

Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible
Initial Consultation, January 18-20, 2007
The Living Power of Scripture in the Midst of Change
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Good afternoon. I would invite you to begin our time by singing the first verse of the **ELW Hymn #312, *Jesus, Come! For We Invite You***
Jesus come! For we invite you, guest and master, friend and Lord;
Now, as once as Cana's wedding, speak and let us hear your word:
Lead us through our need or doubting, hope be born and joy restored.

I sense as we gather that I am not alone in my excitement about this project. I come with the conviction that so many of us share that part of the vocation of the church is to open up the scriptures for and with the people of God. Preparing for such a task, together with all of you gathered here, is my honor and privilege. I have over the years learned a great deal from many of you in this room, and I plan to continue to do so with you and with all the folks I have not met before throughout this consultation and as our project continues. My hope this afternoon is that my remarks will contribute fruitfully to our ongoing conversation. I want to speak about *The Living Power of Scripture in the Midst of Change*. My remarks might be subtitled, *What I have learned in twenty five years of teaching Bible at a Lutheran Seminary*.

I. The Ever Changing Nature of the Church and the World

But I begin with what I learned just last week when a group of Seminary Boards, faculty, students, staff, and alums gathered to think about the challenges facing us as we plan for our future. Futurist visions listing the challenges flashed across the powerpoints like laser beams: Global issues like the unprecedented complexity and speed of life, the general distrust of institutions, and radical climate change. Specific church and world issues like mainline protestant decline, the growing search for spirituality and intimacy, the changed face of global Christianity, the fluctuating nature of families, the differing needs of specific generations all gathered in our churches at the same time, and the altered face of the church in the public square. You all could write your own lists, and perhaps we should spend some time this afternoon together doing just that. In last Friday's gathering, the speaker who most caught my attention was Diana Butler Bass who spoke about the insights in her most recent book, *The Practicing Congregation*.

Bass brought along her tinker toys to help illustrate her insight that in our congregations we are living in the tension of three axes. One you know well. Churches tend to fall along a liberal, conservative continuum. Conservative, not as classically understood, but still a distinction folks today resonate with. This is the description of the church that most attracts the media and is used most often to explain all church conflict and all church growth or decline. Bass contends, like Eric Heen in his *Dialog* article, that this description of today's church, while containing some truth, is simply too simplistic and doesn't begin to explain our contemporary situation.

Bass then adds a second continuum which envisions at one end the old church structures of established Protestantism, a structure that beautifully and effectively held sway from the 1870s to the 1970s.

At the other end is what she calls the “Intentional style” of church structure which arises from new pieties not based on loyalty. The structure of established church is best captured by the oft-repeated childhood hand exercise. You all can join in. “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people.”

In this understanding, church is chapel: you go to services; you have membership in a congregation; you learn your theology and your bible from experts; God is Father; education is information about what we are supposed to believe if we are good Lutherans; and the goal is salvation.

On the opposite end of the continuum is the intentional style of church. People choose what church they go to and what they are going to believe. If you have read Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies*, you get this immediately. Everything is open for negotiations. Church in the intentional style is community not chapel: here is the faith of the seeker where you choose your spiritual home. God is love, and we are pilgrims and friends, discovering our theology as we journey together. The goal is to meet God and to live within this relationship. My very favorite story about my friend and colleague Jane Strohl serves as a perfect illustration. During one church history class in which Jane, representing Old Church, was speaking about the terror of standing before God, a student exclaimed that she didn’t much like that picture of God. To which Dr. Strohl responded, “Honey, it ain’t a buyer’s market.” Most of our congregations are mixtures of old church folks who come with a firm set of beliefs and intentional seeker folks who are looking for a faith that matches their needs.

But we are not finished. Bass adds yet a third continuum, the axis of world view. On one side we have the modern world view which understands truth as objective Truth with a capital ‘T’. Truth tends to be propositional, teachable, objective, and knowable. In this view, we believe that if we look and study hard enough, we can know and find and teach and live and, I might add, read scripture a better, dare I say, a more Lutheran way. And then we have the post-modern world views in which “truth” is transformed into “truthfulness” with no capital ‘t’. The biggest sin is being a faker or inauthentic. Community and experience and multiplicity contribute to, even determine the truthfulness of faith. In biblical interpretation, this continuum is expressed in the conflict between historical critical methods on the one hand and post-modern interpretive moves on the other. I addressed these different approaches in one of my articles in the LWF studies volume. For myself, I find that I am continually pulled between these two poles. On the one hand, I continue to find insights gleaned from historical criticism are often valid, helpful, and even indispensable at times. I find myself frustrated by student responses that do not value the insights of the experts. On the other hand, I find nothing more frustrating than the good church folk who come up to me after a lively adult forum and say, “Oh Professor Jacobson, you know so much. I could never get what you do from the Bible. I simply don’t know enough!” I then consider myself a total failure, having sucked all the biblical imagination out of the room and doing a disservice to both scripture and God’s people.

