

“Doing What Matters”
“The Future Starts Now”
Sermon Series/Study (4-5 weeks)

The idea behind a study/sermon series is that it immerses the entire congregation in the process from the beginning. When people hear about the principles of Doing What Matters in worship, and are then given the opportunity to explore them in groups, it helps with awareness, and unifies the community around thinking about renewable ways of living and working together.

We have created an outline for how this could work. The actual implementation of the study/sermons will depend on the context in which it is offered. With that in mind, this study may be condensed or expanded accordingly. We have not offered sample sermons, but rather some key themes and possible scripture passages around which sermons could be crafted. Keep in mind that sermons need not be delivered by the pastors and rostered leaders only. You may choose to form a sermon “team” to work with rostered leaders in your congregation to form messages that will enhance this study, and may be delivered by laypeople who are willing to preach.

WEEK ONE: “What is God up to?”-p. 19-30 (42)

“Doing What Matters” begins with a critical shift from seeing God as active only within the walls of our congregation, to an awareness that God is on the loose “out there”- in the world. This is a shift from seeing the world as an “object” of God’s mission- something that needs to be “fixed”, to viewing the world as the “locus” of God’s activity-it’s where God is already living and active. In the first week, an emphasis on asking the question “What is God up to?” will help people to begin thinking about God on the loose.

Study Session Possibilities:

“God’s Dream for the World”

God’s mission is highlighted in pages 5-18 of the “Renewable Organization Workbook.” Drawing on Acts 2:1-21, the study helps people to explore God’s dream for the world-a dream that has always included God’s people. Exercises help people to think about what’s most important-i.e. “What’s on your/God’s bucket list?” (p.6-15). At the same time, it frees us to evaluate how we are spending our time and energy (p. 16) The objective of this session is to help people see that God is on the loose in the world, and they are a part of making God’s dream a reality.

“Fill in the Blanks”

What we may fill in to the blanks of questions surrounding needs, obstacles to doing what matters, and renewable work may be very different than what God might include. Scripture: mustard seed...

Key Exercises:

- “Bucket List” exercise- p. 5, 15-16
- Acts 2:1-21 study- p. 6-9

“Making the Shift”

Our Context is explored in pages 19-30 of the “Renewable Organization Workbook.” This section helps people to understand the current dynamics for work and ministry that we take for granted. The goal of this exploration is to gain greater insight into how these dynamics contribute to a “consumable” way of working. At its core, these realities serve to objectify the world, leading to a mindset of scarcity and competition for limited resources (people, funds, etc...) By “filling in the blanks”, participants will begin to see how this sort of approach leads to all sorts of negative outcomes in the lives of congregations and individuals (i.e. “We could do _____ if only we had _____!”) This session sets the stage for beginning to see that God has already provided us with everything we need to get started-and helps people to make the shift from struggling to “fill in the blanks” to Doing What Matters.

Key Exercises:

- “Fill in the Blanks” p.20
- The “consumable” model p. 22-29
- Jesus at the “crossroads”- Matthew 4:12-17, 18-22 studies p.36-41

WEEK TWO: Be Who You Are-p. 43-60

Being who you are is the first principle of the renewable organization. It sounds simple, but it’s not easy. This session will help participants to break out of the habits of comparison, copying, and conformity to recover their own authentic selves. There are pressures in our world to be somebody or something other than what we are. These pressures are toxic to individuals and organizations alike. Jesus invites us to be who we are, and uncover the power already at work in us and the people with whom we work and serve. This session will help us tap into that power! Seven renewable practices are highlighted to help us ask questions, work participatively and playfully, take place seriously, be reproductive, see possibilities, and ignite passion.

Key exercises:

- The Seven Renewable Practices p.45-60

WEEK THREE: See What You Have-p.61-74

When we are trapped in a consumable, competitive system, we can begin to look more at what we are missing, rather than the many gifts that God has given us. At the same time, we may become so focused on planning for tomorrow that we miss out on the things that are happening and possible today. This session will help us to see things in a new way using the PAWN process of defining Purpose and discovering Assets, Wows, and Needs along the way. The strength of this approach lies in helping individuals and

congregations to think about purpose and resources for today-while discovering that there is more available to them than they may have initially imagined!

