

**Bible Study
Introduction
for Leaders**

Objectives (in Participant Handout)

- 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. (In this particular study, the current issue addressed in the fourth session is sexuality.)

Context

- The hope and goal of this Bible study series is to 1) ground participants in Lutheran understanding of scripture, 2) provide a framework for communities of faith to have deeper conversations, and 3) connect faith and the Bible to daily life and the issues facing the church today.
- The Leader is encouraged to read through all four sessions prior to leading the first session to see the trajectory of the Bible study and how things fit together.
- Each session has a consistent layout and is written to take about one hour. The Fourth Session can be an exception to that length as there is a lot of content and some very deep dives into scripture.
- The sessions are written with the intention that anyone can lead. If the leader is a lay person, know that if you have any questions, you may ask for help from a rostered minister in your context. *Italic text* indicates suggested verbiage for the Leader to speak.
- Most of the sessions include activities that require splitting into small groups. Small group size is left up to the leader, though it is suggested that small groups be between 4-5 people to allow ample opportunity for everyone to participate.
- The sessions in this Bible study are written so that the first three sessions build on one another and help people develop a Lutheran “hermeneutic”. (A “hermeneutic” is a person’s approach to interpreting the Bible, including core theological convictions that influence how they read scripture). Sessions one through three help develop specific tools for Biblical interpretation from a Lutheran standpoint. The fourth session takes those tools and helps people apply them to be better equipped to think critically about how scripture speaks to us today.
- There is a likelihood that people who participate in this study will not be able to attend all four sessions. While it will be fine to miss one or two of the sessions, it is not recommended to attend only session four. The structure of the Bible study and intention and function of the first three sessions are to give participants tools that will be used in session four. This recommendation also recognizes the sensitivity of the human sexuality topic of session four.
- While the fourth session addresses the topic of human sexuality, it was written so that the primary content (“Traveling into Scripture” and “Walking the Way”) can be revised to address other topics (e.g., racism, care for creation, violence, politics and religion, etc.). These revisions can be accomplished while still maintaining the opening and closing pieces and having the fourth session build off the first three. This supports the opportunity for other “What does this mean?” sessions to be written so that Bible study can explore a variety of current issues from a Biblical standpoint and Lutheran hermeneutic.
- This Bible study is meant to be a framework. Please feel free to lead this study in ways that are most helpful to your context.

Session Layout (60-90 minutes) (as Agenda in Participant Handout)

- Gathering (10 minutes)
 - Introductions/review
 - Covenant/reminder
 - Prayer
 - Activity
 - Traveling into Scripture (15-20 minutes)
 - Teaching points
 - Discovery activities
 - Questions of exploration
 - Walking the Way (25-30 minutes)
 - Deep conversation
 - Communal interpretation
 - The Journey Continues... (5 minutes)
 - Questions
 - Challenge – for practicing application of concepts between sessions to aid retention
 - Prayer
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Session Overviews (in Participant Handout)

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)

Holy Cross is one of two churches in our Central States Synod who will be piloting this Bible study. The first three sessions in this study build on each other and provide practice with tools for interpreting scripture from a Lutheran understanding. The fourth session provides an opportunity to apply those tools to think about current issues. In considering a Session 4 for our pilot, along with our goal to be welcoming and share Jesus more with others, we thought, "What are some of the most difficult topics to have conversations about, that people tell us – I don't know how to respond to that?" That led us to select scripture related to sexuality for this pilot, so we can then get your feedback on whether this communal learning opportunity with corresponding tools really help you.

Example if needed: We might be in a conversation in which we say something like, Jesus teaches us to love not judge and the other person's response is, "But what about all the laws in Leviticus and what about what St. Paul says? Isn't the Bible the truth?"

SESSION 1 WHAT'S THE WORD?

Introduction

The theme for this session is **A Lutheran understanding of the Word of God.** (in Participant Handout)

Materials you'll need for this session include:

- Bibles for each participant. Encourage them to bring their own. Provide them with one to keep if they don't have one.
- Whiteboard or large flipchart
- Dry erase or other markers
- Copies of the participant handout with quotes and citations of Biblical and other references in the lesson, session summary and this week's challenge

Goals for this session are to: (in Participant Handout)

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

Gathering

Introductions

Welcome everyone! We are excited to be on this journey together as we seek to travel the way of Jesus by venturing into the Bible!

Let's take a moment for introductions. Please share your name and what you hope to gain from this Bible study. I'll start us out – My name is _____ and I hope to _____.

Covenant (in Participant Handout)

A "covenant" is an agreement between multiple parties on ways to be in relationship with one another. Throughout this Bible study we will seek to be in "covenant" with one another concerning how we interact with one another as we make this Biblical journey together.

*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 (in Participant Handout)

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

Divide into groups of two or three and ask them to answer the following questions with one another. Tell them to carefully listen but don't respond to each answer. Afterwards they will be asked to share the other person's response on their behalf.

(questions are in Participant Handout)

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?

Allow time for people to report what they heard to the group. Acknowledge the shared responses. Set the expectation that while we hope this Bible study series will help folks answer some of their questions about the Bible, we may not answer them all. Our focus is to think about how we read and interpret the Bible as Lutheran Christians.

Traveling Into Scripture

Transition

A commonly asked question is, "How do we trust the Bible?", including:

- *How do we know what the Bible says is true?*
- *What makes scripture credible, reliable enough that we make it the basis of our faith?*
- *What sets the Bible apart?*
- *What is it that makes the Bible more important/significant than other writings?*
- *What makes scripture over anything else, the Word of God?*

These are all questions of Biblical Authority. In order to answer these questions, we need to determine what we mean by "Word of God". How we approach scripture, how we read it, how we make meaning out of it is based on how we understand the Bible to be the Word of God.

So, What is the Word of God?

What is the Word? Activity

In this activity, participants will have the opportunity to explore some Bible passages that ground Martin Luther's understanding of the Word of God. The leader might open this activity in this or another similar way:

The Word of God is a central component to many of Martin Luther's works and theology. We are now going to explore some Bible passages that will help us frame how we as Lutherans understand the Word of God.

