

The Appalachian Lutheran



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appalachianlutheranleague.org

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A Letter from Luther



Since you wish to know whether my seal is well done, I shall gladly comply with your request by communicating to you the thoughts I originally desired my seal to embrace as indicative of my theology.

First, there is a cross, black on a heart in red, as its natural color. This to remind me that faith in the Crucified saves us; for if one believes with the heart, one is justified. Now although it is a black cross, although it mortifies and is designed to inflict pain, it nonetheless allows the heart to keep its color; it does not destroy its nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps alive.

Such a heart is to be centered on a white rose in order to indicate that faith yields joy, comfort, and peace and straightaway beds one on a white, pleasing rose. Nor does faith yield the peace and joy of the world. Therefore, the rose should be white and not red, because white is the color of the spirits and of angels.

This rose is on a field tinted with the hues of heaven to indicate that this joy in spirit and faith is

a beginning of the future heavenly joy, a joy which, to be sure, is even present now in faith and embraced by hope but is not yet revealed.

And around this field runs a ring of gold to show that the blessedness of heaven endures forever and ever and is more precious than all pleasures and possessions of earth, as gold is the most precious and the noblest metal.

A New Pastor in Appalachia

The congregation of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Ashland, KY welcomed and installed their new pastor, Rev. Christopher McCarthy on March 15th. Pastor McCarthy will also be helping serve Our Redeemer Lutheran Church a half-hour away in Huntington, WV. A.L.L. rejoices with both congregations and gives thanks to God for this provision of Word and Sacrament ministry in the tri-state region.

Pastor McCarthy received his M. Div. degree from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 2017 and has served as a pastor in Creighton and Wall, SD until accepting the call here in Appalachia.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church has been a faithful LCMS congregation in Ashland, Kentucky since 1866, founded by German immigrants who sought to plant the Lutheran faith in the Ohio Valley. Located at 1320 Bath Avenue, the congregation has worshipped at its current location

since 1951 and offers Sunday services at 10:45 a.m. With a baptized membership of nearly 150, St. Paul's is one of the anchor LCMS congregations in this corner of Appalachia, sitting at the convergence of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. The church can be reached at 606-324-3515.

Our Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church in Huntington, WV was organized in 1952 and is located at 3047 Washington Boulevard. Sunday worship is at 10:00 a.m. Our Redeemer has been a steadfast confessional presence in the heart of Huntington, West Virginia's second-largest city and home to Marshall University. The congregation can be reached at 304-529-7365 or orelc.wv@gmail.com, and more information is available at ourredeemerhuntington.org.

Together, these two congregations represent an important Lutheran witness along the Appalachian corridor where Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia meet. A.L.L. asks our readers to keep Rev. McCarthy, St. Paul's, and Our Redeemer in their prayers as this new chapter of ministry begins.

The Mission Map: Seeing the Field Clearly *From the Appalachian Lutheran League Board of Directors*

One of the most striking features we have added to the Appalachian Lutheran League website is the Mission Map. If you have not yet visited appalachianlutheranleague.org and seen it for yourself, we encourage you to do so. It tells a story that words alone cannot fully convey.



LCMS congregations in Central Appalachia. View the interactive map at appalachianlutheranleague.org.

The map displays LCMS congregations across Central Appalachia, and what it reveals is a picture that has motivated everything A.L.L. has done since the beginning. Zoom out on a national view of LCMS churches, and you will notice a significant gap. Central Appalachia is one of the most underserved regions for confessional Lutheran ministry in the entire country. The mountains that make this region so beautiful also make a congregation sixty miles away feel unreachable for a family without reliable transportation.

The map is more than a tool for visualizing the need. It is also a tool for prayer. When you can see where the congregations are, you can also see where they are not. You can see the communities between them, the distances that isolated Lutherans must travel, and begin to understand why A.L.L. has placed such emphasis on the vision of an Appalachian Circuit Rider.

As A.L.L. continues to identify preaching station locations, contacts in the field, and communities where the Gospel is needed, the map will grow. It is our hope that it will also serve as an invitation, so that pastors, congregations, and supporters who see it will be moved to pray, to give, and perhaps to go.

