

**Bible Study
Introduction**

Objectives

- Help us connect/reconnect to a Lutheran understanding of the Word of God and scriptural authority.
- Empower us to deepen our interpretation of scripture using the tools of context, the analysis of law/Gospel, and the study of scripture as a communal act.
- Explore scripture through the lens of Christ.
- Apply communal interpretation of scripture to current issues in the church, society and world.

Session Agenda

- Gathering
 - Introductions/review
 - Covenant/reminder
 - Prayer
 - Activity
- Traveling into Scripture
 - Teaching points
 - Discovery activities
 - Questions of exploration
- Walking the Way
 - Deep conversation
 - Communal interpretation
- The Journey Continues...
 - Questions
 - Challenge – for practicing application of concepts between sessions to aid retention
 - Prayer

Session Overviews

Session 1: What's the Word?

- Focus: Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word, scriptural authority
- Application: Reading Biblical texts looking for Christ, interpretive questions in community

Session 2: What Does the Word Say?

- Focus: Scripture is the cradle for Christ, Biblical interpretation using law/Gospel, lens of Christ, let scripture interpret scripture
- Application: Practice using scripture to interpret scripture

Session 3: God's Word is Love

- Focus: God's Word leads us to love all, not judge
- Application: Reading scripture to help overcome differences

Session 4: What Does this Mean?

- Focus: Application of Lutheran hermeneutic to Biblical interpretation
- Application: Utilizing scriptural interpretation to think about current issues (example-sexuality)

SESSION 1 WHAT'S THE WORD?

Introduction

The theme for this session is **A Lutheran understanding of the Word of God**. Please bring your Bible if you have one!

Goals for this session are to:

- Explore a Lutheran understanding of the Word of God and scriptural authority.
 - Discover what scripture says about the Living Word, Jesus Christ.
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Gathering

Introductions

Covenant

This Bible study is meant to be a safe space without judgment where we can all be who we are and be vulnerable together as we seek to grow in our understanding and exploration of scripture. So, we ask everyone here to own your thoughts and feelings as being truly your own. We also ask everyone to commit to treating one another as beloved children of God. We will all be challenged and stretched as we travel the way of Jesus, yet we trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding our conversations and time together. **Can we all agree to this covenant?**

Opening Prayer

O God who speaks the cosmos into existence, we give you thanks that you have chosen to speak to us through Jesus Christ, your Son, who shows us who you are. Send now your Holy Spirit upon us to open us to your Word, so that through our learning and conversation our hearts may burn with the knowledge of your loving presence and your grace, which is for the whole world. All honor and glory are yours, Almighty God, through your Son Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Activity

Pair up and take turns sharing a response to one of the following:

1. What is your favorite memory of scripture?
 2. How does the Bible play a role in your life?
 3. What is a question you have about the Bible?
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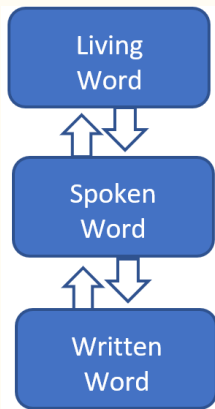
Traveling Into Scripture

“What’s the Word?” Activity

As a group, read each passage and discuss: What does each passage say about the Word of God?

John 1:1-5, 14
Romans 10:14-17
II Timothy 3:14-17

Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word



Walking the Way

Interpret and Explore Activity

Read each of the following passages; then share answers to the questions within your group.

John 3:11-17

1. What does this text tell us about God?
2. What does this text tell us about us?
3. What does this text show us about Jesus?
His identity? Where He comes from? His purpose?

John 10:7-18

1. What does this text tell us about God?
2. What does this text tell us about us?
3. What does this text show us about Jesus?
His identity? Where He comes from? His purpose?

The Journey Continues...

Challenge

Before our next session, find one piece of scripture (for example in your personal devotion/study, one you hear somewhere, one used in worship this week, etc.) and reflect on the following questions about that passage:

1. What does this text tell us about God?
2. What does this text tell us about us?
3. How does this text show us the Truth—God's love in Jesus?

Closing Prayer

SESSION 2 WHAT DOES THE WORD SAY?

