

# Pathways to Preaching

a publication of the Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary

## Topic: The Trinity

The Trinity is a doctrine that many people are interested in, but also one that many preachers find it difficult to discuss. There are a variety of aspects to talking about God as Trinity, to be sure, but one that is too often overlooked is understanding the Trinity as God's action to make us more like God.

Written by Rev. Dr. Eric Trozzo,  
Lecturer and Director of the Lutheran Study Centre at STS.



## What do theologians say?

"The Trinity is fundamentally not a doctrine to be learned and explained, but rather a story to be experienced. [When preaching about the Trinity] we shouldn't try to explain it. Perhaps the best thing to do is what we should be doing every Sunday, which is reliving as we are retelling the story of the Gospel: the story of the risen Jesus, his Abba, and their Spirit."

-- 20<sup>th</sup> Century American theologian Walter Bouman

## Songs and Hymns:

Holy, Holy, Holy

Praise God for His Love,

Doxology, Gloria Patri

## Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

In chapters 3 and 4 of 2 Corinthians, Paul discusses four aspects of apostolic ministry. Each can be summarized with a statement of what marks this ministry. He includes "We have such confidence... (3:4)," "We have this ministry... (4:1)," "We have this treasure... (4:7)," and "We have the same spirit of faith (4:13)." The passage we are focused on begins in 3:12 by telling us, "we have such a hope." Thus central to this passage is the question of what exactly is the hope that marks apostolic ministry and indeed the Christian life. It is the hope of being transformed into the image of God that we know in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Our hope, then, is in the power of the Trinity to transform our lives and make us holy people.



# The Trinity

## Law:

Paul tells us that the hope his ministry proclaims is different from the hope that Moses had. Paul evokes the image of Exodus 34, where Moses spoke face to face with God. When Moses returned from speaking with God, his face shown so brightly from having been in the presence of God's glory that Moses had to wear a veil over his face, otherwise the people would be overwhelmed by the intense glow. Symbolically, then, Paul says that when the law of Moses is read even today, people's minds are clouded as if covered by a veil. Paul's point is that this veil prevents the people from seeing the whole truth: the covenant of the law comes to an end in Christ. That is, in looking at God's law we might see some of God's glory, it is muted and distorted image of that glory. Thus if we base our understanding of God on God's law, we will misunderstand who God is.

## Gospel:

Paul goes on to tell us that in Christ God removes the veil, so that we can see clearly the truth of God. Through Christ we are not like the people who only have a distorted view of God through the laws Moses gave, but like Moses who had a direct view of God. Paul tells us that Christ is the perfect mirror of God the Father. That is, in looking to Christ we see the full truth of whole God is. Christ is a mirror image of the father with no distortions; to know Christ is to know the Father. And to know Christ is to know freedom. Rather than lists of rules that we must follow in order to be pleasing to God, the full truth of God is freedom. In Christ we know that we are acceptable to God not because we have followed everything listed in God's laws, but because we are loved. We are freed from the command to have to be perfect. Our status with God comes from God's grace and not the value of our deeds.



## Transformation:

Paul does not stop with Christ as the perfect mirror image of the Father. He goes on to tell us that all of us, as we look into that reflection of the glory of God, become transformed into that same image through the work of the Spirit. That is, the more we focus our lives on Christ, the more like Christ we will be. In this sense the Christian life is a life spent reflecting on Christ. As we study the life of Jesus and focus on Christ's grace, our life will begin to look more and more like Christ's. God's glory will shine more and more in our lives. Thus the continued life of a Christian is one of becoming more and more God-like. This is not to say that we will ever become the perfect image of the Father that Christ is, but rather that the image does become clearer as we focus on Christ. This transformation or sanctifying of our lives is the work of the Holy Spirit.



## Preaching Law + Gospel = Transformation

Through the Law, God tells us God's vision for how life ought to be in this world. Law tells us what God commands us to do. Yet if we take God's command seriously, we will recognize how far short of it our lives fall. Thus the Law shows us our sin. Law tells us what we must do, but actually makes us realize that it is beyond our power to accomplish it.

Gospel, on the other hand, tells us what God does. Despite our failings, God acts with grace. When God's grace comes to us, not only are we forgiven of our sin, but the Holy Spirit empowers us to serve God out of love. In hearing the gospel, our hearts are transformed.

In a sermon, we hear the Law that tells us of human actions and reveals to us our sin, and we then hear the Gospel of God's unfailing love and mercy. Together they bring forth transformed hearts. In *Pathways to Preaching*, for each biblical text we will consider how the Law speaks through it, how Gospel speaks through it, and the transformation that occurs through the Word of God.

## Theological Reflection on Doctrine

We find in this passage that the Holy Trinity for us is God's action in our lives to mold us into the image of God. Our attempts to be holy people by following God's law fail. It fails because we are sinful people to our core, but just as much it fails because the law is a distorted image of who God is.