Visit the map today at appalachianlutheranleague.org. Share it with a friend. And pray for the harvest.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." - Matthew 9:37

Grants Available: Festival and Fair Outreach

From the Appalachian Lutheran League Board of Directors

The Appalachian Lutheran League is pleased to announce the availability of the Festival and Fair Grant for LCMS congregations in Central Appalachia. This grant, up to \$500, exists to help your congregation engage your local community through festivals, fairs, and public outreach events where the Gospel can be proclaimed and neighbors can be invited into the life of the Church.

Appalachia is home to a rich tradition of community gathering: county fairs, heritage festivals, and local events that draw families together. These are natural opportunities to meet your neighbors, share a word of witness, and extend an invitation to worship. A.L.L. wants to come alongside congregations who see these opportunities and are ready to act on them.

Grants may be used to cover outreach materials, printed invitations, event booth costs, or other expenses directly related to sharing the Gospel at a festival or fair. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis and require a brief description of the planned event, the amount requested, a budget breakdown, and any sample printed materials if available.

Eligibility is straightforward: applicants must be an LCMS congregation in good standing, located in Central Appalachia, and committed to faithful Lutheran outreach. Within 30 days of the event, grantees are asked to submit a brief report describing how funds were used, how many people were reached, and any stories or photos from the event.

If your congregation is planning a presence at a local festival or fair this year, we encourage you to apply. The application is available at appalachianlutheranleague.org. For questions, contact us at pastordangolden@gmail.com.

Grants Available: Preaching Station Support ***From the Appalachian Lutheran League Board of Directors***

Since our first newsletter, A.L.L. has been clear about one of our most pressing convictions: the harvest in Central Appalachia is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Just in West Virginia alone, there are at least 300 Christian congregations that meet faithfully yet have no preacher. Across the wider Appalachian region, the picture is similar: people who hunger for God's Word and the Sacraments, but who have no access to faithful Lutheran ministry.

To help address this directly, A.L.L. is now accepting applications for the Preaching Station Support Grant. This grant exists to help LCMS congregations establish, support, or strengthen a preaching station in their mission field, funding the kind of Word and Sacrament ministry that the Circuit Riders of old carried from hollow to hollow across these mountains.

Grant funds may be used for worship supplies such as Bibles, hymnals, and liturgical materials; facility rental or setup costs; outreach and invitation materials; travel expenses for a pastor or lay workers; and children's catechesis materials. Applicants are asked to describe how the Gospel will be proclaimed and how people will be gathered, through preaching, catechesis, visitation, or regular worship.

Eligibility requirements are consistent with A.L.L.'s mission: the applying congregation must be an LCMS congregation in good standing, located in Central Appalachia, committed to faithful Lutheran preaching, teaching, and pastoral care, and demonstrating intent to establish or

sustain a preaching station. A brief ministry plan is required along with a budget breakdown.

This is practical, hands-on mission work of the kind A.L.L. was founded to support. If you know of a community that needs this ministry, or if your congregation is already doing this work and could benefit from support, we want to hear from you. The application is available at appalachianlutheranleague.org. For questions, write to pastordangolden@gmail.com.

Upcoming Event: Alderson 4th of July Festival

June 26 - July 4, 2026 | Alderson, WV

For more than six decades, the town of Alderson, West Virginia, home to Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, has adorned itself in red, white, and blue to host what has become known as West Virginia's best Fourth of July celebration. The 2026 festival spans two weekends, beginning Friday, June 26th and concluding Saturday, July 4th, with events filling every day in between.

The celebration features the Fireman's Rodeo, a youth bicycle race with three age divisions, the grand parade (one of the longest in the state at nearly two hours), field events, gospel music, live concerts, and the Grand Fireworks Display at 10:00 p.m. on July 4th. The fireworks include both aerial and ground displays, with a coordinated ground fireworks show that is among the only remaining ones on the East Coast. Admission to the fireworks is \$5 per person, with children 6 and under free.

A.L.L. encourages friends and supporters across the region to make plans to attend. Events like Alderson's festival are exactly the kind of community gathering where Lutherans can be present, build relationships, and bear witness to the faith. Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church in Alderson has been a faithful LCMS congregation in the heart of southern West Virginia, and we are grateful for their witness in that community.