Introduction

The theme for this session is **A Lutheran approach to interpreting scripture**. Please bring your Bible if you have one!

Goals for this session are to:

- Explore Luther’s dialectic of Law/Gospel (dialectic definition: the art of investigating/discussing the truth of opinions; discussing differing opinions to get to the truth)
 - Develop skill of reading scripture through the lens of Christ
 - Practice using scripture to interpret scripture
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Gathering

Welcome and Recap

Covenant

As a reminder, this Bible study is meant to be a safe space without judgment where we can all be who we are and be vulnerable together as we seek to grow in our understanding and exploration of scripture. So, we ask everyone here to own your thoughts and feelings as being truly your own. We also ask everyone to commit to treating one another as beloved children of God. We will all be challenged and stretched as we travel the way of Jesus, yet we trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding our conversations and time together. **Can we all agree to this covenant?**

Opening Prayer

O God who speaks to us through the ages, through your Word you both show us how we fall short of your glory and set us free to live as your beloved children. Send your Holy Spirit to open us now to become aware of how we have misused the gift of your Holy Scriptures to harm others and empower us to use them instead as an instrument of freedom for the whole world, through receiving the gift of your Son, the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Opening Activity

Round 1: Indicate whether each brief passage below is LAW or GOSPEL:

1. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves
2. In the name of Jesus, your sin is forgiven
3. “By grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your doing; it is the gift of God.” Ephesians 2:8
4. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” Romans 3:23
5. You are God’s beloved child
6. “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” Matthew 5:44

Round 2: Read each scripture selection below, indicate whether it is LAW or GOSPEL and why you made that choice.

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|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Psalm 103:8-14 | 3. Revelation 21: 3-5 |
| 2. Genesis 30:15-21 | 4. John 9:35-41 |
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Traveling Into Scripture

“What Does the Word Say?” Activity

The Law	The Gospel
Lays out how God intends us to live in relationship with God and one another, and reminds us of our brokenness	The promise of God’s grace, that though we sin, we are loved by God and set free from sin through Jesus Christ
As a group, read each passage and discuss: What does this passage tell us about the law?	As a group, read each passage and discuss: What does this passage tell us about the Gospel:
Romans 3:9-12, 19-20 Romans 7:11-25 Galatians 3:19-28 Galatians 5:13-14	Romans 1:16-17 Galatians 1:6-12 Romans 3:21-24 – What is the Gospel? Romans 8:31-39 – What does this mean?

Walking the Way

Interpret and Explore Activity

After your group is assigned a set of texts, read each passage and share answers to the questions within your group.

Set 1: More on the Word

Read the passage. How do you hear the law in this text? How do you hear the Gospel in this text?

- Isaiah 55:6-11
- John 1:1-14
- John 14:1-7

How do these passages inform one another?

- What more do they tell us about the Word of God?
- How does this build on the understanding of the Word that we have established thus far in the Bible study?
- Respond to this phrase: “God’s word does what it says.”
 - How do the texts relate to this?
 - How does this inform how we approach scripture, recognizing that it is the cradle for Christ and that Christ himself is first and foremost the Word of God?

Set 2: What does it mean to live out our faith?

Read the passage. How do you hear the law in this text? How do you hear the Gospel in this text?

- Isaiah 1:12-18
- John 2:13-22
- Micah 6:1-8
- John 15:9-17

How do these texts inform one another?

- How do these texts describe what is faithful and what is not?
- What are things (priorities, ideals, etc.) the church may think are faithful but may actually not be?
- How does the Gospel in these texts call us to live our faith in new ways today?

The Journey Continues...

Challenge

Before our next session, take some time to look at the Bible readings from either this Sunday's or last Sunday's worship service. Pick at least two. With each reading:

- How do you hear law and how do you hear Gospel?
- How do these passages inform one another?
- If you can, talk about this with someone, recognizing that what you both hear might be different and that is okay.