If there is a small group, stay together as a group, read each text and discuss each individually. If there is a larger group, consider breaking into 3-smaller groups and assign one text per group.

- Read John 1:1-5, 14
What does this passage say about the word of God? (Invite and affirm responses from the group)
 - Read Romans 10:14-17
What does this passage say about the word of God? (Invite and affirm responses from the group)
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- Read II Timothy 3:14-17
What does this passage say about the word of God? (Invite and affirm responses from the group)

Come back together and debrief as a large group. Record responses for each text on a whiteboard or flipchart if available (for visual learners). Summarize the following teaching points, possibly also diagramming Luther’s 3-fold understanding of the Word on a whiteboard/flipchart. (Diagram is in Participant Handout)

- *Though Luther’s theology of the Word is not contained neatly in one place, it is clear through all his works that he held a 3-fold understanding of the Word of God. **First** and foremost, the Word of God is the Living Word, Jesus Christ.*

Living
Word

*“The Word became flesh and lived among us...” John 1:14.
It is through Jesus that we know God most fully (John 14:6-7) and it is through Jesus that God has spoken to us most clearly (Hebrews 1:1-3a).*

Second, the Word of God is the Word proclaimed, that comes from what is heard about Christ (Romans 10:17).

Spoken
Word

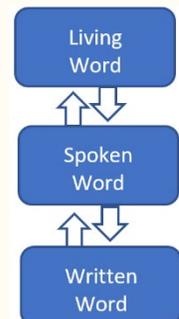
Speaking is proclamation when the Spirit makes Christ present to the listener through ordinary words of the one speaking. It is the spoken Word that makes the sacraments effective as a means of receiving God’s grace and it is through hearing the Gospel that we come to faith. (For more on this, refer to Luther’s Large Catechism concerning Baptism and Holy Communion and Luther’s explanation to the third article of the Apostle’s Creed in his Small Catechism. Luther also writes of holding the spoken Word higher in the hierarchy than the written scriptures in his preface to the Old Testament. See LW 35:123).

Finally, the Word of God is the written Word – scripture (II Timothy 3:16).

Written
Word

The books, letters, poems, allegories, songs, and other writings in the Bible are works written by humans who were inspired by God to write to an audience in a particular time. Through these written works, we get to see who God is, especially in Jesus.

- *This understanding of the Word of God is a hierarchy (Living Word is of the highest importance, from which the spoken and written word flow, Spoken/Proclaimed Word, Written Word), even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse – we read scripture which informs our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present and active in our lives. On account of this, how we read scripture must be framed by our understanding of who God is in Jesus Christ, the Living Word. It is the Living Word that gives power and authority to our proclamation. **Therefore, what gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present to us. This means that as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true – in terms of fact – but to find the Truth itself—Jesus Christ.***



Note to the Leader: This is the foundational point of this Bible study series. As appropriate, take some time to digest and discuss this point with participants. Here are some texts referenced above if helpful for further discussion.

- Hebrews 1:1-3a “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”
- “Concerning Baptism” Luther’s Large Catechism. Kolb & Wengert, The Book of Concord. “This is a rather subtle point, perhaps, but it is based upon what I have said, that baptism is simply water and God’s Word in and with each other; that is, when the Word accompanies the water, baptism is valid, even though faith is lacking. For my faith does not make baptism; rather it receives baptism. Baptism does not become invalid if it is not properly received or used, as I have said, for it is not bound to our faith but to the Word.”
- “The Sacrament of the Altar”, Luther’s Large Catechism. Kolb & Wengert, The Book of Concord. “Now, what is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of the Lord Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ’s word to eat and drink. And just as we said of baptism that it is not mere water, so we say here too, that the sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread and wine such as is served at the table. Rather, it is bread and wine set within God’s Word and bound to it. It is the Word, I say, that makes this a sacrament and distinguishes it from ordinary bread and wine, so that it is called and truly is Christ’s body and blood.”
- “The Creed: The Third Article: On Being Made Holy”, Luther’s Small Catechism. Kolb & Wengert. The Book of Concord. “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me to faith through the Gospel...”
- “Preface to the Old Testament”, Martin Luther. (LW 35:123) “And the gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but spoke. He called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.”

Walking the Way

Transition

Given that our understanding of scripture is grounded in the Living Word, Jesus Christ, we must then ask, “What does scripture tell us about Jesus?”

Interpret and Explore Activity

Instructions:

In this activity, participants have the opportunity to do some of their own exploration and interpretation of scripture, practicing looking for Christ.

If group size warrants, break into small groups of 4-5, ensuring you leave enough time for multi-group debrief as a large group to increase opportunities for learning and listening.

During debrief, it may be helpful to record responses to questions on whiteboard or flipchart. (Verses and questions are in Participant Handout)

First Scripture Reading Context:

John 3:11-17 This text occurs after Jesus has turned over tables in the temple, catching more attention from the Judean religious leaders than he had in the beginning of his ministry. The leaders don't know what to make of Jesus. One member of the Jewish Council, called the Sanhedrin, decides to come to Jesus under the cover of darkness. His name was Nicodemus. Nicodemus, curious about who Jesus is and Jesus' teachings and actions, gets into a conversation with Jesus about Jesus' identity and origin.

Read John 3:11-17 and discuss the following questions:

- What does this text tell us about God?
- What does this text tell us about us?
- What does this text show us about Jesus?
 - What is Jesus' identity?
 - Where does Jesus come from?
 - What is Jesus' purpose?
 - What else?

Second Scripture Reading Context:

John 10:7-18 This passage includes two of the I AM sayings unique to the Gospel of John that Jesus makes about himself. These statements are one of the central components to the Gospel of John, which seeks primarily to answer the questions of Jesus' identity, particularly what it means that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is speaking to a group of his followers as well as some Pharisees who are inquiring about a man born blind to whom Jesus restored sight.

Read John 10:7-18 and discuss the following questions:

- What does this text tell us about God?
- What does this text tell us about us?
- What does this text show us about Jesus?
 - What is Jesus' identity?
 - Where does Jesus come from?
 - What is Jesus' purpose?
 - What else?

