

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

Topic: God's Witnesses to the Unseen Works of GOD THE FATHER

1. Focus of This Study

For this study, we will ask two questions. First, how might the contemplation of God's works in creation strengthen the faith of Christians? Second, how might God's works in creation serve as the starting point for our witness to others?

2. Scripture Search

The first text (Job 38-41) is addressed to "believers" or the people of God for the strengthening of faith, and the second text (Acts 17) speaks of creation's witness to unbelievers.

Job 38-39

- 1). What is the context for the book of Job and central question(s) that is/are being asked?
- 2). For 35 chapters (3-37) we have heard from Job and his friends as they debate the moral order of the world. In the final chapters (38-41), we now hear from God. How does God provide an answer for Job (or does he)? (you might compare these chapters with chap. 3).
- 3). Skim over chapters 38-41 and describe the structure and development of God's answer.
- 4). What kinds of questions does God ask him on this tour? Identify some of the things that Job learns about God from each of the elements and their details of the physical creation overviewed by God. (Job 38:4-38).
- 5). Identify the types of animals mentioned and some of the specific characteristics emphasized about each of them (Job 38:39-39:30). What do these details tell us about God?
- 6). Discuss the significance of God's focus on the "forces of nature" in creation and the "wildness" of animals in creation?
- 7). How does this tour of creation provide an answer to Job's situation? What is the upshot of God's answer to Job? And how does Job respond (42:2-6)?

Acts 17: 16-33

- 1). What is the setting for Paul's speech at the Areopagus? Who is his audience?
- 2). How does Paul approach them? Consider on what basis does he make his appeal to them?
- 3). How does Paul use the doctrine of creation to approach them? On what does Paul affirm about the creator from his creation?
- 4). What purpose does creation serve in Paul's witness to the Athenians?

3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

- A. So how might we think about creation's witness to God within a Lutheran framework, to prevent falling into either a purely natural or a pantheistic theology on the one hand or a gnostic dismissal of creation and its witness to God on the other hand?

First, God is the creator and we are the creatures. Thus, God deals with us through his creation and the creaturely and we deal with God only through creation and the creaturely.

Second, the Scriptures describe creation as "declaring" the glory of God, giving thanks to God, praising God (Ps 19, 148, etc).

Third, creation's witness is "muffled." It's as if we have wax in our ears or have hit the mute button. Luther: "we do not even have insight into that fullness of joy and bliss which Adam derived from his contemplation of all the animal creatures. All our faculties today are leprous, indeed dull and utterly dead.... (LW 1, 66).

Fourth, the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel awakens our senses so that we once again can perceive and receive the witness, proclamation, and praise of creation to the Creator.

Fifth, with senses awakened by the Spirit, we can re-enter creation and perceive it anew. However, we now do so with the narrative of scripture to sharpen our seeing and listening.

- B. Given our newly awakened senses, discuss in what ways you pay attention to and reflect on the marvels and wonders of creation in the light of saving faith in Christ? Consider the example of Basil the Great as he reflects on God's creation. E.g., he observes

God's attention to the details of his creatures such as cranes, crows, geese, vultures, and nightingales as examples of his benevolent wisdom: "In what bird does nature not show some marvel peculiar to it?" God has produced exactly what each creature needs: "Our God has produced neither anything beyond need nor a deficiency of the necessities of life for any creature." Swans are given webbed feet and long neck to "procure the food hidden in the deep water." Basil concludes, when "the meaning in the words is explained, then the marvel of the wisdom of the Creator appears. How many varieties of winged creatures He has provided for! How different He has made them from each other in species! With what distinct properties He has marked each kind!" (Haexameron, 130-132).

Basil concludes his 7th homily with the encouragement, "may you who are studious review by yourselves, learning the wisdom of God in all things, and may you never cease from admiration nor giving glory to the Creator for every creature" (Haexameron, 129).

4. Points to Ponder

You may select one or more of the following points to discuss:

- A. The biblical writers ask people to consider aspects in creation as witnesses to God. Do we ourselves follow their example? If not, why not?
- B. Discuss Luther's statement in the Large Catechism, "Therefore, if we believe it [the first article of the creed], this article should humble and terrify all of us" (LC II, 22; K-W, p. 433).
- C. Discuss the various connections between Creation's witness to the Creator and creation's witness to the pre-incarnate Son of God (e.g., Colossians 1:15-20). Discuss the consistency of God's modus operandi in creation and in redemption.