But I digress. Back to this third continuum. Bass adds that in fact this continuum is longer than modern/ post-modern line suggests. Because we also have in our world and in our midst, pre-modern understandings of the world and truth. These pre-modern understandings are clearly contributing to fights both between faiths and within faiths. I am often struck by the fact that some post-modern views have more in common with pre-modern than with modern views. This may in fact explain some of our own attraction to Luther and his view of truth.

As I was listening last week to Diana Butler Bass and this analysis, I was thinking clearly of today's gathering and the challenges before us. Look at his figure. In analyzing a congregation, it can be all over and certainly more unpredictable than it would be if only one continuum is considered. Given these three continuums, all alive and well in our congregations, how do we help to enliven the engagement with scripture in the church? How do we teach scripture both to traditional church folks and to seekers? How do we teach Lutheran ideas to folks who don't simply listen to experts? We must be both persuasive and dialogical in ways quite different from the ways most of us were taught.

II. My Story and God's Story

Over the last twenty-five years of teaching at Luther, I have been stuck between and within these worlds described by Bass. Though I consider myself more liberal than conservative, I am often too conservative for my liberal friends. I was trained using modern methods for service in a traditional church, and have kids who, along with their friends, fall much more into the seeker category. My students are caught between modern and post-modern sensibilities. Actually, my own mixed story begins far earlier than my time at Luther. As many of you know, I was raised in a very reformed Jewish home in St. Louis, extremely light on religious tradition but noticeably heavy on family and education. One could call it "ethical culturalism" with a Jewish identity. I was a seeker. I was a Jewish student at an Episcopal high school who took an extra-credit class in the beatitudes. I was a religion major in college where I sat on the chapel board, yet stayed Jewish. I went to church all the time; I went to Union Seminary; I stayed Jewish. And I kept reading scripture. And somewhere in the midst of this massive confusion I became captive to God's speech in Hosea 11.

¹When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. ²The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. ³Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. ⁴I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them... ⁶The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. ⁷My people are bent on turning away from me... ⁸How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. ⁹I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

I heard this passage and studied this passage, and through this word, mixed together with all manner of other experiences, I was called to become a Christian. I heard the wrath and the promise. I experienced the compassion and that remarkable verse: *I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.* I heard that what distinguishes God from humanity is God's compassion-driven unwillingness to execute anger, to destroy, and to come in wrath.

What distinguishes God from humanity and what constitutes God's holiness is the anguish-filled tilt toward and grasp of grace and forgiveness. And ironically the verse in which God claims not to be human was the very verse that persuaded me that God did become human. Incarnation was the only possible way to actualize those bonds of compassion, the only way for God to be most fully the Holy One in our midst.

The irony does not stop there. As it turns out Hosea is also the very biblical book that most often gives rise to my own hermeneutics of suspicion. The prime metaphor in Hosea pictures God as the good husband and Israel as the promiscuous wife. Men are good; women are bad. The metaphor permeates the book and has a profound effect on how the whole prophetic witness describes women and men. The very image effectively blocks the good news that Hosea so insistently proclaims. And so it goes. I find myself struggling with scripture as one struggles with a friend, or a parent, or a husband. I am reminded of Abraham arguing with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In arguing with and through Scripture, I find myself arguing with God. And I am thrown back to the main point of the divine pronouncement in Hosea 2:16

¹⁶ On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, "My 'ish, my husband," and no longer will you call me, "My lord, my Baal."

God promised a relationship, and that is what I have received. My experience, in retrospect, reminds me of Luther's engagement with Roman 1:17. As Scott Hendrix pointed out in his article, Luther came to his own radical insight about justification through faith because of his own need and his experience of the medieval church. He struggles with his own situation and with the text. He didn't bring to this encounter a fully formed theory of scripture. What Luther brought was a love of scripture, an emersion in scripture, an encounter with scripture, and a trust in the power of the Holy Spirit through this encounter to make the Gospel known.

In truth I rarely have told my personal story in public, because I really am more of a traditional church type, and we don't do that sort of thing. But I tell you this story now because I believe this is part of how we communicate with seekers and post-moderns. I see it yearly and daily with my students. But then again, I learned the same lesson in my year with the Lutheran Women's Bible Study. It is not sufficient to be academic. One must be personal, real. Faith calls for testimony, a particular challenge for those of you thinking about scripture and worship. And as the women of the ELCA taught me, this sensibility belongs not only to post-modern seekers but also to old church pietists.

