

Faithful & Afire

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2012-2013

Called To Be Christ's Witnesses

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

LEADER'S GUIDE

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

1. Focus of This Study

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

These questions assume greater importance for us today, because as we have become more urbanized people have, we become increasingly distanced and isolated from creation as we live almost exclusively in climate-controlled environments of our own making. We have lost touch with the seasons and when food comes into season for we have everything year around in the supermarket. Children are surprised to learn that tomatoes grow on vines and do not come from the supermarket. Many no longer see the stars at night.

Jesus, the prophets, and the psalmists all point to elements in creation as witnesses to God. So did church fathers from Irenaeus to Basil to Luther. For them, to ignore creation's witness to God is to disparage creation as God's good work. However, Christians can receive creation as a witness to the good works of the Creator who has also graciously revealed himself as their Father in Christ. Thus, they can receive creation as God's providential care for them born of the same love that redeemed them in Christ.

2. Scripture Search

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

Job 38-39

1). What is the context for the book of Job and central question(s) that is/are being asked?

We know well the story of Job. He was a god-fearing man who lost his wife, his children, his health, and all of his property. Job asks the classic theodicy question: ("why do bad things happen to good people?"). He does not question that God is all-powerful but he does question God's moral ordering of the world. As a God-fearing man, he argued did not deserve to lose his family, his wealth, and his health. It seems as if God wields his power capriciously, arbitrarily, and unfairly.

2). For 35 chapters (3-37) we have heard from Job and his friends as they debate the moral order of the world. In the final chapters (38-41), we now hear from God. How does God provide an answer for Job (or does he)? (you might compare these chapters with chap. 3).

Job gets the confrontation with God that he wanted. However, God's response (chs 38-41) comes as a surprise. God does not directly address Job's situation (Gray, 451). Nor does God explain and justify his actions to Job with the imagery of the courtroom and the language of fairness and justice (Alter, 104). Instead, God responds from the midst of a whirlwind and invites Job to take something of a virtual tour of creation. In the process, we are given (Job 38-39) "the longest passage in the Bible about the non-human creation" (Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 38-39).

3). Skim over chapters 38-41 and describe the structure and development of God's answer.

These four chapters are divided into two speeches (38-39 and 40-41). They move from a panoramic vision of creation (first discourse) to a detailed account of two terrifying creatures (second discourse).

In the first speech, God takes Job on a virtual tour of creation (38:2-39:30). After confronting Job in 38:2-3, God -

then asks whether Job can fathom the vastness or control the forces of the physical creation (Job 38:4-38). These include the Earth (38:4-7); Oceans (38:8-11); the Dawn (38:12-15); the Underworld (38:16-18), Light and Darkness (38:19-21); adverse weather (38:22-24); life-giving weather (38:25-29); the Stars (28:31-33).

After asking about cosmogony and meteorology, God turns to zoology and asks, do you provide for the wild animals? (38:39-39:30): lion & raven (38:39-41); the ibex and deer (39:1-4); wild ass (onager) (39:5-8); wild ox (buffalo) (39:9-12); ostrich (39:13-18); warhorse (39:19-25); hawk & vulture (39:26-30).

In the second speech, God moves from focusing on the entire creation to a closer examination of two large, wild, and terrifying animals (40-41). Again, Job is challenged (40:1-14). Then God describes two of his greatest creatures: the Behemoth (40:15-24) and the Leviathan (41:1-24)

In the conclusion, Job responds (42:1-6)

- 4). What kinds of questions does God ask him on this tour? Identify some of the things that Job learns about God from each of the elements and their details of the physical creation overviewed by God. (Job 38:4-38).

In his questions (cross-examination?) God draws his attention to the breadth, length, and height of creation. Note the details of life-giving rain in the wilderness, the mane and nostrils of the horse, the food for ravens, etc.

A variety of answers may be given here. For example, creation is carefully designed and planned out by God; God restrains the forces of disorder as well the evil ones; God delights in his wild creatures; God provides for all, etc.

- 5). Identify the types of animals mentioned and some of the specific characteristics emphasized about each of them (Job 38:39-39:30). What do these details tell us about God?

The horse's mane, the wild donkey's love of freedom, the ostrich and her eggs, etc.

God attends to the details of his creatures, providing food for the young, habitat, unique abilities and capacities, etc. God delights in wildness? God delights in a creation outside of human presence?

- 6). Discuss the significance of God's focus on the "forces of nature" in creation and the "wildness" of animals in creation?

God is in control of the forces of nature. He has his own plan for them.

Wild animals serve no human purpose or use. They have their own lives to live independently of humans. Yet God daily provides for them and delights in them. Not under human control? A mystery to us?

- 7). How does this tour of creation provide an answer to Job's situation? What is the upshot of God's answer to Job? And how does Job respond (42:2-6)?

