

# 3 Encountering God in the Sacraments



*This session explores how God encounters us in the sacraments of holy baptism and holy communion.*

# gather

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## ✧ OPENING PRAYER ✧

Welcome! In the previous session, we explored Jesus as the Word made flesh. We hear, speak, and sing many words in worship. We believe that in these words, we discover God's promises for us and for all creation. Today we explore the [sacraments](#), God's word made visible and tangible.

When your group has assembled and is ready to begin, sing or speak aloud the text of one of the following hymns from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

466 In the singing

520 Dearest Jesus, at your word

Then, pray this prayer aloud.

Gather us, living God, as your holy people.

Guide our listening and speaking,

our seeking and understanding,

that we may freely share your gifts of abundant grace.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

## ✧ WHAT DO LUTHERANS MEAN BY SACRAMENTS? ✧

Lutherans, among other Christians, believe that we encounter Jesus Christ not only in word (see session 2) but also in [sacraments](#).

For Lutherans, a sacrament:

- is something Jesus commanded us to do;
- uses a physical element—something we can see, touch, and sometimes taste; and
- is connected with God's promise, the word of God, which gives faith.

One is not better than the other; they are just different ways in which God encounters us. We need both regularly! Sacraments speak to us through our bodily senses; they are a visible and tangible word. Think of a young child preparing for "show and tell" at school. The child might stand up and tell about a red truck or a stuffed animal, but he must bring the object, a concrete sign of what she wants to say, to make the presentation complete. So it is with us in worship:

we tell about God, but we also show who God is with touchable things. We call this combination of showing and telling a *sacrament*. Lutherans have two sacraments: [holy baptism](#) and [holy communion](#).

## ✧ THE SACRAMENTS AND YOU ✧

Take turns answering the following question in quick, around-the-room fashion, or write your answers (anonymously) on a slip of paper to be collected and read out loud by the leader. Don't overthink your answer.

- If someone asked you, "What about the celebration of baptism *or* communion in your congregation most engages *or* puzzles you?" what is the first answer you would give?

# encounter

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## ✧ MYSTERY, NOT MAGIC ✧

Many of us enjoy a good mystery novel. We become engrossed in the story until the mystery comes to a satisfying solution. As Christians, we believe in a mystery of a different kind, the mystery of the divine becoming human in the person of Jesus. We call this [incarnation](#) (see page 31). Unlike a mystery novel, we aren't detectives trying to solve the story. Instead, we are participants in the mystery, invited to pay attention to the clues of Jesus' presence with us in worship and in our everyday lives.

A magician may say "hocus pocus" when performing a trick. Perhaps we often regard the sacraments as such, magic performed by the pastor. The sacraments are a mystery, but they are not magic. The amazing grace, love, and forgiveness of God present for us and through us is a mystery not to be solved but to be lived. Some believe that the words *hocus pocus* actually are a parody of the Latin phrase *hoc est corpus meum*, meaning "this is my body." Lutherans believe that the bread of holy communion is the [body of Christ](#), but we do not speculate on how this is true. We simply trust Jesus' promise.

The sacraments are *mystery* in that we cannot fully exhaust what they mean for us—in this course or over a lifetime. We can, however, affirm their centrality for our faith. This Encounter provides brief backgrounds on baptism and communion before delving more deeply into what the sacraments mean for us as individuals and as a community of faith.

## ✧ BAPTISM: A LITTLE BACKGROUND ✧

Christians did not invent baptism; many religions include water-washing [rituals](#). Jesus, a Jew, was baptized by John, and it is likely that Jewish purification practices influenced Christian practice. As the first Christian communities were forming, baptism became the rite of initiation into the community, first for adults or families and later for infants.

The Bible does not offer us many details about how baptisms took place, but we do know that its meanings are found throughout the New Testament. These include:

- being born anew, birth, rebirth (John 3; Titus 3:4-5);
- dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:12);
- washing, conversion, and forgiveness (Acts 22:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 Peter 3:21-22);
- the gift of the Spirit (Titus 3:4-7; Ephesians 1:13-14);
- incorporation into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13); and
- the sign of the reign of God (2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 1:13-14).