In large group debrief small group discussions and then summarize as follows:

Given what we have learned from these passages, what can we say about Jesus?

Remember: Jesus is the Word made flesh. How do these passages shape how we understand Jesus as God's Living Word?

If we read scripture to find the Truth, that is Jesus himself, how does our understanding of Jesus as the Living Word inform how we read the Bible?

The Journey Continues...

Wrap-up

Ask the group the following questions, noting that you are not expected to respond to what is shared. Simply acknowledge what is shared. This is an intentional way to affirm that we are still learning and growing together.

What are you going to take away from our time today?

What are you still struggling with? What questions do you still have?

If the group is struggling to respond, you could recap main points from the session as follows:

- Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word of God is hierarchical – the **Living Word**, Jesus Christ; the Proclaimed or **Spoken Word**, the promises of Christ declared; and the **Written Word**, the Bible—even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse (we use scripture to inform our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present in us).
- How we read scripture is fundamentally grounded in how we understand Jesus to be God's Living Word.
- What gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present in us.
- Therefore, as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to find the Truth itself – Jesus Christ.

Challenge (in Participant Handout)

At some point before our next session, find one piece of scripture – whether in your personal devotion or study or one that you hear somewhere or one that is used in worship this week – and take some time to ask our interpretive questions about that passage:

- What does this text tell us about God?
- What does this text tell us about us?
- How does this text show us the Truth – God's love in Jesus?

Closing Prayer: The Lord's Prayer

SESSION 2

WHAT DOES THE WORD SAY?

Introduction

The theme for this session is **A Lutheran approach to interpreting scripture.**

Materials you need for this session include:

- Bibles for each participant. Encourage them to bring their own. Provide them with one to keep if they don't have one.
- Whiteboard or large flipchart
- Dry erase or other markers
- Copies of the participant handout with verses and discussion questions and other references in the lesson, session summary and this week's challenge
- Signs to post in the gathering space that designate "LAW" and "GOSPEL" locations for the opening activity

Goals for this session are to:

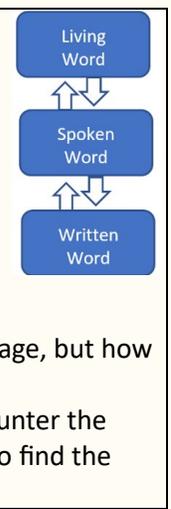
- Explore Luther's dialectic of Law/Gospel (dialectic definition: the art of investigating/discussing the truth of opinions; discussing differing opinions to get to the truth)
- Develop skill of reading scripture through the lens of Christ
- Practice using scripture to interpret scripture

Gathering

Welcome and Recap

Welcome to our second session in our Bible Study series—Traveling the Way of Jesus: A Biblical Journey! If you were here for the first session, we're glad you're back. If this is your first session, we're glad you've joined us!

Let's start with a brief recap of what we covered last time. For those who were here, what can you share/what do you remember from Session 1?

<p>Note to the leader – ensure the following points are mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word of God is hierarchical – 1) the Living Word, Jesus Christ, 2) the Proclaimed or Spoken Word, the promises Christ declared, and 3) the Written Word, the Bible, even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse (we use scripture to inform our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present to us). ○ How we read scripture is fundamentally grounded in how we understand Jesus to be God's Living Word. ○ What gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present in us. ○ Therefore, as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to find the Truth itself—Jesus Christ. 	
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Today, we'll continue to build on our Lutheran understanding of the Word and think about how what we covered in the first session informs how we interpret the Bible together as a community of faith.

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 being open and to listen intentionally and compassionately to one another. We recognize that we are all at different places in our faith journey and we 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

Today we'll be exploring one of the key aspects of Lutheran theology that shapes how we read scripture. We understand that scripture can be classified into two topics: the Law and the Gospel.

The law holds two primary functions: 1) to lay out how God desires and intends us to live in relationship with God and one another, and 2) to remind us of our brokenness, the brokenness of the world, and that we are unable by our own power to live up to the law, convicting us of our sin.

The Gospel is the promise of God—the word about God's grace—that though we are bound to sin, we are loved by God and set free from sin to live in loving relationship with God and one another on account of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

(Note to the leader: Further study of this can be found in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4; and the Formula of Concord, Article 5).

Instructions:

In this activity, for those who are able, please stand and line up in the middle of the room. I'm going to read aloud some brief passages. I've designated one side of the room as the "LAW" side and another to be the "GOSPEL" side. For each passage, you are invited to indicate whether you think the passage is LAW or GOSPEL by moving to the corresponding side of the room. If physically moving is difficult for you, you are invited to indicate your opinion by pointing to the corresponding side of the room. What questions do you have before we begin?

This first set of passages are to help us ensure we understand the concept of LAW and GOSPEL. Some passages are not from scripture.

(Leader: identify out loud which statements are LAW and which are GOSPEL after people have had the opportunity to indicate their choice).

1. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves (LAW)
2. In the name of Jesus, your sin is forgiven (GOSPEL)

3. "By grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your doing; it is the gift of God." Ephesians 2:8 (GOSPEL)
4. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" Romans 3:23 (LAW)
5. You are God's beloved child (GOSPEL; this statement is a word of grace)
6. "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matthew 5:44 (LAW; reveals God's desire for how we live together)

Now that we have the concept down, let's apply this concept to scripture!

(Note to Leader: After someone reads a passage, give everyone the opportunity to indicate their choice and explain why they made that choice. DO NOT CONCLUDE THAT ANY PASSAGE IS STRICTLY ONE OR THE OTHER. Just affirm responses.)

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

Activity Summary:

Notice how there was not agreement on all those passages. That's because there is law and Gospel throughout Scripture. Many passages from scripture can be heard as both LAW and GOSPEL. Therefore, one important aspect to how we read scripture is to listen for both.

Traveling Into Scripture

Transition

In order for us to apply this concept to how we interpret scripture, we are going to explore what the Bible says about law and Gospel. As always, we keep in mind that we read scripture through the lens of Christ—not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to encounter the Truth itself, the Living Christ.