Closing Prayer: The Lord's Prayer

SESSION 3

GOD'S WORD IS LOVE

Introduction

The theme for this session is **God's Word leads us to love. Period.**

Goals for this session are to:

- Be reminded that we are not judge, Jesus is
 - Explore how God's love changes how we read scripture and apply scripture to our lives
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Gathering

Welcome and Recap

Covenant

As a reminder, this Bible study is meant to be a safe space without judgment where we can all be who we are and be vulnerable together as we seek to grow in our understanding and exploration of scripture. So, we ask everyone here to own your thoughts and feelings as being truly your own. We also ask everyone to commit to treating one another as beloved children of God. We will all be challenged and stretched as we travel the way of Jesus, yet we trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding our conversations and time together. **Can we all agree to this covenant?**

Opening Prayer

O God whose Word does not return to you empty, you have spoken yourself into our lives and the world in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Through Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection you have given us an embodiment of your unstoppable love, love that is for us and for the world. Help us to lean into your love, to live in it, to accept it as your free gift to us. Give us the courage to become ourselves an embodiment of that same love for others, regardless of the differences between us, so that we may be the church that you have called us to be, through your Son Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Activity

Without talking, writing or using any smart devices, including phones, put yourselves in order according to your birth day and month (not year).

Traveling Into Scripture

"God's Word is Love" Activity

As a group, reach each passage and discuss the questions that follow.

John 3:16-17

I John 4:7-21

Matthew 7:1-5

Romans 14:13-19

- How do you hear law and Gospel in this passage?
 - What does this passage show us about Jesus, God's Living Word?
 - Based on the answers to the previous two questions, what conclusions can we draw from this passage about how we see and approach other people?
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Walking the Way

Overcoming Differences

Review our Covenant.

Read each of the following passages aloud; then share answers to the questions.

Ephesians 2:13-16

Ephesians 4:29-5:1

- How do you hear law/Gospel in this passage?
- How does this passage show Christ?
- How does this passage inform other Bible passages that come to mind and vice versa?
- Given the responses to the questions above, what conclusions can we draw from this passage?

Apply to your own life: What is a situation in your life in which you've struggled with differences between you and someone else?

- How does this passage or anything we talked about in this Bible study help you think about this situation?
- How are you challenged?
- How are you set free?

Apply to our church: What is a situation in the church in which there are differences that are causing stress or division?

- How does this passage or anything we talked about in this Bible study help you think about this situation?
 - How are you challenged?
 - How are you set free?
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The Journey Continues...

Challenge

Commit to praying for one another this week as well as for someone with whom you have differences.

Closing Prayer

SESSION 4 **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? (HUMAN SEXUALITY)**

Introduction

The theme for this session is **Applying a Lutheran Interpretation of scripture to current issues, particularly to thinking about human sexuality.** Please bring your Bible if you have one!

The goal for this session is to utilize the tools developed in the first three sessions of this study to approach and discuss the topic of human sexuality from a Biblical (and Lutheran) standpoint.

Gathering

Welcome and Recap

Covenant

As a reminder, this Bible study is meant to be a safe space without judgment where we can all be who we are and be vulnerable together as we seek to grow in our understanding and exploration of scripture. So, we ask everyone here to own your thoughts and feelings as being truly your own. We also ask everyone to commit to treating one another as beloved children of God. We will all be challenged and stretched as we travel the way of Jesus, yet we trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding our conversations and time together. **Can we all agree to this covenant?**

Remembrance of Baptism

Gather in a circle and light the candle. Share in the Prayer of Thanksgiving. As you mark the sign of the cross, say to the person receiving, "*<name>, you are a beloved child of God*".

Pray Together: God whose Word is love, we give you thanks for the way you have drawn near to us, chosen us before the foundation of the world, and given yourself to us in overwhelming love through your Son, Jesus Christ. By your Holy Spirit, pour out your love upon us again, that we may be renewed and recreated to be whom you have called us to be as people of faith through the Gospel. Give us the faith to live into the identity you have given us as your beloved children and to treat others as ones whom you also call beloved. We lift our prayers, spoken and silent, to you, Almighty God, through your Son Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Activity – Recentering Practice

