

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 13, 2022

GENESIS 15:1-12, 17-18 | PSALM 27 | PHILIPPIANS 3:7-4:1 | LUKE 13:31-35

For Lent this year, we're building a theological toolbox. Every week, I'm giving you one tool from our tradition so that when you come across some theological problem, you have some different ways to get to work on it.

Last week we talked about justification. Justification has to do with giving evidence and making the case for something. And we talked about how God does that for us. This week we're going to talk about how about how Lutherans read scripture. To put a finer point on it, how does God speak to us in and through scripture and through the Word of God in Jesus?

There are a bunch of ways that you can read scripture.¹ You can read the Bible as literature or poetry, analyzing linguistic devices. You can read the Bible through a historical-critical lens, looking at the social context that shaped its formation. (If you've read Gerry Lauro's newsletter articles, they tend to be historical-critical perspectives.) You can do form criticism and try to divide the Bible into genres. You can do source criticism and look at where various pieces came from. You can do reception history and look at how various communities have constructed meaning.

What all of those have in common is they tend to view us reading the text. We are acting on the text. I, the active agent, read the text, the passive object. But in the Lutheran tradition, we flip that around, too. And we see how the text works on us. And the text works on us as law and gospel. Sometimes you hear this as commands and promises, which is getting at the same idea.

To help you get this idea, I want you to go back in time to your elementary school when you learned about different types of sentences. A lot of what we use day to day are declarative statements. *I am going to the store. The house is red. The Mets lost last night.* Declarative sentences just describe the world the way it is to no one in particular.

But when God speaks to us, God doesn't just describe things. God speaks in commands and promises. A command is an imperative sentence. *You have to go the store. You must paint that house red. You need to field a better team.* Commands don't just describe the world in general. They tell you to do something. You can probably think of a whole bunch of examples from scripture. *Thou shall not kill. you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. Thou shall have no others gods.*

And you can find commands in the New Testament, too. Some people—not smart people like you—think that the Hebrew Bible is all commands and the New Testament is all promise, but it's not. What does Jesus say to the rich man who wants

¹ A good summary is here: "How Do Biblical Scholars Read the Hebrew Bible?," accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/how-do-biblical-scholars-read-the-hebrew-bible.aspx>.

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to follow him? *Go sell your possessions.* That's a command if there ever was one. At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to *Go... and make disciples of all nations.*

Commands make a claim on us. They make us evaluate our own actions and force us to make a decision. And more than that, the commands of God reveal our capacity to turn away from God and our neighbor. Left to our own devices, we are prone to indifference toward the lives of the vulnerable, hatred of those who differ from us, and making an idol of our own convenience. Our actions and our desires need to be constrained in some way. As I'm writing this on Monday, the lead stories in the news are about Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians and health care facilities, climate change reaching an irreversible tipping point, rising gun violence, sexual assault trials, and more.

The commands of God have a way of bringing all this to light. They reveal not simply the wastefulness of our violence but our own capacity to excuse ourselves. To take for granted not only the outcomes of our decisions but the systems that we believe to be inevitable. We acknowledge that on Sundays when we begin our service with confession and forgiveness. We address our failure to live up to the commands of God. *We have not loved God with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. Things we have done and things we have left undone.* The commands of God make us interrogate our own histories and actions and hold us to account. When God speaks as law, it allows us to see the world the way it actually is and our place in it.

But commands aren't the only way God speaks. God also speaks through promises. *I am with you until the end of the age. You shall bear a son and name him Jesus. Yours is the kingdom of God.* The resurrection of Jesus is a promise, too.² An announcement of a redeemer future. And you can find lots of promises in the Hebrew Bible as well. You actually heard the big one from Genesis today, God's covenant, God's promise, to Abraham. And you also have covenants or promises to Moses, to Noah, to David, to Sarah. The list goes on.

Promises are important because they create something new. They create a new reality that changes your perception of yourself, other people, and creation. Imagine for a second that someone promised you that it was going to rain tomorrow. Even if it was sunny when you woke up, you might bring an umbrella just in case. If someone promised you that they would help you move out of your apartment, you might not hire movers. If someone promised they'd buy you lunch, you might not pack one.

And if simple promises like those change our plans for the future, how much more do God's promises? If you were promised that you were actually loved, it would change how you view yourself. If you were promised that you were actually forgiven, it would change how you perceive your past. If you were promised that you had the ability to serve God and neighbor in meaningful ways, it would change the way you

² Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Fortress Press, 1993), 85.

think about your vocation. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God gives us faith to trust those promises.³

In Lutheran theology, law and gospel work together.⁴ We distinguish between the two, but we need both. Imagine for a second if you came to church on Sunday, and all you heard was law. We would confess our sins, and I would say *Well, nice try. Better luck next week.* The homily would just be about things you're supposed to do. And why aren't you doing these things already? Confirmation class would just be about teaching how to behave. You would leave church feeling pretty frustrated, discouraged, and disheartened. And if you were in confirmation, pretty bored.

Now imagine for a second if you came to church and it was just promise. You'd start the confession and I'd say *You know what? Don't worry about it. This stuff doesn't really matter.* The homily would just be about making us feel better. *The world's pretty messed up if you think about it, so don't think about it.* All God wants is for you to be happy, and if the world goes to hell in a handbasket, that's not really your problem.

In Lutheran theology, law and gospel, command promise, work together. Law tells us how the world is, and the gospel tells us how God is redeeming it. Commands tells us how we are, and promises tells us how God sees us in Christ.

We need both law and gospel, but the gospel is always God's final word to us. There's always more gospel than there is law. One of my old mentors used to say that there's more grace in God than sin in us.⁵ Which means there's no situation that's beyond God's capacity. There's no situation where the gospel can't be the final verdict.

That's what Easter is all about. Even death can't keep God from being God for us. God goes on living, promising, and redeeming.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ Small Catechism Article III.

⁴ This is a good summary with the relevant citations from the Augsburg Confession and Apology. "The Gospel Is a Promise," *Living Lutheran* (blog), April 16, 2019, <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2019/04/the-gospel-is-a-promise/>.

⁵ George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 134.

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