For the full schedule of events, visit alderson4th.com. For lodging and travel planning in the Greenbrier Valley, visit greenbrierwv.com.

A Lutheran Homeschool Co-Op in Bridgeport, WV

St. John's Lutheran Church, Bridgeport, WV

One of the quiet but meaningful developments in Appalachian Lutheran ministry is happening on Friday mornings in Bridgeport, West Virginia. St. John's Lutheran Church, an LCMS congregation located at 721 Hall Street, hosts St. John's Homeschool Co-Op, a Christ-centered enrichment program for homeschool families of all ages.

The co-op meets each Friday from 10:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and follows a structured, nurturing rhythm: the morning opens with a Matins prayer service, followed by music time, movement, an enrichment class taught by a co-op parent, lunch, and recess. Monthly field trips and nature walks round out the program with experiential learning beyond the classroom. A nursery class is available for the youngest children, and parents are asked to be actively involved rather than simply dropping children off, making it a true community effort.

Past enrichment class topics have included pollinators, trees, fairy tales, Christian art, and more. While Lutheran teaching is woven into the fabric of the day, the co-op is open to any family seeking a Christ-centered learning environment, not just Lutherans. The statement of faith is grounded in the three great Reformation "Alones": Grace Alone, Faith Alone, and Scripture Alone, along with a clear confession of the Holy Trinity.

This kind of ministry, a congregation opening its doors to serve homeschooling families in its community, is exactly the sort of local witness A.L.L. is glad to highlight. In a region where Lutheran congregations are spread thin, St. John's is demonstrating that a small congregation

can have an outsized impact by simply being present and faithful in its neighborhood.

Families interested in joining the co-op can find St. John's Homeschool Co-Op on Facebook, or contact the church at homeschool@stjohnslutheranwv.org or 304-608-3597. Sunday School is at 10 a.m. and the Divine Service is at 11 a.m. each Sunday at 721 Hall St., Bridgeport, WV. Learn more at stjohnslutheranwv.org.

**Carolina Confessional Lutherans:
Sharpening One Another in the Faith**
carolinalutherans.com

In the Carolinas, the southern reaches of the Appalachian region, a fellowship of confessional Lutheran pastors and laypeople has been quietly building something important: a community of mutual theological encouragement. Carolina Confessional Lutherans (CCL) exists for a simple but vital purpose, expressed well in their own words: "Faithful Christians need each other."

CCL brings together pastors and laypeople from North Carolina, South Carolina, and beyond who gather regularly to sharpen one another theologically and build relationships across congregations. This happens through two primary gatherings. The first is Loci, a monthly theological conference held at All Saints Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC, where area pastors take turns presenting on different theological topics related to a theme selected for the year. The second is Sunago, an annual retreat held in the beautiful mountains of the Carolinas, along with a Spring Campout. Together these gatherings form a rhythm of study, fellowship, and mutual encouragement in the faith.

For A.L.L. readers, CCL represents a kindred spirit in a neighboring part of Appalachia. The mountains of western North Carolina are as much a part of our region as the hills of West Virginia, and the challenges of maintaining faithful,

confessional Lutheran witness in a land of scattered congregations are shared ones. What CCL is doing, building intentional networks of theological fellowship among those who might otherwise labor in isolation, is the kind of work that strengthens the whole Church in this region.

Those interested in learning more, connecting with CCL, or finding out about upcoming Loci meetings and the next Sunago retreat are encouraged to visit carolinalutherans.com.

**Pittsburgh Area Lutheran Ministries:
Devoting Themselves to the Gospel**
palmpa.org

At the northern edge of the Appalachian region, along the rivers of western Pennsylvania, a coalition of LCMS congregations has been working together since 1997 to do what no single congregation could do alone. Pittsburgh Area Lutheran Ministries, known as PALM, is a recognized service organization of The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, born out of its predecessor the Lutheran Church Extension Society and dedicated to expanding and supporting mission and ministry work across the Pittsburgh region.