Key exercises:

- Seeing things in a new way: Matthew 6:25-34 study p. 63
- Introducing the PAWN Process p.64-74

WEEK FOUR: Do What Matters-p. 75-88

We've been trained to believe that if we don't have a comprehensive long-range plan that we aren't prepared for the future. For years, congregations have been operating this way. Sometimes, people really respond to these kinds of plans, other times, people feel alienated by them because they weren't intimately involved in the formation of the plan. In many cases, long-range plans sit on the shelf as people struggle to find their role, or as times change. Doing what matters means involving as many people in a "strategic process" rather than a long-range plan. The strength of this approach lies in its inclusivity-people are involved, encouraged, and valued in the ongoing work of the congregation. They are aware of the purpose, and freed to contribute to it by being who they are. This session will help to explore what a strategic process looks like, and invites people to see how they might do what matters by being who they are and offering what they have.

Key exercises:

- Doing What Matters- Acts 1:6-8 study p.78
- The 4-D Cycle-a process strategy p. 79-85
- Developmental Evaluation Tool p.86-88

WEEK FIVE: "It's Your Choice!" p. 89-91

Now that participants and congregation have walked through this renewable process: "Be Who You Are, See What You Have-Do What Matters"-it is time to celebrate and trust that God is up to something! The choice is yours-continue working in competitive, consumable ways, or Do What Matters and discover the wealth of opportunities, resources, and experiences that God has already provided you with. God is on the loose, and God's people are too!

Possible Sermon Themes/Directions

Lenten Track

March 13-"What is God up To?"

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

"Temptation" is the obvious theme of these lessons-from the temptation that the first human experienced, to the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness. Maybe a bigger theme could be "What is God up To...and how can we help?" God was

up to something when God created a place for those first humans to live, and shared boundaries within that space: “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...” God was up to something in the wilderness: “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted...” At risk in eating from the tree is the boundary that separated those first humans from God. The tempter tells those first humans: “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.” The tempter in the wilderness challenges God’s power and presence similarly with three temptations: turn these stones to bread, jump, and see how God rushes to save you, worship me and the world is yours. Jesus counters these three temptations with wisdom from scripture, and in doing so, he emphasizes three ways that God is up to something: nourishing with the Word, present in ways that transcend testing that presence, and providing a safe and true place to focus our devotion.

God is still up to something in our world-providing space for people to live and grow, feeding us with the Word, remaining a steadfast presence in the world, and welcoming our worship and devotion. Maybe the temptation for churches today is to define all of these things too narrowly. When we do this, we miss the point that God is on the loose out there in the world. God was on the loose in the garden, providing the first humans with all they needed to live. God was on the loose in the world when Jesus arrived, facing temptations of his own-temptations that would have made the journey to the cross irrelevant. In overcoming those temptations, Jesus was living into a larger vision for the world-one that included God’s own self-sacrificing love as the path to forgiveness, true life, and authentic worship.

Drawing on these themes, where are the places in our communities where God is up to something. How can we resist the temptation to define that activity too narrowly, and partner with God to offer our help?

March 20-“Be Who You Are”

Genesis 12:1-4a, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

Seventy-five year old Abram is called to uproot his family and go. Paul tells us that “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, with a heart full of questions. Jesus answers him with a statement of belief: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” A statement of belief from the Son of God-a statement of belief from God’s own lips: “This is how much I love this world.”

Being who he was, Abraham could easily have said: “You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m too old.” No one would have blamed him. Yet, in his life lies the power of being who you are-the power of knowing that God knows exactly who you are, and that’s why God calls. The same could be true of any of us. We could come up with thousands of reasons why being who we are exempts us from doing what matters. Yet, God has called us. Claiming us in the waters of baptism, God has sent us into the world that God loves to share love-just as we are.

Jesus sits with Nicodemus and invites him to be who he is: a person seeking God with honest questions. The answer that he gives draws Nicodemus into a larger reality—the world that is loved by God, the world that he lives in. Jesus does the same for each of us, always drawing us into larger things and reminding us that God is always up to something.

Jesus is an expert at being who he is. The Son of God, sent to redeem the world that God loves, spent his days being who he was. At night, sitting and talking with Nicodemus, at the table sharing bread and wine, on the cross, giving everything.

God needs people like Abraham and Nicodemus, like you and I. God needs people who are willing to ask questions, and faithful enough to follow God on paths as yet untrodden. God needs our creativity, our thinking, our willingness to work. Most of all, God needs us—people who are willing to be who we are for the sake of discovering the depth of God’s love on the loose in the world.