God's true nature is not one who gives strict laws and commands absolute obedience. God's true nature is one who loves deeply and unconditionally. This love is not reflected in the law, but it is reflected in Christ. The Father and Son are perfect images of one another. To know the truth of Christ is to know the truth of God. In Christ we find freedom because we know the love of God.

As we gaze upon the truth of love, the Holy Spirit transforms us into more loving people. As our ability to love others expands, we reflect the glory of God's love more and more. This makes sense. We are shaped by the things that we spend our days doing and thinking about. If we spend all of our time focused on sports, we tend to become competitive in all aspects of life. If we spend our time focused on money, we tend to become financially-oriented in all aspects of our life. Thus if we spend our time focused on God, we will become loving in all aspects of our life. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In preaching about the Trinity, therefore, we need not get caught up in detailed doctrines or philosophical debates. The Trinity is a way of talking about our lives showing the glory of God by coming to know Christ. It is a way of telling us that God is greater than a list of rules; God is a kind of love that makes us more loving. God the Father is loving by nature. In Christ we know this to be true. In the Holy Spirit that love becomes part of who we are. This is the story of the Trinity.





## Topic: Doubt/Unbelief

The word “doubt” comes from a Greek word “diakrino.” It has many connected meanings having to do with how we think: it can mean to distinguish or judge, to separate and divide, to quarrel or struggle. These are all internal mental processes as we choose what we can believe.

In the New Testament, doubt moves against hope or confidence, which might make us think doubt is bad or sinful. But in the New Testament, doubt only exists where the Gospel can be heard or seen. Thus we are not left alone in our doubt, we are not separated from God or Church; rather, God meets us in our unbelief and offers us hope that we can believe in.

Written by Rev. Wendolyn Trozzo, coordinator for congregational outreach at the Lutheran Study Centre at STS.

**FAITH**  
is like Wi-Fi,  
it's invisible but  
it has the power  
to connect you to  
what you need.

QUOTEDIARY.ME

## Bible Text: John 20:24-31

Thomas, one of the 12 disciples, had gone away from the other 11 after Jesus' crucifixion. When the others tell Thomas of Jesus' resurrection appearance, he hesitates to believe, saying he needs proof in actually touching Jesus. Jesus responds to Thomas' need: he appears again and Thomas speaks the biggest confession of belief in the Gospel of John, as he says, “My Lord and my God!” The passage closes with an invitation to modern-day readers to be included in the disciples' belief and joy.

**Prayer:** Loving God, thank you for your promise to be with us in good times and bad. When we doubt you or your love, show us your Gospel. When we feel alone in our doubts, take us back to your holy Church. Help us to experience doubts as the gateway to faith. We are grateful that you never leave us alone in our struggle. Please send your Spirit to calm our hearts and give us courage. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who loved us enough to give His life for us. Amen.



**Related texts:** Psalm 42:5-6,

Romans 14:23 doubt as sin; Matthew 17:20 doubt as faint-heartedness — yet also the mustard seed;

“Lord I believe, help my unbelief,” Isaiah 49:14-15, Jesus with disciples calming the storm, “Ye of little/no faith”, the book of Job,

Matthew 28:17 (“they worshipped and they doubted”).

*“Pathways to Preaching” is a newsletter provided by the Lutheran Study Centre, edited by Rev. Wendolyn Trozzo.*

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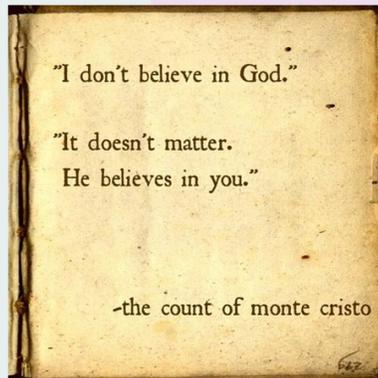
# Doubt / Unbelief

Law + Gospel = Transformation

**Law:** In the western world, Thomas is often spoken of as “Doubting Thomas” – it is what Thomas is most remembered for. Yet the other disciples all doubted the women’s story of the empty tomb; they all had to see Jesus just like Thomas did. Thomas’ biggest problem was that after Jesus’ brutal murder, he went away from the others, probably in a mixture of grief and fear. To him, God’s law had not been fulfilled in Jesus, and he no longer knew what to believe or what to do with his life. Many people believe that Thomas should be shamed or punished for his unbelief. But think of this: imagine the Church as a bonfire, burning bright because of the many logs in the fire. Thomas is like a branch that is removed from the fire and quickly extinguishes. The Law in this passage would focus on Thomas’ separation, unbelief, and demanding words, the way his fire went out when he was separated from his community. But such a branch, put back into the fire, can be re-ignited and burn strong. The Church today needs to be careful to not send people away or punish them because they doubt; people speaking their doubts are an opportunity for the Church to speak about the Gospel.