Note to Leader: It may be helpful to take notes on a whiteboard/flipchart during this portion to keep track of the conversation. For the sake of time, it is suggested that this portion be done in large group.

The Law

Let's see what the Bible says about the law.

- Have someone read Romans 3:9-12, 19-20
 - *What does this passage tell us about the law?* (Affirm responses)
 - POINT=> *Everyone falls short of fulfilling the law and through the law comes knowledge of sin.*
- Have someone read Romans 7:11-25
 - *What does this passage tell us about the law?* (Affirm responses)
 - POINT=> *The law shows us what sin is and even though we want to follow the law we cannot.*
- Have someone read Galatians 3:19-28
 - *What does this passage tell us about the law?* (Affirm responses)

- POINT=> *The law was our disciplinarian but now because of Christ we are not subject to it—not that it no longer matters but our salvation is not dependent upon it—and because of Christ we are ALL God’s children.*
- Have someone read Galatians 5:13-14
 - *What does this passage tell us about the law? (Affirm responses)*
 - POINT=> *The law = love one another. We are free from fulfilling the law perfectly (we can’t because of sin) and we are not to use our freedom to harm others.*

The Gospel

Now let’s move to the Gospel, though as you have probably noticed and will continue to see, there is crossover.

- Have someone read Romans 1:16-17
 - *What does this passage tell us about the Gospel? (Affirm responses)*
 - POINT=> *It is the power of God for the purpose of salvation.*
- Have someone read Galatians 1:6-12
 - *What does this passage tell us about the Gospel? (Affirm responses)*
 - POINT=> *There is only one Gospel.*
- *What is the Gospel?*
 - Have someone read Romans 3:21-24
 - POINT=> *We are saved by grace as a gift.*
- *What does this mean?*
 - Have someone read Romans 8:31-39
 - POINT=> *NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.*

Summary

Note to the Leader: This is a key point of the Bible study that is crucial to everything that follows. Be sure to make this a point.

Teaching Point: The law reminds us of the brokenness of the world and our own brokenness imperfection, and sin because we cannot live in loving relationship with God and one another on our own. The law is still important because of this. AND the Gospel sets us free from that brokenness and sin so that following the law perfectly (which is impossible) is no longer required. The LOVE OF GOD is for ALL and it is stronger than anything else could possibly be. We often times get stuck in the law, but we cannot stay there because of the Gospel. The power of the Gospel does not allow us to stop with the law but draws us into the never ending, overwhelming love of God. The gospel also frees us to live as God desires, not to earn salvation, but show love for our neighbor. For this reason, we read scripture listening for BOTH law AND Gospel.

Walking the Way

Transition

One thing that is all too easy for us to do when reading scripture is to categorize one passage or another as law or Gospel. However, like we discovered in our opening activity, law and Gospel can both be found throughout scripture. Martin Luther called scripture “the manger in which Christ lies”. (“Preface to the Old Testament,” LW 35:236) We read all of scripture listening to how God is using it to reveal Christ to us. And as we read and listen, we will have questions about “what does this mean”. We do not rely on ourselves to come up with the answer. Instead, we read and study scripture in community and conversation with others AND we use scripture to interpret scripture.

Instructions

Note to Leader: As the number of participants allows, break into small groups. As the leader, you have a decision to make at this juncture. There are two sets of texts; one focuses more on the Word, the other focuses on how we live out our faith in God. You do not need to do both. You may choose to have all groups do one set of texts with all the passages, one text per group from one set or different groups do different sets. It is recommended not to randomize texts across sets as one of the points of this activity is to practice using scripture to interpret scripture. It is also not recommended to have all groups do both sets for time purposes. Do whatever you feel is most beneficial to your context. Either way, you will want to leave some time for a large group debrief so that everyone can glean from conversations amongst the other groups as this will help reinforce the importance of hearing multiple voices and interpreting the Bible as a communal act. You may introduce the activity in the following or similar manner:

We are now going to take some time and practice our interpreting skills, including:

- *listening for law and Gospel,*
- *using scripture to interpret other scripture, and*
- *reading scripture to encounter the Truth himself, Jesus Christ*

Set 1: More on the Word

Note to Leader: It may be helpful to think through how you might answer some of these questions ahead of the session so that you have some possible suggestions as a catalyst for discussion if it is needed.

- Read Isaiah 55:6-11
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- Read John 1:1-14
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- Read John 14:1-7
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- 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/manger 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 Isaiah 1:12-18
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- Read John 2:13-22
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- Read Micah 6:1-8
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- Read John 15:9-17
 - How do you hear the law in this text?
 - How do you hear the Gospel in this text?
- 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?

Debrief as a large group and summarize what has been lifted up.

Teaching Point: The law still holds a purpose even though we are saved by faith. It holds up a mirror and shows us what our true repentance—whether it be a change in mind, way of living, or both—should look like. This is helpful and can guide us as we seek to grow in our faithfulness. AND we cannot allow ourselves to get stuck in the law. We cannot use the law to beat ourselves up because we are set free by the Gospel—free from guilt and free to live differently. Likewise, we cannot use the law to beat up others because they have also been set free by the Gospel in the same way. In the end the Gospel—the promise of God’s grace—trumps everything. Christ wins! Grace wins!

The Journey Continues...

Wrap-up

Ask the group the following questions, noting that you are not expected to respond to what is shared with these questions. Simply acknowledge what people share. This is an intentional way to affirm that we are still learning and growing together.

What are you going to take away from our time today?

What are you still struggling with? What questions do you still have?

To help spark conversation, it may be helpful to recap main points we've talked about as follows:
Session 1:

- Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word of God is hierarchical – the **Living Word**, Jesus Christ; the Proclaimed or **Spoken Word**, the promises of Christ declared; and the **Written Word**, the Bible—even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse (we use scripture to inform our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present in us).
- How we read scripture is fundamentally grounded in how we understand Jesus to be God's Living Word.
- What gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present in us.
- Therefore, as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to find the Truth itself – Jesus Christ.