March 27-“See What You Have”

Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

In this episode from Exodus, the Israelites are focused less on what they have and more on what’s missing. Thirsty from the journey, they begin to wonder what in the world God is up to—or if God is present at all. Ask them to “fill in the blanks” and their answer would be obvious: “If only we had some water!” At this point they may feel like they are on the loose in a strange wilderness, but that God is somewhere else. You get the sense that even Paul’s words about how suffering, endurance, and character lead to hope may not have been enough for them. And then there’s the Samaritan woman, at the well in the heat of the day, asking Jesus for the same thing: “If only I had some water!”

These lessons illustrate how a mindset of scarcity narrows our vision and obscures all that God is up to. Even in the wilderness, even at the well, there is more to life than water that quenches thirst for a short while. We live in a consumable world, and like the Israelites in the wilderness and the woman at the well—at times it leaves us feeling used-up, lost, and thirsty for something more. Thankfully, because God is on the loose—there is more available to us than we ever dreamed.

When Jesus tells the woman at the well about “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” she begins to see that there is more to life than she ever imagined. Naturally, when she hears about it, she wants to know where to find it. Jesus invites her to see that it’s sitting right in front of her.

Seeing what you have is about breaking out of the narrow, “fill-in-the blanks” approaches to life. It is about more than quenching our thirst with things that don’t last. It is about opening our eyes to a new purpose, uncovering real assets, needs, and experiencing a sense of “WOW” along the way. The woman at the well experienced this, the Israelites in the wilderness saw it. We will, too.

Jesus life, death, and resurrection show us that when God is on the loose there is always something at work that we never could have dreamt of on our own. The eternal life that he gives opens our eyes to the eternal presence of God here and now. A life (in

the church and outside of it) that leaves us consumed and parched of our God-given sense of purpose is not what God had in mind. It's why God freed the Israelites. It's why Jesus sat with people like the woman at the well. It's why God calls us today, to see what we have, and dream of a new way of living and working that renews and redeems us each day.

April 3- "Do What Matters"

I Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

Healing a man who was blind is something that matters, right? We could all agree on that, couldn't we? When Jesus did it, the amazement of sight for a blind man was overshadowed by a debate. Who did it? When did he do it? How did it really happen? Why did he do it you? Who is this guy? There were no cartwheels of joy that day. There were no feel-good stories on the evening news that night. Instead, there was a lengthy debate. Believe it, or not, sometimes we do the same thing. Instead of doing what matters, we debate ideas-sending them to committee for revision and clarity, and then re-hashing them until they slowly die a torturous death. The problem is, sometimes the zeal of our people for doing what matters dies along with those ideas.

When God is up to something (and God always is) there is tremendous opportunity, amazement, and people who grow in their passion for helping God. The people who heard the news about the blind man who was healed could have asked anything they wanted to. How did this happen? How can we share this with others? What does this mean for all of the others who were born blind? How can we be a part of this kind of work in the world? They didn't. Instead they devised a somewhat strategic plan to discount the fact that God was on the loose in their neighborhood.

Jesus opened the eyes of the world to a new way of seeing God. He showed us a God who is willing to give everything to redeem the world. We can debate it, send it to a committee for review, and dissect what this means for our churches and our world. Or, we can live in it, and live into it. We can open our eyes to places in our world where God is on the loose. We can leave our long-range plans behind, and visit those places to see what God is up to. When we do, we're bound to gather ideas for doing what matters.

What happens when our spiritual blinders are removed and we catch a glimpse of God? Paul offers one option in the lesson from Ephesians: "Live as children of the light...Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." I would add a next step: once you've found what is pleasing to the Lord-DO IT! My guess is, when you do, you'll be doing what matters.

April 10-"It's Your Choice!"

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

If God can raise a pile of dry bones, knit them back together, breathe life into them, and set them dancing before Ezekiel, then God can do the same with us! If Jesus

can stand before a tomb, breathing in the smell of death, and invite Lazarus to come out, then he can stand before us and do the same thing! We can continue to live the way we've always lived, work the way we've always worked, and wind up in a valley of dry bones or worse-entombed forever. This is what it looks like when life and ministry has been consumed. Many of us are dangerously close to this, and some who are don't even know it, yet.