Other clues about early Christian baptismal practice have been found through art and other written sources.

The book of Acts, which records stories of the earliest Christian communities, also offers us a picture of what communal life looked like among the baptized. In Acts 2 we learn that the baptized “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... All who believed were together and had all

Compare the Acts 2 description of the Christian community with Justin Martyr’s description of the Sunday meeting in session 1 (p. 18). Interesting, isn’t it?

things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:42, 44-45).

## ✧ BAPTISM: A CLOSER LOOK ✧

Baptism is a onetime event that takes a lifetime to unfold. One way we can understand the lifetime dimension of baptism is through its relationship to confession and forgiveness. *The Use of the Means of Grace* (the ELCA’s statement on the practice of word and sacrament) says it this way (quoting from [Martin Luther’s Large Catechism](#)):

The baptismal life is expressed each time the baptized confess their sins and receive forgiveness. “Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism” (Background 17A).

“In baptism, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life.”  
–[Large Catechism](#):  
“Concerning Baptism,”  
*The Book of Concord*,  
Kolb and Wengert, eds.  
(Minneapolis: Fortress,  
2000), p. 461.

When a pastor stands at the baptismal [font](#) and pours water into it at the confession and forgiveness, this connection becomes visible. Each day we find ourselves turning away from God’s good intentions for us. Each day we can return to trace ourselves with water and the sign of the cross. We are forgiven, baptized children of God, marked forever!

Some congregations use a thanksgiving for baptism as an alternative to confession and forgiveness, especially during the [Easter](#) season. This rite is led from the baptismal font. Its words recall significant scriptural images of water—creation, flood, crossing the Red Sea, Jesus’ baptism—and give voice to the power of water to sustain life. At the conclusion of the thanksgiving, the assembly may be sprinkled with water from the font as a reminder of the gift of baptism—connecting a water sign with a water word. We can reach out to receive these waters with thanksgiving and praise, and make the sign of the cross in remembrance of our own baptism. Renewed and refreshed in the waters and their promises, we receive at the hand of a gracious God the renewing power of forgiveness, grace, and love.



What difference does baptism make? It initiates us into the Christian community, for sure (which is one reason Lutherans almost always baptize publicly in the midst of a gathered assembly). But baptism is also an immersion into the world, the means by which we are more fully engaged in loving the world God loves. After Jesus' baptism, he begins his public ministry: teaching, healing, forgiving, driving out demons. Likewise, baptism sets us free—and sets us loose—to proclaim and live the good news. As baptized people, we see our daily lives as the place we carry out our baptismal calling.

## ✧ HOLY COMMUNION: A LITTLE BACKGROUND ✧

The very earliest description we have of the meal on the night that Jesus was betrayed is the account in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth (Paul's letters were written before the gospels were written). You can find Paul's description in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. Here Jesus gives thanks over the bread in the Jewish way, and takes the cup after supper as the pray-er does at the end of every [Sabbath](#) meal, giving thanks for the [covenant](#). Yet *this* prayed-over meal is a new thing: of the bread Jesus says, "This is my body for you," and of the cup, "This is the new covenant in my blood."



When the earliest Christians first gathered, they celebrated a full meal at which bread was blessed and shared. Over time, perhaps because of abuses in this practice (see 1 Corinthians 11), the larger meal became a four-action ritualized meal that included taking bread and wine, thanking God for these, then breaking and sharing them. This is the pattern we can recognize still today in our communion practice.

Christians call this [ritual](#) meal by many names. [Eucharist](#), [Lord's supper](#), and [holy communion](#) are perhaps the most familiar to Lutherans (see p. 22 for a longer list). Yet one name is not enough—could never be enough—to capture the depth of meaning of this meal. Each name reflects a different, beautiful facet of the meal: thanksgiving, a meal hosted by Jesus, and the relationship between and among Christ and those who eat the meal.



## ❖ HOLY COMMUNION: A CLOSER LOOK ❖

While we may remember and give thanks for baptism daily, the sacrament itself is only done once. Holy communion, on the other hand, is repeated