Session 2:

- We understand both law (shows us our brokenness and the brokenness of the world) and the Gospel (the promise of God's grace in Jesus Christ) are found throughout scripture. The purpose of scripture is to point us to the Truth—Jesus Christ.
- When we are reading and listening to scripture and we ask “what does this mean?” we do not rely on ourselves to answer the question. Instead, we read scripture in community with others and use scripture to interpret scripture. In other words when we have a question about scripture, we turn to other parts of the Bible to see what scripture has to say about it.

Challenge

Take some time to look at the Bible readings from either this Sunday's or last Sunday's worship service. Pick at least two. Consider 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.** (in Participant Handout)

Materials you'll need for this session include:

- Bibles for each participant. Encourage them to bring their own. Provide them with one to keep if they don't have one.
- Whiteboard or large flipchart
- Dry erase or other markers
- Copies of the participant handout with quotes and citations of Biblical and other references in the lesson, session summary and this week's challenge

Goals for this session are to: (in Participant Handout)

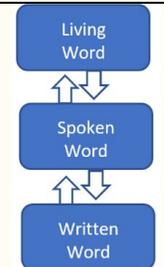
- Be reminded that we are not judge, Jesus is
- Explore how God's love changes how we read scripture and apply scripture to our lives

Gathering

Welcome and Recap

Welcome to our third session in our Bible Study series—Traveling the Way of Jesus: A Biblical Journey! If you were here for the first two sessions, we are glad you're back. If this is your first session, we're glad you've joined us!

Let's start with a brief recap of what we've covered so far. For those who were here, what can you share/what do you remember from our first two sessions?

<p>Note to the leader – ensure the following points are mentioned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word of God is hierarchical – 1) the Living Word, Jesus Christ, 2) the Proclaimed or Spoken Word, the promises Christ declared, and 3) the Written Word, the Bible, even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse (we use scripture to inform our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present to us).○ How we read scripture is fundamentally grounded in how we understand Jesus to be God's Living Word.○ What gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present in us.○ Therefore, as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to find the Truth itself—Jesus Christ.○ We understand both law (shows us our brokenness and the brokenness of the world) and the Gospel (the promise of God's grace in Jesus Christ) are found throughout scripture. The purpose of scripture is to point us to the Truth—Jesus Christ.○ When we are reading and listening to scripture and we ask "what does this mean?" we do not rely on ourselves to answer the question. Instead, we read scripture in community	
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with others and use scripture to interpret scripture. In other words when we have a question about scripture, we turn to other parts of the Bible to see what scripture has to say about it.

Today, we will continue to build on our Lutheran understanding of the Word and think about how that applies to our approach when we are dealing with difficult differences between us and others.

Covenant (in Participant Handout)

*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 being open and to listen intentionally and compassionately to one another. We recognize that we are all at different places in our faith journey and we 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 (in Participant Handout)

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 (in Participant Handout)

Note to Leader: This activity requires some movement. If there are participants present whose mobility is restricted for whatever reason, be creative in finding ways to include them in the activity.

Instructions:

Please listen to the full instructions before beginning.

For this task you are not allowed to talk, write, or use any smart devices, including phones. Your task is to put yourselves in order according to your birth month and within a month, birth day. Both month and day matter in this task. For example, if three people were born February 3, January 31, and February 27, they would end up in this order: January 31, February 3, February 27. The year you were born does not matter in this task. For example, someone born on May 2 would be before someone born on July 13 even if the person born on July 13 is older (lower birth year) than the person born on May 2.

Once you all think you are in the correct order, we will go through and check to see if you got it right.

What questions do you have? Remember there is no talking after questions are answered. GO!

Debrief:

Do a check when people think they are in order to see if they got it right. Then ask:

- *What was difficult or easy about this task?*
- *Were any of you able to figure it out entirely on your own?*
- *Did you all figure things out the same way or at least start the same way? How did you overcome the differences?*
- *Imagine you had to do this blindfolded. How do you think that would go?*
POINT=>You needed something in common, seeing each other, in order to do this task.

Teaching Point and Transition:

Note to Leader: This is a key point in the Bible study that the rest of the study depends on. Be sure to make this point.

In this situation, there was a challenge on which you needed to cooperate with each other. You needed one another to help figure it out and could not do it on your own.

Any differences in approach that were between you needed to be bridged by finding something in common, whether that be understanding or method of communication, in order to complete the task.

This is also how we approach the Bible. We each have different thoughts on how we read various parts of scripture and how we understand it. Often these differences can lead to disagreements, conflict or even divisions among us.

Thankfully we have something in common that bridges those differences in how we approach scripture. We read the Bible to encounter the Truth itself, Jesus Christ, and in Christ we come to know most fully who God is: God is love. God's Word for us and the World in Jesus is LOVE. And that changes how we see and approach others with whom we have differences.

We are going to explore that now.

Traveling Into Scripture

Note to Leader: It may be helpful to take notes on a whiteboard/flipchart to track the conversation and discussion points.

"God's Word is Love" Activity (in Participant Handout)

Context – John 3:16-17

Jesus' identity as the Son of God and what that means is a primary theme in the Gospel of John. In John 1, we hear that through God's Word "all things came into being" and "what has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people." (John1:3-4)

In John 2 we witness Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, a sign of God's abundance that is being brought into the world through Jesus. We hear Jesus claiming authority and cleansing the temple, throwing out money changers, overturning tables, and teaching about the temple of his body.

Then, Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish high council—called the Sanhedrin—comes to talk with Jesus under the cover of darkness. He is curious about Jesus’ identity. The passage we’re going to dive further into, comes from the middle of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus.

*Can someone please read **John 3:16-17**?*

- 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?

Context – I John 4:7-21

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”. (I John 1:1; 2:7; 3:11)

*Can someone please read **I John 4:7-21**?*

- 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?

Context – Matthew 7:1-5

Matthew’s Gospel highlights Jesus’ role as a rabbi—teacher—and structures the story of Jesus’ life and ministry around his teachings. This passage from Matthew comes from the middle of Jesus’ first and most significant teaching in Matthew’s Gospel, common referred to as the sermon on the mount.