1. Find a comfortable position. Hold on to your recentering item.
 2. Take some time to focus on your breathing.
 3. Allow your breathing to become deeper. Slower. Not forcefully, but as it feels natural
 4. (BREATHE)
 5. Remember that God is spirit, breath. God is as close to you as your next breath.
 6. (BREATHE)
 7. Gently shift your focus to the item in your hand. Notice how it feels. Weight. Texture.
 8. (BREATHE)
 9. This item is a reminder of the love of God that is always yours. Always free. Always given.
 10. (BREATHE)
 11. Say to yourself repetitively, "God is love".
 12. (BREATHE)(BREATHE)
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13. Now gently as you are ready, bring yourself back to this moment.
 14. As we move through the rest of this session, if you feel tension within yourself or if emotions begin to well up within you, I invite you to hold on to your recentering item, take a moment to breathe, and repeat to yourself several times “God is love” as a way of recentering yourself in the moment.
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Traveling Into Scripture

“What Does This Mean?” Activity

As a group, read each **Leviticus** passage aloud and discuss the questions that follow.

Leviticus 11:1-8

Leviticus 18:1-25

Leviticus 19:9-19

- What are your reactions to these codes?
- How do these codes help people honor God? Others? The earth/creation?
- We do not follow all the codes in Leviticus today. In fact, there aren’t many that we pay attention to at all. For example, eating pork, wearing clothing made from mixed textiles, and harvesting even the edges of grain fields, are all ways that we violate these codes.
 - Why don’t we follow all the codes?
 - Why do you think we single out the codes about males lying with other males?

As a group, read **Matthew 22:34-40** aloud and discuss the question that follows.

This teaching of Jesus happens after Jesus has entered into Jerusalem. The Sadducees have asked Jesus questions, trying to find cause to arrest him. Jesus has stumped them. Then the Pharisees ask Jesus this question about the law to try and find cause to arrest him.

- How does this teaching of Jesus impact how we hear and understand the codes from Leviticus?

As a group, read **Leviticus 11:46-47** aloud.

This passage comes at the end of a series of codes about unclean animals.

As a group, read **Acts 10:9-16, 30-34** aloud and discuss the question that follows.

This vision that Peter has from God happens while Peter is on his way to visit Cornelius who has sent for Peter to come visit. Cornelius was a Roman centurion and therefore a gentile (non-Jewish). This vision opens Peter to understand that gentiles are also included in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

- How does this passage from Acts 10 inform how we hear and understand the codes in Leviticus?
- How are these passages in Leviticus 10 and Acts 10 in tension with one another?
- How do you hear the Gospel when you read these two texts together?

Respond to this statement: “We don’t get to pick and choose which parts of the law to follow. If we follow part of it, we must follow all of it”.

- How does this discussion relate to what we have learned about law and Gospel in scripture?
 - How does this discussion relate to what we have learned about Gospel and the power of God's love for the world in Jesus?
 - How has this discussion informed how you think about human sexuality?
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Walking the Way

Romans Section

Read **Romans 1:18-2.5; 3:9-11, 21-25a; and 8:31-39**

- Summarize what you read in these passages.
- How do you hear law in these passages?
- How do you hear Gospel in these passages?

Context: The Romans were well known for being overtly and excessively sexually promiscuous compared to other cultures. In the honor-shame culture of the Romans, sex, particularly rape, was used as a way to assert dominance over someone else who was lower in status. This practice becomes one part of Paul's argument about ways that "all fall short of God's glory."

The verses in chapter one that mention unnatural intercourse are one part of a larger argument that Paul is making "all are unrighteous, all fall short of God's glory, no one can fulfill the law." And notice where the argument goes: "all are justified by grace as a gift."

- Using scripture to interpret scripture, how does the rest of Paul's argument inform the verses in chapter one referring to "unnatural sexual relations?"
- How do the law and Gospel in these passages inform how we think about human sexuality?

Genesis Section

Context: The first creation story, found in Genesis chapter 1, was written during the Babylonian exile. There are some striking parallels to the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish, that are meant to be an argument that Yahweh is more powerful than the Babylonian gods and to give a word of comfort to the Israelites in exile. Here are some of the parallels:

- Yahweh creates by speaking a word rather than violence
- Yahweh creates order out of chaos rather than creating more chaos
- Yahweh calls everything created good rather than perceiving creation as annoying
- Yahweh creates humankind in God's image, giving them inherent value, and entrusts to them the task of stewarding creation rather than hating them, making them slaves

Hebrew culture/tradition makes use of what seems to us in Western culture to be "dualisms" (i.e., light and darkness, day and night, land and sea, male and female, etc.). However, in Hebrew culture/tradition these do not indicate clear categories, but rather they represent ends of a spectrum. In the same way that calling God the Alpha and the Omega is meant to encompass all that God is, the "dualisms" in Hebrew imply the diversity of everything in between...