The good news is-God raises things up, God breathes new breath, God renews and redeems even the driest bones and the most hopeless situations. The people who knew and loved Lazarus must have celebrated like crazy that day. Today is a day to celebrate like crazy as well. It's a day to celebrate because God is up to something, and God has invited people like you and I to be a part of it. Even better news is that God has already given us everything we need to get started, and God has blessed us with a multitude of opportunities to do what matters. The best news is, Jesus gave his life to make it all possible. God raised Jesus from death to new life, and we were raised along with him. Today is a day to prepare for resurrection-the resurrection of the Son of God, and the resurrection of our churches, communities, and selves.

Easter Track

May 1-"What is God up To?"

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20: 19-31

This portion of Peter's speech might be all we would need to say about what God is "up to"! The impossibility of death holding the power of God for resurrection in check is foundational to a belief that God is on the loose in the world. Not even the cross and grave can hold this God. It says a lot about what God's power looks like, and even more about how "on the loose" God is in our world.

At the same time, as much as God is on the loose in our world, we are often behind locked doors. Sometimes we hole up in those places out of fear, just as those early disciples did. At other times, we find ourselves locked up because it's comfortable. If God can live in the small places where we worship, there is some comfort. Yet, as he did for the twelve, Jesus moves beyond those walls, opening those doors, and reminding us in ways that we can touch, and taste, and see, that God is indeed on the loose. And so, we are on the loose.

We are on the loose, like Peter was, speaking to people with questions about God. We are on the loose like those disciples eventually would be-meeting God at the crossroads and experiencing life beyond our four walls. God is up to something in the resurrection appearances and the testimony that they inspired. God is up to something, in resurrection appearances at the table-in the bread and wine. God is up to something in the resurrection appearances that draw us into conversation with our communities and neighbors. God is up to something, in resurrection appearances that lead us to God sightings where-if we're paying attention-we just might be inspired to shout "My Lord and my God!"

May 8-“Be Who You Are”

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

When the people who stood and listened to Peter’s testimony asked “What’s next?” Peter pointed them to baptism and repentance. When we sense that God is up to something, when we experience “God sightings” and are moved to ask the same question, our faith draws us back to this same place. In the waters of baptism, God claims us. At the font, we heard our own name called- “child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” God was up to something in those waters, and God is up to something through those waters every day of our lives. Baptism is just part of who we are as children of God, as disciples of Jesus.

It’s funny that the disciples who walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus didn’t recognize him immediately, or after they had walked a few hundred yards, or after they had traveled those seven miles from Jerusalem together. Maybe it was context. They weren’t ready, after the events of the previous few days, to see Jesus walking and talking. And then, at the table, as he took the bread-and blessed and broke it- “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” Then, it all made sense. Jesus was just being who he was-willing to talk with people even if they didn’t hear the voice of God in his voice right away. He was willing to sit at the table with them, even if they weren’t sure about what the recent events surrounding the cross and the empty tomb meant for them. Jesus was just being who he was-taking simple things, thanking God for them, and opening our eyes with what he does next.

In baptism, God recognizes us. At the font, God takes us just as we are and makes us children who are sealed with the Spirit and marked with the cross. Every day after that, God recognizes each of those children as we travel the roads of life-even if we’re oblivious to the God who walks alongside of us. Being who you are begins in baptism, but transcends the space around the font. It means being who you are-sealed and marked, sent and commissioned to travel paths that lead us into the world where God is on the loose. Sometimes, we’re like the people who listened to Peter, ready for the next step and leaping at the opportunity to wade into what’s next. Other times, we’re like the people who walked to Emmaus with Jesus, listening to God’s own voice, but following *our* path. Thankfully, God’s loving presence is big enough to be up to something with us no matter where we are. God is willing to do this because God knows who we are-and God knows that the world needs people who will be who we are to help with whatever God is up to!

May 15-“See What You Have”

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

The three thousand people who were baptized and added to this young community of faith are filled with awe and begin to do things that seem unreal to us. Possessions are sold, proceeds are distributed, and needs are met. Tables are set and new relationships are forged in broken bread and praises to God. What happened to

make these people see their possessions, their homes, their food, and their very lives in this way-as things to be shared equitably with those around them? We could come up with a list, I'm sure, but all of it points to one simple fact: God was up to something!