Jesus’ sermon on the mount is central to how we understand the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus begins the sermon on the mount with the beatitudes (Blessed be...), which serve to outline how the Kingdom of God, which Jesus is inaugurating on earth, is different than the kingdom of the world.

Then Jesus teaches from the law and prophets about what it means to live differently on account of the Kingdom of God; how to live in ways that continue the work that Jesus started in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth.

*Can someone please read **Matthew 7:1-5**?*

- 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?

Context – Romans 14:13-19

Paul’s letter to the Romans is one of the last letters that Paul wrote and it is the only letter of Paul that is written to a Christian community that he did not establish himself. Therefore, Romans

serves as a way of Paul introducing himself and establishing rapport with the Christians in Rome before he arrives.

The Christian community in Rome was predominately Gentile (non-Jewish), though there were a growing number of Jewish Christians making their way to Rome due to persecution. It is an understatement to say that there were many(!) cultural differences and tensions between these groups.

Paul spends the first 11 chapters of the letter explaining and proving that the Gospel is for ALL people. The rest of the letter is spent giving instructions on how to live together despite their differences because of how they are united by the Gospel, which “is the power of God”, which is for all, and which declares that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. (Romans 1:16; 8:39)

Can someone please read 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?

Summary

Briefly tie together the main points that have come from each text, including:

- God is love
- God shows us God’s love in Jesus
- God loves us first
- God’s intention is salvation for all
- Because of God’s love for us we are called to live in the world differently; most pointedly, we are to live in ways that embody God’s love in the world
- Because of God’s love, we are all on the same playing field: people loved by God for whom Christ has lived, died and risen
- That means none of us is over and above another
 - Therefore, we are not to judge others,
Note: There is a difference in holding one another accountable for behavior that does not harm neighbor but contributes to the wellbeing of God’s creation and judging whether one is saved.
 - Nor are we to cause someone else to stumble in their faith because of what we think/believe

Teaching Point: Our approach to others, regardless of our differences, is framed by God’s Living Word, made flesh in Jesus, who is God’s love for the WHOLE world. We see and approach one another through that love. God’s love bridges the differences between us and changes how we live in relationship with one another. No matter what happens, no matter who we are, no matter who we encounter, no matter what differences might be between us, at the end of the day, the Gospel wins. Grace wins. God’s love wins!

Walking the Way

Transition

Over the past several sessions we have had time to dive fairly deeply into how we read the Bible and understand God's Word, and in this session have seen how ultimately God's love is the foundation of not only our relationship with God but also our relationships with others. So now, we are going to do some interpretation together using the tools we have built in this Bible study to see how all this applies to our everyday lives.

Note to Leader: As the number of participants allows, break into small groups. If you have enough for small groups, be sure to leave time at the end to debrief as a large group so that everyone can glean from conversations in other groups.

Overcoming Differences

Please remind yourselves of the covenant you have entered into during this Bible study:

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 own thoughts and feelings as being truly your own. We also ask everyone to commit to being open and to listen intentionally and compassionately to one another. We recognize that we are all at different places in our faith journey and we 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.

*This is a safe space for you to be you, to own your own thoughts, and to listen to others without judgment. **I would also ask that everyone please maintain double confidentiality--what is shared stays in the group and in this session.***

Can someone please read Ephesians 2:13-16 aloud, and someone else read Ephesians 4:29-5:1 aloud? (in Participant Handout)

- *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?*

To apply this to our own lives, what is a situation in your life where you have 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?*

To apply this to our church, what is a situation in the church where 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?*

Debrief

- *Again, ask folks to please maintain double confidentiality--what is shared stays in the group and in this session.*
- *Remind folks to speak for themselves, not others.*
- *Invite sharing as people are willing, of what they are taking away from the small group conversations.*

The Journey Continues...

Wrap-up

Note to Leader: It is not expected that you respond to what is shared with these questions. Simply acknowledge what people share. This is an intentional way to affirm that we are still learning and growing together.

- *What are you going to take away from our time today?*
- *What are you still struggling with? What questions do you still have?*

To help spark conversation, it may be helpful to recap main points we've talked about as follows:
Session 1:

- Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word of God is hierarchical – the **Living Word**, Jesus Christ; the Proclaimed or **Spoken Word**, the promises of Christ declared; and the **Written Word**, the Bible—even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse (we use scripture to inform our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present in us).
- How we read scripture is fundamentally grounded in how we understand Jesus to be God's Living Word.
- What gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present in us.
- Therefore, as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to find the Truth itself – Jesus Christ.

Session 2:

- We understand both law (shows us our brokenness and the brokenness of the world) and the Gospel (the promise of God's grace in Jesus Christ) are found throughout scripture. The purpose of scripture is to point us to the Truth—Jesus Christ.
- When we are reading and listening to scripture and we ask "what does this mean?" we do not rely on ourselves to answer the question. Instead, we read scripture in community with others and use scripture to interpret scripture. In other words when we have a question about scripture, we turn to other parts of the Bible to see what scripture has to say about it.

Session 3:

- By recognizing that the Word of God is Jesus and that the written scriptures are the cradle for Christ through which we experience the Truth itself—Christ—we interpret scripture with God’s love as the starting point and basis of our interpretation.
- God is love God’s love is revealed in Jesus.
- No matter what, at the end of the day, the Gospel wins. Grace wins. God’s love wins and triumphs over all, even the differences and divisions among us.
- God’s love is the basis not just for our approach to reading scripture but also our approach to being in relationship with others.

Challenge (in Participant Handout)

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

Closing Prayer: The Lord’s 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.** (in Participant Handout)

Materials you'll need for this session include:

- Bibles for each participant. Encourage them to bring their own. Provide them with one to keep if they don't have one.
- Baptismal font with water in it (a bowl will do if the font isn't available)
- A flagon or pitcher of water to pour water into the font during the remembrance of baptism
- A candle and lighter/match
- Something tangible (e.g. a rock, palm cross, prayer rope, prayer square, etc.) for folks to take with them to remind them of the recentering technique
- Pieces of paper
- Writing utensils
- Copies of the participant handout with quotes and citations of Biblical and other references in the lesson, session summary and this week's challenge

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. (in Participant Handout)

Note to Leader: It may be helpful to plan for and announce this session ahead of time to allow more time than the previous sessions for the preparation, teaching and discussion required by this session.