PALM exists to accomplish objectives that require the cooperation of all or several of the members. Each September, delegates from member congregations gather to review PALM's work and elect a board of directors. That cooperative spirit has produced a diverse portfolio of ministries: Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Chapel in Pittsburgh's Second Avenue neighborhood; the All Saints Student Center at Slippery Rock University, providing campus ministry under Rev. Jacob Deal and Campus Ministry Director Mrs. Augusta Menell; and the First Trinity Homeless Ministry, which conducts Sunday rounds from 12:30 to 3:00 p.m. each week, serving those in need through Christ.

PALM also gathers the wider Pittsburgh Lutheran community annually for a Reformation Festival on the last Sunday of October, featuring a guest preacher, and hosts the Holy Cross Parish Festival each August.

A.L.L. readers may recognize a familiar name on the PALM board of directors: Mr. Joseph Solberg, who serves as PALM's Secretary and is also a member of the A.L.L. board of directors. His work with both organizations is a reminder that the mission of confessional Lutheranism in this region is best advanced when congregations and fellowships work together across district lines and geographic boundaries.

To learn more about PALM, support their ministries, or connect with their member congregations, visit palmpa.org or contact them at directors@palmpa.org or 412-407-3306.

OWL: Bringing the Winkel to the Whole Church

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Columbus, OH

You may have seen the word "winkel" appear on your pastor's calendar and wondered what it meant. A winkel is a monthly circuit meeting where pastors gather to study, discuss theology, and encourage one another in the work of ministry. It is one of the great gifts that the LCMS structure provides to its clergy. But what if that gift could be extended to the whole congregation? That is exactly the vision behind OWL.

The Ohio Winkel for Laity (OWL) Convocation is an initiative hosted by Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio, designed to bring the sacramental and theological benefits of the pastor's winkel to every member of the church. Pastors from around the Ohio District, and beyond, lead breakout sessions on topics including practical theology, ongoing catechesis, exegetical and systematic theology, and a theology of contemporary issues. All presentations are

grounded in the Word of God, with the goal of equipping laypeople in the knowledge of the truth and strengthening their faith for the vocations God has placed them in.

The theological foundation is drawn straight from Luther's Smalcald Articles, which describe the many ways God distributes His grace: through the spoken Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Keys, and also "through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren." OWL takes that final category seriously. Romans 1:11-12 is also close at hand: "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

OWL is intentionally not an academic conference. It is a gathering that gets down to the nuts and bolts of the Christian faith and applies it to the contemporary Christian life. The fellowship around the table is considered just as important as the presentations themselves, a conviction any pastor who has ever benefited from a good winkel lunch will immediately recognize.

For A.L.L. readers in Ohio and beyond, OWL is worth knowing about and attending. Iron sharpens iron, as Solomon says, and the Church is always stronger when laypeople are as well-equipped as their pastors. More information is available at zionlcms.org.

The Lutheran Young Adults League: Fellowship for the Next Generation *lutheranyoungadultsleague.com*

One of the quiet challenges facing Lutheran congregations across Appalachia and the wider LCMS is retaining and connecting young adults in the years between confirmation and the establishment of a settled family life. The Lutheran Young Adults League (LYAL) is an LCMS-affiliated group taking that challenge seriously.

LYAL is open to Lutheran young adults ages 21 to 35 and exists to provide real, tangible

community: new friendships, fun events, and a network of fellow believers for those who might otherwise be navigating post-college life without much congregational connection. The group is deliberately welcoming and approachable, designed for young adults who want more than a Sunday morning service but are not sure where to find it.

Events are organized to help members meet new people and build lasting friendships within the Lutheran community. The group is active on Facebook and Instagram (@lutheranyoungadultsleague) and maintains an email list that notifies members of upcoming events in their area.

For A.L.L. readers who know young Lutheran adults in the 21 to 35 age range, whether in your congregation or in your family, LYAL is a resource worth sharing. Young adulthood is a pivotal and sometimes lonely season, and a group that knows how to combine genuine Lutheran identity with genuine fun is no small thing.

To connect with LYAL, visit lutheranyoungadultsleague.com, find them on Facebook by searching "Lutheran Young Adults League," or reach out at LutheranYoungAdultsLeague@gmail.com.

