

## Session 4:

# Lutheran Treasures that Speak to this Region

**GUIDING QUESTIONS** What are the core insights of Lutheran Christianity, why do they matter, and how do we communicate these to our congregations and larger communities? (Note: If your group is not Lutheran, these notes may motivate you to explore treasures from your own tradition which can speak in a lively way to the Northwest region.)

**BACKGROUND READING** *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda (Fortress Press, 2002), chapters 5 and 6.

**PREPARATION**

- Blank lined notebook paper, pencils
- Flipchart or blackboard, markers or chalk
- CD of Tom Witt's "Dusting off the Green Book"
- Candle and other items for altar/worship area
- Copies of the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or other resource for reading
- 2 optional handouts: "Lutheran Treasures for the Northwest" (2 sides) and "Gifts from the Attic" (3 sides)
- If you've created lists of the gifts, yearnings, and needs of the people in this region, post these on the walls.

**GATHERING ACTIVITY** As people file in, have playing on CD player Tom Witt's "Dusting off the Green Book" (hymns to a jazzy beat). Encourage people to browse the posted lists of spiritual gifts and yearnings.

5 minutes

**WELCOMING ACTIVITY** Ask people to share their name (if necessary), how long they've been a Lutheran, and one challenge and one blessing of being Lutheran.

5 minutes

**OPENING WORSHIP**

- Light the candle and focus attention on the altar area.
- Begin with a short prayer.
- Read Psalm 90:1-6, 10-17 or ask someone else to read it, slowly and prayerfully.
- Sing together ELW 505, "A Mighty Fortress"

5 minutes

**INDIVIDUAL  
REFLECTION**

10 minutes

Hand out paper and pencils, and ask people to think of three core insights, beliefs, or messages of the Lutheran tradition. These can emerge from sermons they've heard, books they've read, confirmation or adult classes they've taken, worship as they've experienced it — anything that is distinctive and important in our Lutheran theological heritage. Write those down. When most people seem finished, ask them to write on one more question: Why do these core insights matter? What's their significance day-to-day?

**SHARING IN PAIRS**

10 minutes

Ask the gathered to find someone they don't know well, and share what they've written (5 minutes or so for each person).

**GUIDING  
METAPHOR AND  
LARGE GROUP  
SHARING**

15 minutes

Introduce the metaphor of "treasures in our theological attic," which has been important to the Salmon Nation group as we've explored how to best express our Christian faith in the Northwest culture. Some Lutheran ideas and insights have been up there in grandma's attic and could come down and be of service for us now. Some things we have in the middle of our living room could stand to go back up, out of the way. (Of course, the Christian attic is bigger than just the Lutheran attic — thus we can be informed across traditions.)

Thinking about that metaphor, ask the group what core insights they came up with, and why or why not they are worth treasuring? Which of the treasures speak to the yearnings of people in our region? Ask for a volunteer to be the scribe, at the board or flipchart, to record the ideas.

**To seed discussion:**

The handout "Lutheran Treasures for the Northwest" records some insights that have arisen in our Salmon Nation discussions as being particularly valuable for ministry in our region. This is not an exhaustive list. Use these to flesh out discussion, only if needed. First see what insights can be drawn from the wisdom of your group.

As another alternative, you may consult or duplicate the second optional handout, "Gifts from the Attic" and use that materials to guide your discussion. This resource links elements of Northwest spirituality with specific theological insights.

These handouts could also be used as take-home material for this session.

**FINAL  
CONVERSATION  
WITH LARGE  
GROUP**  
10 minutes

The Pacific Northwest challenges the Lutheran church, along with all mainline Christian traditions, to reveal its integrity with new power or be dismissed as outdated and irrelevant or one and the same with much louder, much more politically conservative churches. How do we communicate these core insights to the world in which we live?

**CLOSING**  
5 minutes

**Prayer:** Lord, God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Blessing:** Receive this benediction as a reminder that you are blessed – in the name of the Maker who creates life, the Savior who loves life, and the Spirit who is the fire of life. Amen.

# Lutheran Treasures for the Northwest

*As identified by Salmon Nation participants and conversation partners*

- a) **Theology of the cross:** A theology of the cross opens eyes to see the world's brokenness, but also points to life-giving hope. Facing the unbearable is part of moral discernment; this precisely is where God promises to be. (Jim Norlie)
  
- b) **Sacramentality:** Luther believed in an in-dwelling Christ, a Christ who invites us to faith in him and also into the faith of him. He is mystically present in us and in "all places even the tiniest leaf" (Luther's Works, 57:37). Thus Eucharist "is less a sacramental meal of an exclusive club and more an apocalyptic event manifesting Christ in solidarity with the whole earth." (Frank Wilson)
  
- c) **Christ in Creation:** For Luther, "the finite bears the infinite." Creation matters. Earth bears and reveals the Holy. All the earth is to be treasured as revelatory. All things are connected, from the salmon fry to the Douglas fir to the most delicate trillium.
  
