

**Belonging**  
**February 18, 2024**

**Our Savior is Way Lutheran Church**

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Welcome to Lent. On Ash Wednesday a few days ago, we celebrated the start of this journey toward Easter with these words: *From dust you have come, to dust you shall return, but from dust you will rise again.* Lent is pointing our hearts and our minds toward Easter, and these words, as we focus on these all during Lent season, ***Christ For You***, point us directly there. When you think of these three words, these are words that bring life to death. They bring resurrection to what was dead. They lift you up when you are suffering. When you experience the things of this world that tear you down, knowing that Christ is for you changes everything. So we are going to focus on that in the next few weeks.

We are going to look at each reading, each of the readings from the lectionary as we make our way through the Gospels to see how this works. How we see that *Christ is for us.* And we are going to do this through this lens of law and gospel. I want you to get to know them through this series. Because through the law and through the gospel together, this is how God fulfills His purpose to lovingly bring us back to Himself. That's what we talked about last time in our last series. It was all about God's purpose for His creation, for His people. He is constantly calling out and working for you to be brought back to Him. The way He does this through His scripture and the way that He helps us understand our lives is through law and gospel. This is the way that Lutherans have gone about. This is how we understand scripture. It is how we read it, but I think it is much more than that.

I think it is actually how we can look at our lives. It is the perspective that we take on when we go through all the things that we go through, whether they are incredible things or really terrible things, law and gospel, and I

hope we see that interplay as we go. So today, specifically, when we heard these two different stories, the story about Jesus being baptized, being tempted, and being called into His ministry, and then the Old Testament reading, which was the story of Abraham and Isaac. And if you have not heard that reading before, it is really difficult—especially, I think, as I have gotten older, and I have kids, and maybe you have experienced this, too—that story hits very differently than when I learned it in Sunday school. Very, very differently. Today, we are going to see how God uses this law and this gospel to help us make sense of it, and to help us reconnect with Him.

That's truly the key. So, our big question today is, “Do I belong?” Maybe this is your first time here at Our Savior's Way, and you are coming and wondering, “Do I belong here?” And you start thinking, are people friendly? Do I understand what's happening? How does this all work? I know I had that experience not too long ago.

Do I belong here? Part of this people? Part of this congregation? Maybe you just moved into the area or into a new community. Maybe you moved houses over the summer, and you think, can I be a part of this community? Who do I know? Do you know any of your neighbors' names yet? In all these things, no matter what we start, we always wonder, “Do I belong?” This is a question that does not hit just with our relationships in this realm, but it also comes to us when we think about our relationship with God.

At different times in our lives, we wonder, “Do I really belong here, in His family, with Him?” That's what we are going to explore here through these two readings. What we see is there is a movement. There is a movement that God takes us on. He starts with His Son, Jesus, where He declares Jesus to be His. And then Jesus is brought out into the wilderness and tempted, and the one thing that the tempter says to Jesus is, “Are you really God's Son?”

And then we see when He comes out of that, we see that He is called into this world with the knowledge of who God has said that He is, and He shares that with the world. So there is this movement of God declaring something, us being tempted, and then God calling us into the world with what He has given to us.

For Jesus, when He was baptized, the voice of God came out so that all could hear. Because Jesus did not need to hear this. Jesus knew who He was. We needed to hear it. “This is my son, in whom I am well pleased.” God declares that Jesus is part of His family, His people, and His plan of salvation. This is good news for all the people that hear it. He was taken immediately into the desert, into the wilderness, where He was tempted. We heard from Mark today, but in Matthew we get a bigger picture, and we hear that the tempter tempts Him three times. And He always starts by saying, “If you are the Son of God...”

Wait a second, God just said, I am His son. He just declared it. But the temptation is, “If you are the Son of God, if this is true, if you can trust Him, then why do not you Just do what I say?” That is the temptation, to question if what God has said is true and good of you. Jesus, being Jesus, being God, being perfect, not falling into any temptation, makes it out unscathed, and He ends up going back into the communities, and He has a new message for them: the kingdom of God is at hand. Trust, believe, and know that God is with you. The kingdom of God is at hand. He meant that literally. When people were near Him and around Him, when they heard His voice, when they touched His robe, that was the kingdom of God. That is the goodness of God right there in their midst. When He was walking, and they were following Him, and the dust was flying up around Him, when they were covered with that dust because they were following so closely. That was the kingdom of God right there.

They saw who He was. They saw how He thought. They saw how He reacted to people, and how He treated others, especially those who were

on the margins. And He was teaching them that that is the kingdom of God. I am the kingdom of God. So there is this movement of good news from God declaring who Jesus is to this temptation, of wanting to not believe that you are the son of God, And then good news again, that the kingdom of God is at hand. It is all here, right here. What God has said is true, and it is not just true for me; it is true for you as well. So we have the gospel, and we have law, and we have the gospel. There is this movement that happens. And the story of Abraham is paired with this because the exact same thing happens.

Isaac was Abraham's long-promised son. If you have heard these stories before, you have heard that Abraham and Sarah were very old and had no heir—no son to whom he could pass along the promise of God. And so, when he was a hundred years old, Sarah was blessed with a son, Isaac. This is a miracle of miracles, absolutely incredible. So much so that when Sarah heard the news that she was going to become pregnant, she laughed. She laughed at God and God said, “Why do you laugh?” She said, “I am sorry, there is no way this has ever happened.” And God said, “Watch.”