In the end, Job does not get the answer he expected. However, he does get an answer. God challenges Job's understanding of the world/creation with his virtual tour of creation. In disclosing the marvels and wonders of creation, "God expands Job's perspective—and his hope—beyond the narrow limits of individual human experience" (Gray, 451). God reminds him "that the full significance of the plan and purpose of creation is the ultimate secret of the Creator" (Gray 451).

In humility, Job accepts his place/limits as a creature (and not as God) in a world that he did not make but God did. What does that mean? Job discovers -

- a world filled with mystery and marvels beyond his understanding, and a world that witnesses to God's detailed knowledge, design and work;
- a world filled with wild forces and creatures outside his control, and a world that speaks to God's power and might which he uses in the simplest things taken for granted;
In hope, Job accepts his place/dependence as a creature (and not as God) in a world that he does not sustain, but God does. What does that mean? Job discovers -
- a world filled with marvels and wonders that witnesses to God's benevolent wisdom in his attention to details;
- a world filled with abundance and goodness that witnesses to God's provision for life and protection from evil, (providential care)

Acts 17: 16-33

- 1). What is the setting for Paul's speech at the Areopagus? Who is his audience?

People in Athens were curious about Paul's teaching. Among them were the Stoics and Epicureans. Both shared a similar view of creation and a denigration of the body (both are different responses to that assumption...discipline...indulgence of the body).

2). How does Paul approach them? Consider on what basis does he make his appeal to them?

Paul points to the altar to the unknown god and compliments the Athenians for their religiosity. "This compliment, however, is not without a sting: the Athenians, a people who sacrifice in the temples and philosophers who engage in metaphysical speculation, revere what they do not know!" (Ziegler, 148).

3). How does Paul use the doctrine of creation to approach them? On what does Paul affirm about the creator from his creation?

Paul uses God as Creator to reject the Athenian notion/conception of gods.

First, Creator does not dwell in temples made with human hands. The creator of all things is not limited or bound by anything made with human hands.

Second, God does not need anything from us.

Third, God is the giver of all things, having given all humans life, breath, and all that they have. Thus, all humans find a common beginning in God.

Fourth, God created us for two purposes. First, he has created us to live on a particular patch of earth at a particular time. Second, this creative and governing activity (determining boundaries and periods for us) serves the goal that we might seek God, turn to him, and cling to him. (Ziegler, 148). However, humans instead "fumble" after God, seeking him in darkness in their sin.

4). What purpose does creation serve in Paul's witness to the Athenians?

He preaches judgment, repentance, and Christ.

3. From Our Lutheran Perspective

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

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

"For Luther, God is not to be sought behind His creation by inference from it but is rather to be apprehended in and through it. Here Luther's views on the *larvae Dei* (masks or veils of God) is most instructive. Because God cannot be seen by man in His naked transcendence, God must wear a mask or veil in all His dealings with men to shield them from the unapproachable light of His majesty." "Every creature is His mask" [*Ideo universa creatura eius est larva*]. WA, XL, 1, 174, 3 [Gal. 2:6]. (Bohlmann, 729).

"When God reveals Himself to us, it is necessary for Him to do so through some such veil or wrapper and to say: 'Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of Me.'" [*italics added*]. (LW 1, 15).

"Thus there is no doubt that our first parents worshipped God early in the morning, when the sun was rising, by marveling at the Creator in the creature, or, to express myself more clearly, because they were urged on by the creature [*italics added*]. Their descendants continued the custom but without understanding. Thus this practice turned into idolatry" (LW 1, 15).

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

Luther speaks of creation as the words of God. God speaks "true and existent realities thus the sun, moon, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc. we are all words of God (*italics added*), in fact, only one single syllable or letter by comparison with the entire creation" (LW 1:21-22; on Gen 1:3-5.). Every creature is a noun or syllable in God's speaking (LW 1, 49).

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

"All men have the general knowledge, namely, that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. However, what God thinks of us, what He wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us . . . this men do not know. Thus it can happen that someone's face may be familiar to me but I do not really know him, because I do not know what he has in his mind." (LW 26, 399f. on Galatians 4:8-9).

As a result, we confuse the creator with the creature by failing to distinguish the creator from His works. Idolatry ensues. Cf. LC I, 21; FC SD II, 9; LW 19:53-55.

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

Preaching on Mark 7:31-37 (Jesus healing the deaf man with the words “be opened”), Luther notes, The Gospel opens our “ears, eyes, mouth, and hands to apprehend the world as creation.” For “The whole earth is filled with speaking.” (Bayer, *Theology of Luther*, 109, 107). “The world is ‘our Bible in the fullest sense, this our house, home, field, garden, and all things, where God not only preaches by using his wonderful works, but also taps on our eyes, stirs us up our senses, and enlightens our heart at the same time.’” (Bayer, *Theology of Luther*, 111).