**Gospel:** Jesus does not abandon Thomas in his unbelief. In Jesus’ absence, Thomas demands a miracle: to touch the nail marks in Jesus’ body. Jesus gives Thomas not only the miracle that he asked for (prayed for?); Jesus turns the act of appearing into a great revelation that points to Jesus’ completion of his mission on earth. Thomas sees more than Jesus’ hands – he sees God. He breathes the words of Gospel news: that Jesus is Lord and God. To see God in Christ means to see Jesus as eternal, merciful, all-knowing. Verse 30 is a benediction – a good (“bene”) word (“diction”) – for all who might doubt like Thomas did. The author of

John’s gospel knows that future disciples will also struggle to believe, and that there is no shame in doubting. He reminds all readers that relationship with Jesus is possible, even when Jesus is no longer walking the earth.



**Transformation:** The center of this story seems to be the power of unbelief, but in reality the center of this story is a man honestly asking for what his heart needs, and Jesus granting that wish. Thomas speaks his need for a full experience of God in the darkest time that Thomas has ever known. Where the world might punish someone for doubting, might say “they have a spirit of unbelief,” where the world might expect Thomas to walk away from God, Jesus responds with love, hope, relationship, and a vision of God in Christ fulfilling age-old promises. Jesus is the transformation in this text. And the text concludes with an offer of transformation to us today, as verse 30-31 remind us that the Bible is a vehicle of faith for us whenever we need God’s love and presence in our life. Remember and reassure others: doubt exists only where the Gospel can be heard or seen, and God responds to our desperate pleas to see promises fulfilled. We are not alone; like Thomas we have a faithful Lord and, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have a community to surround and inspire us (like the branches in the bonfire).



## Theological Reflection on Doctrine:

Nobody wants to suffer. Generally we try to avoid suffering at all costs. We turn our eyes away and pretend that suffering does not happen in this world. We might even be able to fool ourselves for a time into thinking that we can avoid painful experiences. Sooner or later, however, difficult times will enter our lives. Part of the reality of this world is that it is full of hardship and troubles. Theologically we must ask how God can allow such suffering in this world. If God truly loves this world and loves us, how can God allow us to suffer? Is suffering a punishment from God?

Jesus' crucifixion forces us to confront suffering. Too often we skip over it, quickly going from "Jesus died" to "Jesus rose" without spending time considering the crucifixion itself. Yet in Matthew 16:24, Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Does this mean God wants us to suffer? Here it is helpful to think of two types of suffering. One is suffering that inflicted upon us, and the other is suffering we choose to endure for the sake of others. What we see in the crucifixion is that while God is against all suffering in this world, in Christ on the cross God embraced suffering for our sake. Rather than thinking of himself, Matthew shows Jesus as enduring suffering in obedience to God's will. Jesus endured suffering inflicted on him so that the suffering of this world could be defeated.

There are two implications of Jesus' suffering on the cross. One is that when difficult times enter our lives and we endure suffering inflicted upon us, we can know that we are not alone. In Christ God is with us in our difficulties. Secondly, however, is that while Jesus did not seek to suffer he was willing to endure it so that others might not suffer. Jesus calls us, when we are able, to follow him in challenging the worldly powers that put self-interest first, and instead to trust in God's will. To trust God means to reject the thinking of this world and instead to focus on the needs of others. Sometimes this will lead us to situations that bring hardship upon us. Yet Christ calls on us to do this so that those who are in difficulty may be preserved from suffering. Indeed when we embrace the needs of others rather than ourselves, we may face suffering but we will also find a deep joy. This is the joy of new life in Christ. We come to know such joy not through pretending that suffering does not exist, but rather by following Christ's obedience even when it causes those who follow the ways of this world to turn against us.

### What do Theologians say?

Chris Armstrong (Ph.D. Duke University), church historian:

These times of *Anfechtungen* (to use his term for it) drove Luther back to Scripture and to the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. Another valuable medicine in the struggle for Luther was "the fellowship of the church: "No one should be alone when he opposes Satan. The church and the ministry of the Word were instituted for this purpose, that hands may be joined together and one may help another. If the prayer of one doesn't help, the prayer of another will."

"If I live longer," said the Reformer, "I would like to write a book about *Anfechtungen* [dark nights], for without them no person is able to know Holy Scripture, nor faith, the fear and love of God; indeed he is not able to know what the Spirit is, having never been in temptations." Or again, "Therefore, we should willingly endure the hand of God in this and in all suffering. Do not be worried; indeed such a trial is the very best sign of God's grace and love for man."