5. For Conversation

- A. How might we follow Paul's example (Acts 17) in leading people from what they experience in creation (a sense of wonder, beauty, mystery, power, etc.) to an acknowledgment of the Creator to the confession of Christ?

Consider the essay, “Nature as a Salvation” (<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/3346/>) from NPR’s “This I Believe: A Public Dialogue about Belief—One Essay at a Time.”

“I believe in the power of nature to temper the hubris at the core of my soul. I believe in natural forces so awesome and mysterious they have obliterated my own sense of ego and shown me the face of things that are eternal and enduring. As a child of California’s beaches, I have spent my life, working and playing around nature’s most wondrous, and dangerous, bidder: the ocean.

I am a surfer. A part of an odd tribe that exalts in that vast wilderness just beyond the urban world. My earliest steps taken (as the home movies prove) were with my father, in the ocean. Today, as a travel and sports journalist, I write about the ocean in guarded tones. I have seen its playfulness; I have also seen fury and destruction.

The moment when I came to believe, wholeheartedly, in the ocean’s power, came on a sunny, cloudless day in September, a long time ago. The Santa Ana winds swept down through California’s scorched valleys, feathering the peaks of a swell generated by a storm tens of thousands of miles away from my home. Even though I was a young man, not yet 20, I had known the ocean for most of my life. I was at ease there. Comfortable. Yet, with the zeal and adrenaline of a young man’s body, I had forgotten the most basic lessons of the wilderness: stay within your limits and never go it alone. Surfers call the result of this hubris: “taking a beating.” The reference is what a wave can do to you physically, but the lessons, when heard, are more profound.

On this day, big and beautiful, and solitary, I dropped into a wave I never should have and was pitched into the monster’s mouth. Sucked back over the falls, I landed on the points of the fins on my own surfboard, driven in just below both calves. I lost feeling in both legs. As the swell poured in unabated, I fought for the shoreline.

For 15 long minutes, I struggled to stay afloat then I gave up, resigned to my fate. When a huge wave inexplicably spit me up on the sand, I looked around in a daze: the wind blew lightly as before, the birds chased each other through the sky, just as before, the sunlight gleamed off the ocean as another wave feathered and broke, just as before. Tread lightly, is the naturalist’s creed; I had nearly drowned, surfing in the Pacific Ocean, and the experience had not left a trace.

Except upon my own beliefs.

The ocean, like most places where man is an alien, is a mysterious, unknowable place that reveals its majesty only through experience. I believe in its power, I believe in its grace, and, paradoxically, on that sunlit California day, I believed in nature as a salvation. I had trifled with the ocean, and it had still thrown me back onto land where I belonged. Go be with your own kind, it had said to me. Help them to understand where you fit in the order of things. So that we can stay friends.”

- B. Discuss the following questions (adapted from questions composed by David Schmitt) in light of the story, “Nature as a Salvation”:
1. What story or stories lie in the background of this man that have shaped his life and “are being brought into the context of your evangelistic conversation?”
 2. In what ways might the creedal story of the Gospel (creation through the incarnation to the new creation) interact with this man’s story? More specifically,
 - a. in what ways might the Christian story complement this man’s story?
 - b. in what ways might the Christian confront this man’s story?
 3. What elements of the divine Master’s Story and “more specifically of the narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry would you use while witnessing to these individuals? How would you use them?”

6. Conclusion (St. Basil's wish for his congregation)

“May God, who created such mighty things and ordained that these petty words be spoken, grant to you an understanding of His truth in its entirety, in order that from visible objects you may comprehend the invisible Being, and from the greatness and beauty of creatures you may conceive the proper idea concerning the Creator [italics added]. ‘For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen—his everlasting power also and divinity.’ Therefore, in the earth, in the air, and in the heavens, in water, in night and in day, and in all things visible, clear reminders of the Benefactor grip us. We shall not give any opportunity for sins, nor shall we leave any place in our hearts for the enemy, if we have God as a dweller in us by our constant remembrance of Him, to whom be all glory and adoration, now and always, and for all ages of ages.” (“On the Hexaemeron,” p. 54).

References and for further reading:

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- Ralph Bohmann, “The Natural Knowledge of God,” Concordia Theological Monthly 34(December, 1963), 721-35.
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Author: Rev. Dr. Charles Arand
Professor, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO
arandc@csl.edu

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