- d) **Grace:** Our freedom as Christ-followers comes not from earning or deserving salvation, but from being loved precisely when we do not deserve it. Unearned gifts surround us. We are thus freed in Lutheran theology not *from* existence but *for* it, freed to be embodied and imperfect as we act, in gratitude, for the love of the neighbor and the world. We are freed from guilt or worry to seek lives of righteousness, or "right relation." (Cynthia Moe-Lobeda)
  
- e) **Contextual Nature:** Lutheran theology is "by nature contextual" and "inherently self-critiquing." Luther's understanding of the human being as inherently fallible and finite means we steer clear of making claims of universality or infallibility. Thus: Humility. Education. Nuanced, not simplified, theology. God-talk for grown-ups. (Martha Maier)
  
- f) **Scriptural understanding:** Lutherans understand the Bible not as a rule book to be read literally, but as the Word of God. We read it "seriously but not literally." This Word is understood as coming to us in three forms. 1) the Living Christ 2) the Spoken Word, or gospel and 3) the written word, meant to be secondary, or interpreted through the lens of the other two. As Krister Stendahl would say when scripture was quoted at him, "Yes I understand that this is God's word, but is it God's Word for me?"

- g) Community:** For Lutherans, sacraments never happen independently of community: it is the gathered who bless the bread and wine; the gathered who baptize the new Christian. We ground our lives in the burden and the blessing of being in close relationship with our sisters and brothers in Christ.
- h) Justice which subverts the powers and principalities:** Martin Luther was a faithful rebel in a long line of faithful rebels. “The power of God’s compassionate, justice-making, unquenchable love for creation may live within and among human beings and the rest of nature. Moral agency for living toward the flourishing of creation – which includes subverting economic systems that render death and destruction – may flow from embodied communion in which God incarnate is received and given. The more fully people receive Her love and become it, the more able they are, as communion, to resist economic structures and ideologies that thwart the gift of abundant life for all.” (Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 109).

# Gifts from the Attic

*As compiled by James Norlie, Lutheran Campus Pastor, Oregon State University*

Here we turn our thoughts to the resources available from the Lutheran theological attic which can help us address the particular spiritual longings we share with of our fellow citizens of Salmon Nation.

## I. SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

This characteristic likely represents a yearning for mystery or an *experience* of God/the Holy. Perhaps the desire here is to know that which is not entirely knowable, love that which is love itself, see that which is not entirely seeable, experience that which is within yet beyond us. If Christianity in particular has reduced faith to adherence to propositions about God, this will not satisfy those longing to know or experience God.

**One gift from the Lutheran attic**, then, might be a **recovery of the place of the Holy Spirit** in our faith practices. One could be reminded of Luther's apparently all-too-real encounter with God in the storm or his struggles with the devil in his cloister cell. Here was a deeply experiential encounter with the Holy. Our tradition has, perhaps, emphasized the second person of the Trinity to the exclusion of and detriment to the first person (Creator) and third person (Life-Infuser).

A corresponding **second gift from the Lutheran attic** to be reclaimed is the **gift of mystery**. How might we emphasize mystery without yielding to naiveté? Mobilize all the senses in worship, pay attention to humility (let God be God), probe the links between worship and daily life ("where do I notice that God is active in my life? in the life of those around me? in the questions and troubles of the day?"). See Krister Stendahl *Energy for Life: Reflections on the Theme "Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation."*

## 2 RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM

Our faith is personal but it is not private. If sin is defined as one turned in on oneself, what **gift from the Lutheran attic** turns us outward?. Just this: we are a **community of faith, a priesthood of believers, a family of the adopted, an ecosystem of individuals, a church** that is expressed in congregation, synod, and church wide. We are one among many.

If the culture says, in effect, I am a "God unto myself" a "master of my fate," we are reminded of the sin of the Garden ("your eyes will be opened and you will be like God..") and we recall the words of Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed, "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 through the gospel, enlightened me with his [her?] gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he [she?] calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the *whole Christian church* on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the *one common, true faith*. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins – *mine and those of all believers*. On the last day the Holy Spirit will raise *me and all the dead* and will

give to me and *all* believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006, page 1162, emphasis added).