Too often, when we look at our lives, our churches, our world, we see scarcity. Rather than resources to share, we see things that are running out-and we protect them. Instead of things held in common, we store up treasures for ourselves, and the days when they are used for doing what matters never come. Maybe it's in the "seeing". Seeing scarcity, we gather what little we see and we hold onto as tightly as we can. Yet, Jesus reminds us that he came "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant life is not a future concept, but a present reality. Seeing what you have is an exercise in that reality. It's about looking at what God is up to, and the blessings that have fallen into our lives because of that activity. Seeing what you have is about recovering what that early group of three thousand discovered-that they had something. They had abundance. Enough to set the table and invite others to come and eat. Enough to live, and enough to provide for the lives of others. Enough to do what God asked them to do. Being who they were, they did it. They set the mindset of scarcity aside, and when they did, they found abundant life together.

At the table, on the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus saw what he had-bread, wine, and close friends. He did what mattered at the table-a foretaste of what he would do on the cross-and we've never forgotten it. When was the last time people came to the altar and there wasn't any bread or wine left to serve? It probably hasn't happened in your congregation. We could call it good planning. Or we could say that God is up to something. What do we have when we set the table, when we set the budget, when we set the agenda? Is it the awe that struck those early followers of Jesus-a sense of God's presence that led them to do something that mattered? Or, is it a sense of scarcity that leads us to lock the doors, set the bar low, and cut back until it's hard to see that God is up to anything at all? Jesus came to fill us with awe and bless us with abundance. Seeing what you have opens the door these things.

May 22-"Do What Matters"

Acts 7:55-60; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Doing what matters can kill. Ask Stephen. Better yet, ask Jesus. This would be incredibly bad news if it weren't for the fact that our God is an expert at bringing new life out of death.

Have you ever had a question about why we do the things we do? At work? At home? At church? Have you ever had the courage to actually ask that question out loud? When you did, did someone tell you "We've always done it this way"? It's funny because that happens all the time, but that response really doesn't answer the question. It's a statement about habits, not about purpose. The answer can kill any discussion that leads in the direction of purpose. Even worse than that, it can kill new ideas that may grow into opportunities for change and new life.

Doing what matters begins with a question: "What is God up to...and how can we help?" It's a dangerous question to ask if we're serious about discovering an answer. It's dangerous because it can kill. It can kill the old ways of doing things-ways that often

lead to consumption and burnout. It can kill the long range plans that have sat on the shelves and gathered dust for so long. It can kill closed systems, opening ministry and purpose up to people with new ideas, honest questions, and hearts that search for greater purpose. It's a dangerous question, but it's a question that can lead to new life—something our God knows a lot about.

Jesus' purpose was to save. Jesus' purpose was to be the way, the truth, and the life of God's people. It was a purpose that he was born into in the manger, and a purpose that he died for on the cross. God's purpose, in Jesus, was to live and die, and rise to new life for us. This is good news for congregations and people who are living on the edge of consumption, and wondering when the scarcity will lead to nothingness. The way, truth, and life that is Jesus reminds us that when God is up to something, new things are always just around the corner, even coming out of places that seem to be filled with nothing. Doing what matters means being who we are, seeing what we have, and journeying with Jesus even if it means killing the temptation to do things the way we've always done them for the sake of doing what matters.

May 29—"It's Your Choice!"

Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

We worship not "an unknown God", but a God who comes to know us by sharing life with us. A God who will continue to live with us and be up to something along the way forever. We have choices before us. To worship the way we've always done things, to worship a God of scarcity, or to worship a God who never leaves the building. Choosing these options, however comfortable or familiar they may be, means choosing to reduce our God to an unknown God. A God who is unknown outside of church walls. A God who is unknown when ministry and mission lead to doing things in new ways. A God who is unknown in the realm of life that is abundant. This is not a God who is up to something. This is not our God.

Choice is a tricky word in Lutheran circles, but that's what we have before us. The choice to do things the way we've always done them, or to do what matters. Doing what matters doesn't mean smashing altars or abandoning liturgies, it means following the God who is on the loose in the world, and asking "How can we help?" It means leaving behind ways of working and living that leave us consumed and depleted. It means welcoming ways of working and living that are joyfully playful and grounded in meaning and purpose. It means being who we are, seeing what we have, and doing what matters with all of it!

Church Council Retreat (1-2 day event)

1. What is God Up To/Making the Shift
2. Be Who You Are/See What You Have
3. Do What Matters