

Law & gospel bring God's word

Listen for each as you hear the Sunday lessons



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Lutherans say the word of God comes to us as “law and gospel,” and that both need to be held together for God’s word to be fulfilled. Let’s consider what this means, in this first of two columns on the key concept. The Bible says two things that are especially important.

First, it speaks words that accuse and condemn us, revealing our human brokenness and showing us our sin.

Second, it reveals words that comfort and save us, healing our brokenness and conveying God’s grace.

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The entire Bible is both law and gospel. Which message people hear often depends on what they need to receive from God at different times in their lives.

This month, let’s think about all of the Bible passages we hear in church in terms of law and gospel: What is God saying that accuses us? What is God saying that comforts us?

We will hear lessons that tell us God holds people accountable for not heeding the words of prophets (Deuteronomy 18:5-20), and we will hear words that urge us to give up our rights and do without things that might be an affront to others (1 Corinthians 9:16-23). Such words may be accusing, shining a light upon our sinful tendencies.

But we will also hear stories of healing: Jesus can drive out what is unclean (Mark 1:21-28), and a mere touch from Jesus can cleanse a leper (Mark 1:40-45). Such stories give us hope that, through God’s grace, our brokenness need not define us. We can be healed, cleansed and saved. And we will be, through God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

Certain Bible texts may strike you differently than they do me, but I will share how two of this month’s lessons speak God’s word of law and gospel to me.

On Feb. 8, we read Isaiah 40:21-31. This text begins with a portrait of an all-powerful God before whom the mightiest human beings are but grasshoppers. I realize that I have failed to trust this God, thinking that my security depends on lesser things—political processes or economic resources. When I hear the words of this text, I’m driven to despair of everything I thought could help me.

And then, suddenly, the text says something else: It declares that this all-powerful God gives power and strength to those who are weak and weary. Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. What a wonderful gospel promise.

On Feb. 22, we read the story of Jesus’ transfiguration in Mark 9:2-9. Jesus’ disciples are terrified when they behold their Lord in glory. I would be too. The purity and holiness of Jesus Christ is what pleases God. How can I ever measure up to that standard? I realize that, compared to Christ, I’m not just mildly flawed.

The problem is not just that I am incompetent or lackadaisical or dim-witted or unmotivated—I may be all those things. But worse, I am a *sinner*, an unholy sinner standing in the holy light of God. Still, the reason Jesus Christ offers his disciples this image of Transfiguration is to provide us with a preview of our destiny.

By grace, I will share in this light, which Paul says already has shone into our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:3-6). Like Peter at the Transfiguration, I don’t know what to say but my heart is filled with joy and gratitude.

Listen for the word of God in these and other lessons this month: What will God say to you? Will they be accusing words of law? Or comforting words of gospel? We can never know for certain but a good Lutheran guess would be: “Probably both.” □

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