### 3. THE WEST AS A PLACE OF NEW BEGINNINGS

Andy said, “I go to the 8:30 service at because they always include the confession and forgiveness in that service.” Starting over is a familiar ritual to Lutheran believers. In our life of faith we believe that we revisit our baptism daily and die and rise to Christ again and again. To the common question, “Are you born again?” Lutherans can easily answer, “Yes, and I am being born – again, and again, and again.” This is not about remaking myself again and again but about being remade by God for the sake of the world.

What the West needs is a word of change that is not just about remaking oneself, but about being remade with new life, transformation, at its center. This is true on a societal level as it is on an individual level.

“Oregon continues to struggle with the residual effects of its long history of extractive activity and the unbridled development of its waterways.” (*Landscape of Conflict: The Oregon Story*, William G. Robbins, University of Washington Press, 2000, p. 326). A change is needed.

**From the Lutheran attic**, then, we bring **repentance** – turning *from* something and turning *toward* something, the very possibility of which is God’s doing. Douglas John Hall cautions not to turn this into a religion of morality. Yet, with this caution in mind we can still become new individually, communally, socially when we discover and apply what we need to leave in order to start again in ways that are good, just, and godly.

### 4. ENTREPRENEURIAL EVANGELISM

The film *Luther* includes the dramatic portrayal of Tetzl merchandising the expansion of St. Peter’s in Rome with clever marketing gimmicks which prove to be very profitable. He is a masterful salesman, uses the “technologies” available to him convincingly, has a charismatic flair, provides tangible tokens of one’s sacrificial giving, entertains, and is able to draw and sustain a crowd. All this for a manufactured message with ulterior motives. From this history within the Reform movement itself, we see old patterns repeating themselves in today’s religious marketplace which we’re wise to apply to our contemporary scene.

For example, one can see these characteristics at work in the successful entrepreneurial religious experiments of our region. Most mimic the culture – especially the corporate culture – without critique. All measure success in numbers, menus of programmatic options, size of their ‘campuses,’ and political clout.

Against this background and to this prevalent and public form of religious expression, the gifts **from the Lutheran attic** which might serve as correctives leading to the deeper longings of those in our region include: **living with the questions** (religious entrepreneurs market and sell the answers), **humility** (in contrast to those who claim an exclusive corner on the truth), and **theology of the cross** versus the theology of “success” or a “prosperity gospel” (which is always claiming “size matters”), and the capacity for **paradox** (in place of one-way thinking).

## 5. SUSPICION OF INSTITUTIONS

There is much to be suspicious about when it comes to institutions. We in the Lutheran community concur. Our very existence comes from a confrontation (the Reformation) with a powerful institution. At their best institutions function to help individual entities do what they cannot do by themselves. In the case of our church these include education of leaders, publishing, shared common work so efforts aren't unnecessarily duplicated, careful stewardship of money and human resources (the budget of the entire ELCA is less than the budget of Campus Crusade). Even so, institutions have a way of always trying to preserve themselves, sometimes (often?) to the detriment of their support base and their purpose.

In terms of an anti-institutional sentiment in our region, the Lutheran **gift from the attic is reform**. It should apply to all public institutions and it can serve well to properly critique and correct these institutions when their purposes are misdirected and their existence compromises the very ones they are supposed to help. Reform calls attention to justice and views systemic change as necessary to publicly live the the gospel good news. In terms of the church as institution we sing:

*The church of Christ, in ev'ry age beset by change, but Spirit led,  
must claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.  
We have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord;  
to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word. (ELW 729)*

Reform mobilizes movements that live passionately, deeply, nimbly. This gift has the potential to change individuals, communities, institutions – indeed, the very culture in which we live.

## 6. NEW AGE, APOCALYPTIC, AND NATURE-ORIENTED PRACTICES

These seemingly unique examples of Pacific Northwest spirituality represent a yearning for wholeness, fear of end-times and awe of nature.

To these the **gifts from the Lutheran attic** are **contextual theology** (cultural exegesis – discerning how God is involved in our time and place), **hope** (“If today were the last day of my life, I’d plant an apple tree”) and **earthiness** (“the visible bears the invisible”).

Luther was a contextual theologian. He had a keen sense of what “time” it was, what his people suffered, what he himself struggled with, what questions were being asked. For him the provocative, nudging question was “How can I satisfy an angry God?” And then, upon a remarkable encounter with the graciousness of God, “What does this mean?” But these are not the questions of our day. Today, many are asking, “How can I (this world?) be made whole?” and “Is there any hope?” From these questions he drew attention to the anxiety of his age (fear), the urgent need for good news (context), and the incarnation (earthboundness) of God that connects the holy with the ordinary (earthiness). In this time and place these can also serve us well.