Gathering

Welcome and Recap

Welcome to our fourth session in our Bible Study series—Traveling the Way of Jesus: A Biblical Journey! We recommend that you've attended or reviewed the materials from the earlier sessions before attending this final session, as tools learned in the first three sessions will be used heavily in today's session.

Let's start with a brief recap of what we've covered so far. For those who were here, what can you share/what do you remember from our first three sessions?

Note to the leader – ensure the following points are mentioned:

Session 1:

- Luther's 3-fold understanding of the Word of God is hierarchical – 1) the Living Word, Jesus Christ, 2) the Proclaimed or Spoken Word, the promises Christ declared, and 3) the Written Word, the Bible, even though our experience of the Word of God is inverse (we use scripture to inform our proclamation which the Holy Spirit uses to make the Living Christ present to us).
- How we read scripture is fundamentally grounded in how we understand Jesus to be God's Living Word.



- What gives scripture its power and authority is not the words written on the page, but how God uses the words on the page to make the Living Christ present in us.
- Therefore, as Lutherans, we do not read scripture literally, but instead to encounter the Living Christ. We read the Bible not to find what is true (in terms of fact), but to find the Truth itself—Jesus Christ.

Session 2:

- We understand both law (shows us our brokenness and the brokenness of the world) and the Gospel (the promise of God’s grace in Jesus Christ) are found throughout scripture. The purpose of scripture is to point us to the Truth—Jesus Christ.
- When we are reading and listening to scripture and we ask “what does this mean?” we do not rely on ourselves to answer the question. Instead, we read scripture in community with others and use scripture to interpret scripture. In other words when we have a question about scripture, we turn to other parts of the Bible to see what scripture has to say about it.

Session 3:

- By recognizing that the Word of God is Jesus and that the written scriptures are the cradle for Christ through which we experience the Truth itself—Christ—we interpret scripture with God’s love as the starting point and basis of our interpretation.
- God is love God’s love is revealed in Jesus.
- No matter what, at the end of the day, the Gospel wins. Grace wins. God’s love wins and triumphs over all, even the differences and divisions among us.
- God’s love is the basis not just for our approach to reading scripture but also our approach to being in relationship with others.

Today, we will seek to use the tools that we have developed for interpreting scripture as a community through the lens of Christ to provide a framework to discuss the topic of human sexuality. This is a sensitive topic for many people. Therefore, it is more important than ever to remember and hold on to what we have learned about the power of the Gospel and the love of God in our previous sessions. We approach one another with grace and this topic with openness, recognizing that we all may not agree and yet are united in the love of God.

Covenant (in Participant Handout)

*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 being open and to listen intentionally and compassionately to one another. We recognize that we are all at different places in our faith journey and we 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 (in Participant Handout)

Adapted from the ELW Thanksgiving at the Font options and Thanksgiving for Baptism

Gather around the font in a circle and light a candle. As you light the candle, begin with these words:

We light this candle as a reminder of the light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome, the same light that shines in each of us by the power of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Leader: *I invite you all to give thanks for baptism. Joined to Christ in the waters of baptism, we are clothed with God's mercy and forgiveness. Let us give thanks for the gift of baptism.*

Water may be poured into the font during the following prayer of Thanksgiving:

Leader: *We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight. Through the waters of the flood, you delivered Noah and his family. Through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom. At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. By water and your Word, you claim us as your beloved children making us heirs of your promise and servants of all. Breathe again your Spirit into all who are gathered here and into all creation. Illumine our hearts. Enliven our bones. Dry our tears. Wash away the sin within us, and drown the evil around us. Satisfy all our thirst with your living water, Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.*

All: Amen.

Remembering Baptism

As a way to acknowledge our belovedness and the belovedness of all those gathered here, I now invite you to in turn, come forward and receive the sign of the cross on your forehead or hand, whichever you prefer, and then to mark the sign of the cross for the next person. We will go around the circle. As you mark the sign of the cross, say to the person receiving, "<their name>, you are a beloved child of God".

The leader will be the first to mark the sign of the cross and it will go around the circle until the leader is the last person to receive the sign of the cross. When all have received the sign of the cross continue with the blessing.

Almighty God, who gives us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and forgives us all our sins, strengthen us in all goodness and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

Prayer (to be prayed as a group)

Let us pray together.

All: *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 (in Participant Handout)

Note to Leader: Hand out the tangible item to remind them of the technique you are about to teach. Go through the technique slowly. Don't rush it. Once everyone has a recentering item, lead them through this practice.

Given that our session today may stir some emotions and lead us into some holy conversations, we want you to have this item as a way to remind yourself to engage in what is called a recentering practice.

1. *Find yourself 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)*
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.*

Traveling Into Scripture

Transition

Now that we are centered in the love of God, let's turn to our topic of human sexuality.

Human sexuality has been a source of dialogue and disagreement in the church for quite some time. A sexual beings created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), how we live out our sexuality is core to being who God created us to be.

Note to Leader: If it would be helpful and if you have time, the ELCA's social statement, Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust, says this:

"Sexuality can be integral to the desire to commit oneself to life with another, to touch and be touched, and to love and be loved. Such powers are complex and ambiguous. They can be used well or badly. They can bring astonishing joy and delight. Such powers can serve God and serve the neighbor. They also can hurt self or hurt the neighbor. Sexuality finds expression at the extreme ends of human experience: in love, care, and security, or lust, cold indifference, and exploitation. Sexuality consists of a rich and diverse combination of relational, emotional, and physical interactions and possibilities. It surely does not consist solely of erotic desire. Erotic desire, in the narrow sense, is only one component of the relational bonds that humans crave as sexual beings. Although not all relationships are sexual, at some level most sexual relationships are about companionship. Although some people may remain single, either intentionally or unintentionally, all people need and delight in companionship, and all are vulnerable to loneliness. The need to share our lives with others is a profound good (Genesis 2:18). The counsel to love and care for the neighbor is not a command that is foreign to our created natures; rather, reaching out in love and care is part of who we are as relational and sexual beings. Even if we never have sexual intimacy, we all seek and respond to the bonds and needs of relationships." (p11)

With sexuality being integral to who we are as beings created in God's image, it is necessary for us to approach how we think about human sexuality grounded in God's command for us to love one another and to approach one another with "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" because "there is no law against such things".