Fifth, with senses awakened by the Spirit, we can re-enter creation and perceive it anew.

However, we now do so with the narrative of scripture to sharpen our seeing and listening.

In his Large Catechism Luther speaks of how all the creatures and temporal blessings created to serve us [i.e., in order to help us see God’s goodness]. (Schwanke, 90; LW 1:39; 6:24-25.) Luther expressed this vividly in a catechism sermon in the 1530s when he encouraged children to open their ears with faith and listen. So when you see a cow in the field, imagine it saying, “Rejoice and be glad, I bring you milk and butter from God.”

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

Basil the Great (responsible for the third article of the Nicene Creed) preached a series of sermons on the six days of creation during the season of Lent. On what he recounts he notes, “I have seen these wonders myself and I have admired the wisdom of God in all things” (p. 113). Basil considers

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

ABOUT GOD’S POWER: “Therefore, the sea, frequently raging with the winds and rising up in waves to towering heights, whenever it merely touches the shores, breaks its onrush into foam and retires. ‘Will you not then fear me, says the Lord? I have set the sand as bound for the sea.’ [Jr 5:22]. With the weakest of all things, sand, the sea, irresistible in its violence, is bridled.” (p. 58).

ABOUT GOD’S PROVISION: “Let no one bewail his poverty; let no one who possesses little at home despair of his life when he looks at the inventiveness of the swallow. When building her nest, she carries the dry twigs in her beak, and not being able to raise the mud in her claws, she moistens the tips of her wings with water, then, rolling in the very fine dust, she thus contrives to secure the mud. After gradually fastening the twigs of wood to each other with mud as with some glue, she raises her young in this nest...Let this warn you not to turn to evil-doing because of poverty, nor in the harshest suffering to cast aside all hope and remain idle and inactive, but to flee to God; for, if He bestows such things upon the swallow, how much more will He give to those who call upon Him with their whole heart” (pp. 126-127).

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

4. Points to Ponder

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

A. The biblical writers ask people to consider aspects in creation as witnesses to God. Do we ourselves follow their example? If not, why not?

Is it because we have become a more urban society and have surrounded ourselves more with the works of human hands than the works of God’s hands? Do we use machine imagery (brains like computers) versus organic imagery drawn from God’s creation? How can people perceive the witness of creation if they are not observing, contemplating, and reflecting on all that they see in creation?

Do we provide them a framework for interpreting and making sense of what they encounter in creation? How might we use images of creation in our sermons more? The Bible is something of an “outdoor book” and understanding it is helped by a familiarity with the outdoor world.

B. Discuss Luther's statement in the Large Catechism, "Therefore, if we believe it [the first article of the creed], this article should humble and terrify all of us" (LC II, 22; K-W, p. 433).

God has given us all that we need. Yet we refuse to believe it. Therefore, we misuse all his gifts for our own "pride, greed, pleasure, and enjoyment, and never once turn to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord or Creator." ... "For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves...." (LC II, 21; K-W, p. 433).

C. Discuss the various connections between Creation's witness to the Creator and creation's witness to the pre-incarnate Son of God (e.g., Colossians 1:15-20). Discuss the consistency of God's *modus operandi* in creation and in redemption.

Eg., working through creation, undeserved goodness, etc.

5. For Conversation

A. How might we follow Paul's example (Acts 17) in leading people from what they experience in creation (a sense of wonder, beauty, mystery, power, etc.) to an acknowledgment of the Creator to the confession of Christ? Consider the essay, "Nature as a Salvation" (<http://thisibelieve.org/essay/3346/>) from NPR's "This I Believe: A Public Dialogue about Belief—One Essay at a Time."

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

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

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

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

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

Except upon my own beliefs.

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

B. Discuss the following questions (adapted from questions composed by David Schmitt) in light of the story, “Nature as a Salvation”:

1. What story or stories lie in the background of this man that have shaped his life and “are being brought into the context of your evangelistic conversation?”
2. In what ways might the creedal story of the Gospel (creation through the incarnation to the new creation) interact with this man’s story? More specifically,
 - a. in what ways might the Christian story complement this man’s story?

Yes, we encounter something powerful and mysterious. For we encounter a world we did not make. But let me tell you who that one is and the rest of His story...

- b. in what ways might the Christian confront this man’s story?

Don’t confuse creation with the Creator or the Savior.

3. What elements of the divine Master’s Story and “more specifically of the narrative of Jesus’ life and ministry would you use while witnessing to these individuals? How would you use them?”

Jesus stilling the storm? Jesus showing that he is in fact the Creator at work, coming to reclaim his creation, restore it, and renew it. He’s in control of all the details of our life.

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

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

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