

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.

Leader'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?

The leader ought to guide participants to see that God uses the "bow", i.e. rainbow as a sign of his attitude towards his people. He attaches a promise to the created "stuff" of the cloud and the sunlight that produced the sign that God chose, i.e. the rainbow.

What does he promise to do or not do?

He promises not to destroy again by water.

Genesis 28: 10-17

What does Jacob see in his dream?

Begin by focusing on the facts of the Scripture story, what actually happened. God is present and promises to be with Jacob and to give to him and his descendants the land upon which he lay.

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

- Note Jacob's words and response:
"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."
- *And he was afraid and said,*

- *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

Discuss how the promise and the presence of God attached to a place foreshadows the way our Lord works in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Further note that in the sacraments, when the promise of God is attached to the created “stuff” of water in baptism and bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper, it is done so for the purpose of giving the forgiveness of sins. Christ’s promises (Word), Christ’s presence and Christ’s gift of forgiveness bound together and received through created “stuff” (water -baptism, bread and wine - Lord’s Supper) for the forgiveness of sins.

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

He worships. He sets up a place to call on God and remember the promises made to him there.

Exodus 3: 1-12

Where is God’s presence in this story?

Lead the participants to see the unexpected nature of God’s presence. It is not up in heaven or in a spiritual event; it is in the bush. God’s presence is in the midst of a created thing.

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

To deliver His people out of the hand of the Egyptians - i.e. to give salvation to His people.

Draw attention to the sacramental qualities in this event. God uses a created thing (the burning bush), the presence of the Lord in the bush, and his word of promise to deliver his people, i.e. bring salvation.

Exodus 13: 21-22

Where is the presence of the Lord in these verses?

Again the point is that the fire and cloud are created things but God’s presence is in them. They don’t symbolize or remind God’s people of Him. He is present in them.

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

To lead and give them light. Focus on the “grace” aspect of God’s presence.

Exodus 25: 10-22

What does God say he will do in verse 22?

He will be present and He will speak.

Leviticus 16: 14-16

Why is this called a mercy seat?

Blood is given for forgiveness.

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

Christ sheds the true blood that grants eternal forgiveness. The incarnation means also that God is present in and with Christ’s flesh, just as he was in the mercy seat only in a higher and greater way.

How in each example is created matter used?

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

Notice how in each example there is created material, “stuff”, if you will, to which God adds a promise and his presence. His presence and promise, though unseen, are clothed by what is seen, that is, the ark, the burning bush, the rainbow, etc. None of these examples are sacraments in the New Testament sense in that the forgiveness of sins was never attached to any of them. God’s use of each of the created things in the Old Testament shows that when Christ instituted Holy Baptism and His Holy Supper, he was following an already established practice of God.

These examples, though wonderful, are just pictures or foreshadowings of what God does through Christ. So let’s go to the New Testament, and specifically consider Christ himself.

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?

Christ has a true human nature, but also is true God yet only one person.

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

The divinity of Christ dwells in and through his created human nature. God is present in and with created “stuff”, so to speak, for our salvation.

Colossians 2:9.

How is Christ described here?

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

Bodily. Emphasize how the pattern is fulfilled in Christ: the creaturely, bodily dwelling of the presence of God.

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

Salvation, forgiveness and the giving of righteousness.

Additional Thoughts for the leader:

We see the pattern of the Old Testament confirmed, fulfilled and made clear in the person of Christ. Christ is true man, with a true body, and yet he is the unseen God. The Son of God, very God of very God, dwells in that flesh, is one with that flesh, has made it His own. He has made it his dwelling, not as some separate thing, but as one person though in two natures. God uses created things to be his dwelling. He did it in the Old Testament and the same is true with Christ. Creation is not unworthy of God’s use or somehow unfit for his work or presence, precisely the contrary. The Biblical witness is a witness to the works of God in and through created matter, culminating in the incarnation of Christ and his being made one with our nature. We as pastors are called to witness to that same truth, pointing to Christ incarnate for salvation and pointing to his sacraments, where through created things he offers his salvation.

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?

Fellowship with body and blood of Christ. Through simple created things, the very presence of Christ is given. It is a participation in the body and blood of Christ himself.

John 3:5

What promise does Jesus make here concerning water?

Entering the kingdom of God. This means salvation. Grace is given through created material things. What is unseen is given through what is seen.

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?

The sacraments are unseen and seen miracles of God. What is unseen, grace and mercy and the very presence of God, is wrapped up in things that are seen like water and bread and wine. It is His Word which proclaims and promises and provides such unseen works of grace for and in us. What God’s word says, it does. It works and gives what it promises. The created elements are used and grasped by God to give the unseen benefits of his mercy and forgiveness. These created elements are given to us to be grasped in faith, that we might receive the gifts, the works of God in Jesus Christ.

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.

Connect “believing God when he makes a promise” to the Old Testament stories of promises of salvation tied to God’s presence. Do the same with the New Testament sacraments. Faith is crucial to the proper reception of the sacraments. We believe God when he speaks, especially when connected to the material things of the sacraments.

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?

The places which he has chosen and to which he adds a word of promise.

While the tabernacle is not a sacrament in the New Testament sense, what sacramental qualities does it foreshadow?

God is present and adds his word.

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?

To mark the place where God is, where we can find him in grace and mercy.

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?

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