"Yesterday's People": A Word Still Worth Hearing

From the President, Rev. Daniel Golden

In 1965, a Presbyterian minister named Jack E. Weller published a book called *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia*. It was a careful, sympathetic, and at times uncomfortable study of the mountain people of central Appalachia. Sixty years later, one paragraph from that book reads as if it were written for us today.

Weller wrote this about anyone who would come to work and minister in Appalachia:

"To work in Appalachia in any field, one must be vitally aware of these

deep feelings of mountain people - their long history of failure and loss; their backward stance toward the only security they ever knew; their eager longing for a time and place where things will finally work out well for them for a change, when the reference group will be reunited in heaven.

Those who come to work and to minister must do so with great sympathy for mountain religion. For many it is the only hope, and to destroy it without replacing it with a livelier hope is a great injustice to a people who have already suffered too much at the hands of outsiders."

Those words are the reason A.L.L. exists. We are not here to come into Appalachia with outside ideas and remake the people of these mountains in someone else's image. We are here to bring the fullest and liveliest hope there is: the Word of God, the body and blood of Christ, and the promise of resurrection. The Appalachian people have always known they need a Savior. Our task is simply to make sure they have one within reach.

Weller, Jack E. Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965. p. 133.

Lutheran Family Day - Sugar Grove, OH ***Saturday, June 6, 2026 | Trinity Sponagle Lutheran Church***

What does a day of Lutheran family life look like? On Saturday, June 6, 2026, you can find out firsthand.

Trinity Sponagle Lutheran Church in Sugar Grove, Ohio is hosting Lutheran Family Day, a full-day gathering for Lutheran families and anyone who wants to join them. The event runs from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and features teaching, worship, and fellowship led by Pastors Sovitzky,

Golden, and Hromowyk. Lunch and dinner will be provided. The cost to attend is \$0.

The day is built around a rhythm that will feel familiar to any Lutheran family: it begins with Matins, moves through three teaching sessions with breaks and fellowship in between, closes the formal portion of the day with Vespers, and ends with dinner and time to simply enjoy each other's company. Bible studies will be offered separately for parents and by child age group, so that every member of the family is engaged at the right level. Younger children will be grouped together for learning and fun.

The event is geared toward families, but the invitation is open to everyone. If you are looking for a chance to connect with other Lutheran families, spend a full day in the Word, and walk away refreshed, this is the event for you.

RSVP by email to pastorsovitzky@gmail.com. Trinity Sponagle Lutheran Church is located at 7120 Sponagle Rd, Sugar Grove, OH.

Appalachian Lutherans: Gathering Together and Growing Together

Near and Far, A.L.L. is Building Community Across the Mountains



One of the great joys of the Appalachian Lutheran League is watching congregations that might otherwise never meet discover that they are neighbors in the faith. That vision is taking shape at two levels this year: a local picnic this June, and a longer-term dream that is just beginning to take root.

On Saturday, June 20, 2026, St. Paul Lutheran Church of Parkersburg, WV and St.

John's Lutheran Church of Bridgeport, WV will be joining together for an afternoon of fellowship at Doddridge County Park from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. The event is simple by design: food, fun, and the company of fellow Lutherans from across the region. These two congregations are separated by less than an hour's drive through the West Virginia hills, yet many of their members have never met. Events like this are how connections become friendships, and how friendships become the kind of Christian community that sustains people through the long haul of life in Appalachia. If you are a member of either congregation, or a Lutheran in the surrounding area, mark June 20th on your calendar and come on out.

But A.L.L. is also looking further down the road. What if Lutherans from across the entire Appalachian region could gather together in one place, not just for a service, not just for a meeting, but for a full-on festival? A day of music, preaching, fellowship, food, and the kind of joy that only comes from being surrounded by people who share your faith and your mountains?

That is the vision behind the Appalachian Lutheran Fest.

A.L.L. is planting the seed for what we hope will become an annual celebration of Lutheran life and witness in Appalachia. The Fest is still in its early stages, but the dream is big: a gathering that draws families, pastors, laypeople, and friends from across the region together for a day of worship, teaching, and community. Think county fair meets Reformation festival, set somewhere in the heart of these beautiful hills.

