, bread and wine and his word? How are we as pastors, as sinners, also able to be strengthened by these gifts even as we concern ourselves with their administration? As we consider these questions, we will use some helpful ideas from Luther's commentary on Genesis.

2. a Scripture Search - Old Testament

Read the Old Testament passages listed below and discuss how one might be able to see God's word or work or presence, hidden covered or connected with a created thing or object.

Genesis 9:12-17

What does God say about the rainbow in the clouds?

What does he promise to do or not do?

Genesis 28: 10-17

What does Jacob see in his dream?

What does he say about the place (Bethel) where he slept?

What does he do in v. 18-20 in response to his dream?

Exodus 3: 1-12

Where is God's presence in this story?

Why has he come to the earth (see v. 8)?

Exodus 13: 21-22

Where is the presence of the Lord in these verses?

What is the purpose of the pillar of fire and cloud?

Exodus 25: 10-22

What does God say he will do in verse 22?

Leviticus 16: 14-16

Why is this called a mercy seat?

How does Romans 3: 25 help us understand the purpose of the mercy seat and how Christ fulfills it?

How in each example is created matter used?

How is God's word and promise used in relation to the created matter?

2. b Scripture Search - New Testament

Read the New Testament passages listed below and discuss.

THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST IN ONE PERSON

Read John 1: 1-14.

How do these verses describe Christ, his two natures and one person?

How is this description similar to what we saw in the Old Testament?

Colossians 2:9.

How is Christ described here?

Where does the deity (God's nature) dwell?

What was the purpose of this incarnation of the Son of God according to 2 Corinthians 5: 19-21?

THE SACRAMENTS

When Christ wished to share the fruit of his work on the cross with the world, he acted in the same way he had in the Old Testament. He used created things: the elements of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper and humble water in Holy Baptism.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

Paul mentions simple created things like bread and a cup of wine. Yet according to Paul, what comes from receiving these gifts in faith?

John 3:5

What promise does Jesus make here concerning water?

1 Peter 3:21.

What does Peter say "saves" us? What is the thing or action that is visible? What is the invisible or unseen thing?

3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

In his commentary on Genesis, Martin Luther had some very useful and sometimes surprising comments on the sacraments and their use in the Christian life. Building on our Scripture study above, we will consider how Luther speaks about the sacraments and their value, and why we ought to be witnessing to them for the benefit of our congregations and ourselves.

In this commentary, Luther likes to say that God adds visible signs to his invisible presence for our benefit. Of course Luther begins with Christ, the forgiving Word and the need for sinners to be righteous. Comment on what you think Luther means in the following selection:

Righteousness is not fulfillment of the law; it consists in believing God when he makes a promise.” LW, Vol. 3: 84.

Luther goes on to emphasize that sinful human beings need a definite, concrete place to find God. Papists and enthusiasts made their own places to find God. But God sets up his own exclusive “places” where he may be found.

The tabernacle God gave to Moses as a sure sign of the place He had chosen and He added the promise that he would dwell there. Be present and hear the invocations and prayers of those who call upon Him. But that very people which most of all had a sure and definite place of worship wandered and strayed most of all in uncertain and self-chosen places. Such is the despicable perversity of our nature that we do not keep what God commands or regard it highly; but whatever the Devil prescribes this we receive and observe with utmost eagerness and deference. We erect altars, chapels, churches; we run to Rome and St. James. But meanwhile we slight baptism, the Eucharist, absolution and our calling. LW, Vol. 4, 179.

Where does Luther point us to find God in this selection?

How is the tabernacle like our sacraments?

What sort of self-chosen places do we tend to run to in an attempt to find the presence of God?

How often is some kind of emotional experience sought and/or used as verification of God’s presence in deference to the word of God?

According to Luther we have a need as sinners to find God in his grace in a sure, certain way.

“God’s church is a place where God’s word resounds ... Wherever that Word is heard where baptism, the sacrament of the altar and absolution are administered there you must determine and conclude with certainty, “This surely is God’s house, here heaven has been opened. .. where God speaks, where Jacob’s ladder is, where angels ascend and descend, there the church is.” LW, Vol. 5, 244.

How do the Word and sacraments function in the selection above?

Trials come upon us as Christians and as pastors. Luther emphasizes that in a time of difficulties and trials, God places himself in fixed, created things so that he may be found and trusted.

Faith is not a laughable cold quality that snores and is idle in the heart. No, it is agitated and harassed by horrible trials concerning the nothingness and vanity of the divine promises. For I believe in Christ whom I do not see. But I have his baptism, the sacrament of the Altar and consolation through the Word and Absolution. LW, Vol. 5, 205-206.

Luther says sometimes God seems absent, that his promises seem vain and empty. How can the Sacraments which are unseen, yet seen, help in pastoral or personal situations when someone (even ourselves) is feeling this way?

4. Points to Discuss

1. How can we better witness to the unseen works of God in the sacraments in our preaching and practice?
2. What difficulties or challenges do we face as we proclaim the unseen realities of sin and the works of God to in today’s emotion and materialistic driven culture?
3. How can the sacraments help us minister to those dealing with such personal challenges as depression, persistent sadness or feelings of God’s absence?
4. How can Luther’s insights help us incorporate the sacraments into our pastoral care?

5. In our outreach and witnessing to those outside the church, how ought we use or not use the unseen works of God in the sacraments?
6. Are the sacraments best left to those already catechized and “in” the church, or do we make these a part of our discussion and explanation of the unseen works of God to those just beginning to come to the church?
7. How do you personally “use” the unseen works of God in the sacraments in your own life as a husband? Father? Pastor?
8. Is it difficult as a called pastor to hear and receive the unseen works of God in sacraments as Gospel for yourself?
9. How can we improve this situation?

Author: Rev. Paul Gregory Alms
Pastor: Redeemer Lutheran Church, Catawba, NC
almspg@gmail.com

GENERAL EDITOR: Rev. Mark W. Love
markwlove@gmail.com