- There is night and day, but there is also twilight, dawn, high noon, and midnight. The sky at transitional times is profoundly beautiful, and changes every minute. We often think of the sky in these "between times" as God's artwork!
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- There is water and land, but there are also beaches and tide, and marshland, where the lines between land and water are blurred.
- There are literally billions of species of animals that live on land, on water, and in the air. And many living beings spend time in different environments. Ducks fly, swim, and walk on land. Amphibians require time in water and on land for survival. The diversity of God's creation is beyond our understanding!

Read **Genesis 1:1-31**

- How do you hear law in these passages?
- How do you hear Gospel in these passages?
- God creating humans as male and female shows us that God creates us as sexual beings. We also see in this passage that all humankind is created in the image of God. How does this inform how we think about human sexuality?
- That God created them "male and female" represents the extremes of a whole diversity of human beings rather than pigeonholing all of humanity into two distinct categories. In fact, the "dualisms" all throughout this text represent the full diversity of God's creation. Jewish tradition, going back thousands of years, has recognized many genders, including a person's experiences of gender changing over time. How does this inform how we think about the experience of people who are born intersex, or are non-binary in their gender identity or expression?
- Respond to this statement: "'All' means 'all'. Therefore, when God sees 'all' that God created and 'indeed it is very good', that includes all gender identities and sexual orientation".
 - How do your thoughts, in addition to our understanding of reading scripture to point us to Christ (who is God's love for the world), inform your response?
 - What are your thoughts about being specific in naming the welcome and goodness of creation? (For example, "God loves trans people," "Black lives matter," "People of all abilities are welcome here.") How do our scriptures, our church teaching, and the experience of people who are marginalized inform how we welcome?

I John Section

Context: I John shares a strong connection with the Gospel of John, though it may have a different author. Though it is considered a general letter (a letter not addressed to anyone specific), it is more like a sermon. People in the author's community are struggling with whether Jesus was actually BOTH human AND divine and not one or the other. This letter and the passage that we will read are urging folks to stay true to "what they heard from the beginning:" that God is light, God is love and living as ones who are loved so much by God, we are to love one another in the same way.

Read **I John 2:3-11; 3:1-3, 11-24; and 4:7-21**

- How do you hear law in these passages?
- How do you hear Gospel in these passages?
- How do these passages inform how you think about human sexuality?
 - There is a lot of hate, misunderstanding, and active exclusion targeted at the LGBTQIA+ community. The author of I John calls on us to "love not in word or speech, but in truth and action." How can we, as the church, love the LGBTQIA+ community in truth and action?

- Often times if we dislike someone, it stems from the ways they are different from us, that we don't understand. At the core of that feeling is fear of that which is different or other from us. The author writes that "perfect love casts out fear." How has the church held on to fear? How can the church move forward in ways that allow the perfect love of Christ to cast out our fear?

Large Group Discussion

Report on each small group conversation.

- What were your thoughts on human sexuality before we started this session?
- How has this session, and Bible Study as a whole, informed what we think about human sexuality?

Activity: Next Steps

Journal or draw to reflect on the following prompts. Take it with you as a reminder of the commitment you have made to yourself. Whatever you write or draw is between you and God, you will not have to share it.

- Where are you at now:
 - With how we interpret scripture?
 - With how God uses scripture to speak to current topics?
 - With how we think about human sexuality?
- What are your growing edges and how can you work on them?
- Make a commitment to how you will continue to work on your growing edges.

The Journey Continues...

Challenge

Keep the item you received in the opening activity handy and use it. When you feel yourself getting tense in an interaction, conversation, or situation, hold it, focus on your breathing, and repeat to yourself "God is love" for a time to recenter yourself.

Closing Prayer

Document Change Log

Summary of Change	Date	Owner
Proofreading updates and minor modifications to Law/Gospel section from review by Bishop S. Candea	8/24/2023	D.Morin
Session 4 proofreading updates on several Bible passages	10/26/23	D.Morin