The people of these mountains have always known how to gather, how to make music, how to tell stories, and how to take care of one another. Add the Word of God and a Luther Rose to that, and you have something worth building.

If this vision excites you, we want to hear from you. Would you like to help plan it? Would your congregation host it? Do you have ideas?

Reach out at appalachianlutheranleague.org or pastordangolden@gmail.com. The Appalachian Lutheran Fest is looking for its first volunteers, its first partners, and its first believers.

The first step to any good festival is someone saying yes.

"The Wellspring of the New Creation"

Vicar Adam Cranford, Davidson County Lutheran Mission, Thomasville, NC

What does it mean to be a new creation in Christ? St. Paul declares it plainly in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." It is one of the most cherished verses in the New Testament. And yet, as Vicar Adam Cranford argues in this paper submitted for his course on Baptism: Life in Christ, most Christians have no proper understanding of what it actually means.

The problem, he contends, begins with Decision Theology, the dominant framework of American Evangelical Christianity, which places a person's salvation squarely in his own hands. "Like Hermeticism," Cranford writes, "Decision Theology demands for a person's salvation not so much trust nor faith, but *gnosis* in which you must somehow convince yourself to believe." The result is a faith built on sand: what happens when you look back and are not sure you believed strongly enough? What if you come to doubt whether you believed at all? "Maybe you weren't really saved after all."

The Lutheran answer is Baptism, and Cranford traces it through the whole sweep of Scripture with care. He begins in Genesis 1, where the Spirit of God hovers over the waters before anything else exists. He moves through the Flood, where God takes the earth back to its watery beginnings, drowns the old creation, and preserves Noah and his family through those same waters. He draws the line through the Red Sea, through

Christ's side pierced at the Crucifixion from which water and blood flow, and finally to the font.

"Our Old Adam is drowned, the breath of his corrupted life is taken; but when we are raised from that death we are renewed in the Spirit of God." The Baptismal life, Cranford writes, is not a one-time event but a daily reality. Luther's Small Catechism describes it as a daily drowning and rising: "The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and that a new man daily come forth and arise."

The image Cranford centers the paper on is the wellspring: the fountain of living water, which Jeremiah identifies with God Himself, and which Jesus promises to the Samaritan woman at the well. That wellspring does not run dry. God's Word does not return to Him empty, and that goes for His Word in Baptism as well. It works the first time, and it continues to work throughout your life.

"Who Will Be Saved?" - A Sermon

Vicar Adam Cranford, Davidson County Lutheran Mission, Silver Valley, NC

Fifth Sunday after Easter | St. Mark the Evangelist (Observed)

Mark 16:14-20 NKJV

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into

heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.

Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Yesterday was the remembrance of St. Mark, the Evangelist; and as usual when there is a festival day I like us to keep them in mind. And so our Gospel lection today comes from St. Mark's account of what we call the Great Commission.

This short passage happens to be one that is widely debated and misunderstood. There are people who would like to make the mention of speaking in tongues into a rule that says if you don't speak in strange languages you might not actually even be a Christian. There are those who will say the same thing if you've never at least been present when someone was miraculously healed from some kind of disease or injury. And I saw a headline not too long ago about a pastor who took the mention of handling serpents too literally, and died after being bitten in his chest by a rattlesnake.

Really though, all of that is missing the point. This passage was not written as a litmus test for determining the level of a Christian's faith, or even the lack of it. This was Jesus' final marching orders to His apostles. And what He told them to do is to go out and preach the Gospel. And because this Gospel is the good news of His salvation to the world, there is a promise attached to it. He tells them that he who believes and is baptized will be saved.

Every other religion in the world stakes your eternity on what you do to earn it. In the true Faith though, our eternity is staked on what was done for us. It is staked on this promise right here. "Will he who believes and is baptized be saved?" Yes. God said so.

"What about the thief on the cross?" they will ask. "He wasn't baptized but Jesus promised him that he'd be saved!"

Okay. But how does that take away from God's promise written here? It is right and proper to interpret Scripture by Scripture, but you should never pit Scripture against Scripture. Jesus made a promise to the thief on the cross. He also made a promise right here. Both are true.