<https://gratefultothedead.wordpress.com/2011/08/24/martin-luthers-anfechtungen-his-own-dark-nights-of-the-soul-and-how-they-affected-his-teaching-and-ministry/>

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# Doubt / Unbelief

## What theologians say:

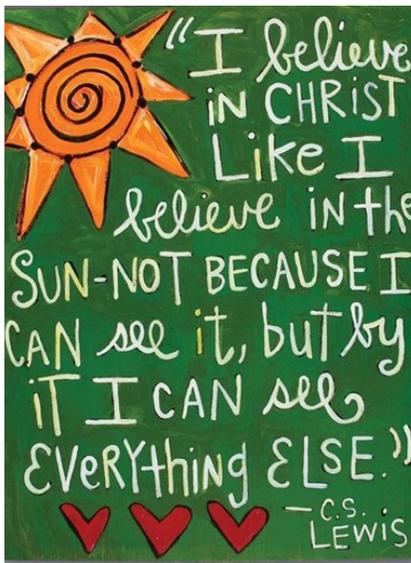
This article is by Philip Yancey, the author of “What’s So Amazing about Grace?” and “The Question that Never Goes Away.” Here is a quote from this article:

<http://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/faith-and-doubt>

Jesus is the bridge between God and human beings. He came to show us what God is like, and at the same time to show us what we could be like, as God’s children. He came to proclaim the radical message that God doesn’t just love good people—every religion claims that—but also sinners. The story of the Bible, in a nutshell, is God welcoming home his family, with arms outstretched like the prodigal’s father.

Most stunning of all, Christians believe that Jesus is still alive, the Spirit of God who accepts us with all our secrets and gradually transforms us into someone more like him. The historians, of course, emphasize Jesus’ effect on history, and even the agnostics must admit that no person ever had a greater impact. As a journalist, I see more the personal effect of prisoners and drug addicts transformed, of wealthy people humbled to care for the forsaken, of doctors who forgo comfort to serve the needy. Jesus is God’s promise that no matter what we do, we can be forgiven and no matter who we are, we can be transformed.

(This sounds like Thomas, doesn’t it?)



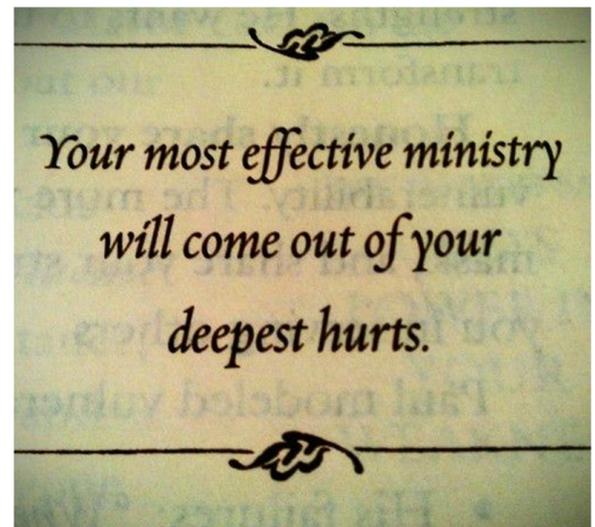
## Songs and Hymns:

Blessed Assurance

Not I, But Christ

In the Shadow of His Wings

Nearer, My God, to Thee



“Whether one is Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian, how you live your life is proof that you are or not fully His. We cannot condemn or judge or pass words that will hurt people. We don't know in what way God is appearing to that soul and what God is drawing that soul to; therefore, who are we to condemn anybody?” - Mother Teresa



## Greetings to the pastors of the FELCMS!

This newsletter is a new resource that will come to your email 4 times per year, to help you with ideas and theology for preaching. The Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary knows how hard pastors are working to share God's word with their congregation, and we at the LSC want to offer you support in the important work of preaching.

Every newsletter will review a few topics that you might want to preach on. Every topic will have one scripture passage for you to think about. One topic might have 20 different texts that could be connected, but this newsletter will choose one text to focus on. Being uniquely Lutheran, we will look at each topic for where it shows us the Law, the Gospel, and how the Law (that would condemn us) is transformed by God into the good news of the Gospel. You can read a short theological reflection, and see quotes from famous theologians that relate to the topic.

For this newsletter, we want to know if it is received by pastors.

We also want to know if there are ways we can help you in preparing to preach. So, we ask that you email [lsc@stssabah.org](mailto:lsc@stssabah.org) and answer these 3 simple questions:

1.) What are you preaching about now? How do you choose what text to preach on?

a.) lectionary b.) a book of the Bible c.) a topic d.) other \_\_\_\_\_

2.) What would you like to preach on in the future?

Baptism Eucharist Finding time for worship Stewardship Worry Gifts of the Spirit  
Marriage relationship New Life Other \_\_\_\_\_

3.) would you be willing to help write a newsletter topic or suggest songs/hymns?

Yes No Possibly

Please paste these questions into your reply email. Thank you!!!