*(Galatians 5:22-23) **This will be the foundation of our conversation today.***

One of the passages that has been frequently used in conversations surrounding human sexuality is found in Leviticus. We are going to look at this passage now using the tools we have developed in our previous sessions. Recognizing that the Bible as the written Word of God has human authors inspired by God who wrote to particular audiences, we start looking at what the authors of Leviticus were addressing.

"What Does This Mean?" Activity

Context – Leviticus

Note to Leader: The introduction to Leviticus in the Lutheran Study Bible (available through Fortress Press) is a good resource for background information.

- *Leviticus was written during the Babylonian Exile, a time when Israel had been conquered by the Babylonian Empire. In order to better control the people they conquered, the Babylonians would take significant portions of the population and force them to live elsewhere in the empire. The Israelites in exile had been forcefully removed from their homeland and people they knew--including family--and forced to live as a part of Babylonian culture and society. As a way to maintain a sense of cultural identity as the people of Yahweh, the Israelite priests in exile wrote Leviticus, which sets forth guidance for all the Israelites in exile to live differently as people of God in ways that honor God, honor worship of God, honor relationships with others, and honor the earth.*
- *The Babylonians, as well as many other cultures, were more sexually promiscuous than the Israelites. The Israelites also recognized the ways that sex is easily misused. In that time, there was fear of and reverence of sex and illnesses because they were largely mysterious to them. Semen was seen as the seed of life and they regarded it as being powerful given that God alone is the source of life. They knew that sexual intercourse could also spread some diseases. Illness was believed to be connected directly to forces of evil. This shaped how they thought about the act of sexual intercourse.*
- *Animals that were out of place in the environment or that were foreign were often labeled as "unclean" given that they knew illness could be caused from eating certain foods leading them to be stricter in their diet.*
- *At the core of the identity of the Israelites was the covenant God made with Moses in the ten commandments. The ten commandments lay out generally that they are to be in right relationship with God and with one another. Therefore, all of the laws and codes written in Leviticus serve the purpose of finding ways for them to live differently than the Babylonians that help them live in loving, life-giving relationship with God and one another. This includes many codes/laws that serve to promote physical health.*

Ask for three volunteers to read aloud the following three passages from Leviticus.
(in Participant Handout)

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?*

Context – Matthew 22:34-40 (in Participant Handout)

Ask someone to read Matthew 22:34-40

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?*
POINT=> The heart and intention of the codes is to love God, neighbor, and all that God has created. This is part of the Gospel that we hear in Leviticus.

Context – Leviticus 11:46-47 (in Participant Handout)

Ask someone to read Leviticus 11:46-47

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

Context – Acts 10:9-16, 30-34 (in Participant Handout)

Ask someone to read Acts 10:9-16, 30-34

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?*

Teaching Point: Remember what we have learned previously: when we are reading scripture, we do not look for facts in words on the page but we read scripture looking for how God is using the words on the page to draw us into relationship with the Truth itself--Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, the Word made flesh, we see God's love for the whole world. The LOVE OF GOD is for ALL and it is stronger than anything else could possibly be.

We often times get stuck in the law, but we cannot stay there because of the Gospel. The power of the Gospel does not allow us to stop with the law but draws us into the never ending, overwhelming love of God. At the end of the day, no matter what, the Gospel wins. Grace wins. Love wins.

Walking the Way

Transition

Now we are going to continue our exploration of scripture concerning human sexuality using the tools we have been gaining throughout this Bible Study.

Remind the group of the Covenant and the Recentering Practice.

Note to Leader: As the number of participants allows, this section should be done in small groups, with each small group being assigned passages from one of the following sections. If you have more than three small groups, it is fine for other groups to double up on which section they work through. If you don't have enough for small groups and need to stay in a large group, pick which section you feel would be most helpful for your group.

Romans Section (in Participant Handout)

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 (in Participant Handout)

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!*
- *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 (in Participant Handout)

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 (in Participant Handout)

Have small groups report on their conversations.

- 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?

Teaching Point: If you are struggling more with this session than previous sessions, ask yourself: What is the source of that tension? A long-held belief being challenged? Fear of what might not be understood or what is different?

No matter where you are at and how you feel, acknowledge that to yourself for a minute. As we have learned, we read scripture to see how God uses it to show us Christ. Christ shows us God's love. And no matter where we are at, whether we agree or not, at the end of the day, God's grace wins.

This is core to our Christian and Lutheran identity. And while grace can make us uncomfortable at times, it is still what unites us and makes us one. Where you are struggling allow yourself to receive the grace of God. Where you are struggling with others, regard them with that same grace.

Activity: Next Steps (in Participant Handout)

Instructions: Pass out pieces of paper and writing utensils. Encourage people to journal or draw to reflect on the following prompts. Encourage them to take it with them as a reminder of the commitment they have made to themselves. Whatever they write or draw is between them and God, they 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...

Wrap-up

Note to Leader: It is not expected that you respond to what is shared with these questions. Simply acknowledge what people share. This is an intentional way to affirm that we are still learning and growing together.

- *What are you going to take away from our Bible Study? What has been most helpful?*
- *What are you still struggling with? What questions do you still have? What has been most challenging?*

Challenge (in Participant Handout)

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.

Thank you for joining us for this Bible Study! It has truly been holy time, holy learning, and holy conversation.

Closing Prayer: The Lord's Prayer

Document Change Log

Summary of Change	Date	Owner
Proofreading updates and minor modifications to Law/Gospel from review by Bishop S. Canda	8/24/2023	D. Morin
Proofreading updates in Session 4 scripture	10/26/2023	D. Morin