Somehow there are a lot of Christians over the years who have managed to completely miss the mark on what Baptism actually is. A lot of them convince themselves that Baptism is a Law instead of a Promise. They decide that it is a work that you do in obedience to Christ, and that therefore it should only be administered to those who are old enough to have already decided that they want to obey. Think about what that means for those children, though. Jesus was incensed with His disciples when they tried to prevent the babies from being brought to Him, and yes, in the Gospel of Luke the word in question literally means infants.

What do you even say to that? First, just to take care of any doubts that may be creeping up on you: it doesn't say anywhere that you must "believe, then be baptized." It says "believe and be baptized." It is not a sequence. It is a single act. And in any case, God does not depend on our deciding to believe before He can act.

But we also teach that because Baptism is God's Gospel made material, it in and of itself can work the faith that it requires. Ask yourself: can a baby trust her mother? Yes? Then she can trust God. Because that is what faith is. It is not an intellectual assent to a set of propositions. It is trust.

Which brings us to another question. What do we say of children who die before they can be baptized? We don't decide to climb up to God. We can't. That is why He climbed down to us in the first place. Any "Age of Accountability" is just a

story made up in an attempt to sweeten the bitter pill that this theology produces. It doesn't make it better. It makes it worse, because now the parent is left wondering whether their child made that decision.

Those tragedies do happen, and it is a whole lot better to know where your hope lies beforehand than to try to figure it out afterward. I can't say it better or in fewer words than Luther does in his "Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage":

"One ought not to frighten or sadden such mothers by harsh words... because the mother is a believing Christian it is to be hoped that her heartfelt cry and deep longing to bring her child to be baptized will be accepted by God as an effective prayer." - Martin Luther

I mentioned before how the thief's salvation is misused to cast doubt on Baptism; but this is the proper time to consider it rightly. God promises to save the believer in his Baptism. But God is not bound by His Sacraments the way we are. He can work outside of them when He chooses. The thief on the cross is proof that He does. But He has promised to work through them, and that promise is what we stand on.

That is actually one hopeful thing that you can see in those Christians who are so misled as to think they need to be rebaptized over and over again. They might not recognize it consciously, but what they are really doing is returning to the promise. They feel the weight of their sin, and they want to be washed again. That desire is right and good. The only problem is that they don't need to get back into the water. They are already clean. They need to return to their Baptism, not repeat it.

God's Word does not return to Him empty, and that goes for His word in Baptism as well. It works the first time, and it continues to work

throughout your life. You don't have to get back into the water. You just have to remember that you were already there.

Now, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Supporting the Mission in Our Own Backyard

From the President, Rev. Daniel Golden

The mission field does not always require a passport. Sometimes it is right outside your door.

Central Appalachia is one of the most underserved regions for confessional Lutheran ministry in the entire United States. As the Mission Map on our website makes plain, there are hundreds of communities across these mountains where people are hungry for the Word of God and have no faithful Lutheran church within reasonable reach. A.L.L. exists to change that, one preaching station, one grant, one Circuit Rider at a time.

If your congregation is prayerfully considering where to direct your mission giving this year, we would ask you to consider adding the Appalachian Lutheran League to your stewardship budget. Every dollar given to A.L.L. goes directly toward Word and Sacrament ministry in this region: supporting pastors in the field, funding outreach grants for congregations, and building the network that makes sustained mission work possible. You can give by check made out to Appalachian Lutheran League, mailed to 3500 Broad St., Parkersburg, WV 26104, or electronically through our website at appalachianlutheranleague.org.

A.L.L. also wishes to express our deep and sincere gratitude to those congregations who are already supporting this work through their regular giving. Your faithfulness makes everything else possible. We are grateful for your partnership in the Gospel, and we pray that God blesses your congregations richly in return.

Information about the Appalachian Lutheran League can be found at
appalachianlutheranleague.org

To support A.L.L., checks may be made out to Appalachian Lutheran League and mailed to: 3500 Broad St, Parkersburg, WV 26104. Electronic giving is also available on our website.

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We appreciate your prayers.

Appalachian Lutheran League
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