When the Lord declares something, it is true. He makes it happen. And so, Sarah had a son, Isaac, and the blessing of God was to pass through Isaac to all generations and be an incredible blessing. When one day God says to Abraham, “Take this son, your only son, the son that you love, the son that has spent so long promised, that all of my promises are going to take him and sacrifice him,” how does this make any sense? Abraham must have been wondering what you and I are wondering. “How could this be? Lord, you have blessed me with this son. He is a miracle. How could you ask me to sacrifice him?” That question has been asked throughout millennia. If you are a reader and you like to read philosophy, Soren Kierkegaard wrote an entire book on four different ways to look at this part of scripture and different ways to understand it. But I am going to go to the book of Hebrews to help me understand it. The writer of the

Hebrews in the New Testament looked at this story and said, by faith, Abraham trusted that if God declared that Isaac was the one through whom His blessing would come, that God said, it will happen, and it will happen. So much so, that if God asked me to sacrifice this son, then God could raise him from the dead. Abraham was tempted to not believe that God's promises were true, that what God said He would do and who He was not the case. And so, at the very end, when the knife was raised, The angel of the Lord came and said, Abraham, stop. You believe. You have listened to me. You have obeyed the word of God. Please do not, do not carry this through. I have provided an appropriate sacrifice, a lamb that you can sacrifice instead. You see, this good news of the promise is followed by this law of temptation, is God really who He says He is? Are his promises really true? Could He really raise the dead? And when God did provide, when God did hold faithful to His promises, Abraham called that place Jehovah Jireh, meaning the Lord Provides. From then on, whenever anybody from the descendants came to that place, they would know that the Lord in every situation will provide, and His promises will be true.

Gospel, law, and gospel. Now, these are old stories, kind of. They are kind of our stories, too. Because we live in this realm as well, and we wonder, "Do we belong?" Are we part of something bigger than ourselves? And when we think of God, are we part of His family? Can we possibly, with all the things that we have done, that we have experienced, the ways that we have hurt others? The ways that we have sabotaged ourselves, could we ever be a part of His family? I mean, God is pretty amazing. He has created the whole universe. He has sent His son Jesus to save everything. He exists through His spirit to bring goodness and light to the world. And what have we done? Well, many times we have fallen way short of that.

This is not just a way to understand scripture, it is a way to understand your life. From the very beginning, what has God declared about you? In Ephesians, it said that you are His masterpiece. You are the one that He

has created uniquely gifted, uniquely talented, uniquely you. And that you have been saved by Jesus. You have been created new in Him. You have been declared. part of His family because of what Jesus has done. And when did He do that? He did that at your baptism. At your baptism, God said, “You are mine. You will always be mine. No matter what happens in life, no matter what happens in the world, you will be mine. Your name is written in my book of life, and you have salvation through Jesus, today and forever.” That is an objective truth. It is an objective fact. It happened at a place, on a day, at a time, that cannot be changed. So, you wonder, am I baptized? If you say yes to that, then you are part of God's family. Do you belong? Yes, you do. But through our lives, we start to doubt, and we start to question, and things happen in our worlds that truly shake our lives.

And that question comes back, “Can I truly be His?” I do not know about you, but there have been things that have happened throughout my life that have caused me to really bring this to the forefront.

When we question, when we doubt, when we wonder, God provides good news for us. When we are stuck in the grip of the law, when we are shown our sinfulness, when we are shown our brokenness, it becomes so real to us, God has good news for us. He has the gospel. He says, “You are mine. That no matter what has happened, through Jesus, I forgive you.” And when we experience that forgiveness, it sets us free. It sets us free to be His people, to know who we are, to know that we are able, through Jesus, to do what He did. To go into the world and show other people that the kingdom of God is right here in this promise, in the goodness of Jesus. Not only am I His child, but you can be too. So that no matter what is happening in your world, no matter how you question where you belong, the answer that God gives to you each and every time is, “You belong with me. I have got you. You are mine.” The law shows us our sinfulness, our brokenness, and the experience that we have with that. And gospel shows us our Savior, the one, the only one who could have saved us, who went

perfectly, who saved us through His death on the cross and in His resurrection on Easter morning, gives us life today. And God's promise to us through that is that we are His.

Each week, we are going to tackle a different way that the gospel speaks to us. This week, it is all about belonging and being part of a family. But there is so much more to Scripture than just that one question. Each week, we will tackle a different one and see how the Good News really speaks to us, speaks to us of God's promises, speaks to us of His goodness, and speaks to us of what we are called to do to share that with the people around us each and every day. This is our Lent journey together.

Would you close in prayer with me? Heavenly Father, we thank You for declaring that we are Yours, that at our baptisms, You called us Your own by name. You have made us and created us new as Your masterpieces. That through Jesus, through what He has done for us, You give us life today and forever.

Lord, as we struggle through the things that we each go through, or the ways that our community mourns, the ways that life just seems to weigh us so down, Lord, let that weight lift because of the good news of the gospel of Jesus for us. Remind us each day that *Christ is for us*. All this we pray, trusting in your great mercy and love for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.