Moreover this way of interacting with the text, though it begins with the personal, quickly becomes communal. Folks share and exchange stories. Listening to the text becomes a way we listen to others in the room. The biblical story interprets our story as we interpret the biblical stories. We all finally apprehend the doctrines and theories through the stories, a theological reality apparently well understood by Jesus.

This mixture of stories was one of the strengths of *Word and Witness* which I hope we build on in our own efforts, whatever they may lead us. So my telling of my personal journey with scripture and faith comes with its own question. How can we, for the sake of the mission of the church and communication of the Gospel, highlight personal testimony and experience? And in what way is this challenge a Lutheran way of encountering the Word?

III. Lutheran Insights

Perhaps we should suggest that testimonies about the power of the Scriptures, like preaching, is at the heart of the Lutheran understanding of the Word. As is so clearly articulated in our ELCA Constitution and as Eric has shown, we understand the Word to be threefold: Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, the Scriptures are the written Word of God, and the Word of God is brought home to us as proclamation, the preached and living Word. Such proclamation is not the unique province of the preacher. We all, in our capacities as part of the priesthood of all believers, bear witness through the Spirit to the law and Gospel we experience in our reading of the Bible. Such proclamation is surely part of the calling of every Christian. I wonder if we are able as a church to democratize this aspect of the Word. We tend to understand proclamation solely as the realm of the ordained pastor. Does this cut people off from the Word? Why **did** Luther translate the Bible into German? Why put the Scriptures into the hands of all the people? I do not here mean to diminish the role and awesome responsibility of the preacher. But my experience with my seminary students is that their first question of any biblical text is 'how do I preach this'? I wonder about the effect of this question on them and on their future parishioners. Does asking the question assume an automatic relationship with the text? Is this question broad enough to allow the workings of the Spirit in and through the text? How might we broaden our understanding of the role of the proclaimed Word as we consider the task before us?

Beneath our Lutheran claim about proclamation lies, of course, another Lutheran claim so beautifully articulated in Kit Kleinhans' article in *Word and World*. She notes, quoting Luther, that what we should expect when we read Scripture

is to receive Jesus Christ "as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own"; for reading or hearing the Scriptures rightly "is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him." (p.407)

This articulation of what happens when we read scripture is the most accurate way of understanding our Lutheran principle that what is important and central and true about Scripture is whatever shows forth Christ. Christ is the living Word of God; scripture is the cradle which holds that word. This Lutheran principle is most often misunderstood by my students. They think that what shows forth Christ is clear and is automatically contained within specific texts like the Gospels, Paul's epistles, and prophetic texts specifically pointing to Jesus. With such an understanding, the job of an Old Testament scholar is difficult indeed. I have always taken great comfort in the fact that I share this vocation with no less than Luther himself. And through various Lutheran writings I have come to appreciate the broadness, rather than the narrowness, of this way of thinking.

What shows forth Christ? In understanding this principle of interpretation I have been profoundly influenced by two books. The first is a book written in 1969 by Samuel Preus entitled, *From Shadow to Promise: OT Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*. In this book Preus traces the transformation of Luther's thinking about the Psalms. Luther moved away from the medieval notions that Christ was the true pray-er of the psalms or that the psalms primarily functioned to point a prophetic finger to Christ. Luther moved rather to an understanding that in the psalms Christ was shown to be the *telos* or goal of the people of the faithful synagogue. Hence the Old Testament psalms were not a shadow of Christ, but rather were the prayers of the faithful who believed in the promises of God and looked forward, like all the truly faithful, to the coming of Christ. That is, Luther understood that promise, and indeed Gospel, was present in the Old Testament as well as the New.

The second book that influenced my understanding of the interpretive principle of "what shows forth Christ" is Luther's own commentary on *Ecclesiastes*. I had assumed that Luther would have hated *Ecclesiastes*. Surely this book of the bible, which incidentally I adore, in no way shows forth Christ. There is no mention or hope for Christ, and no apparent gospel. How could *Ecclesiastes* even be considered straw for the cradle of Christ? My students often come to the book with the same assumption. Imagine then my surprise when I discovered that, far from hating *Ecclesiastes*, Luther found it "a very beautiful and useful book...which on many counts deserves to be in everyone's hands and to be familiar to everyone." (4, 7) The purpose of the book, says Luther, is as follows: (*LW*, vol.15, pp.7-8).

Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future and are, as Paul says, without care and anxiety (Phil. 4:6). It is useless to plague oneself with anxiety about the future. By a sort of continuing induction from particulars, Solomon concludes that the efforts and endeavors of men are vain and useless, so that he draws a universal conclusion from particulars and shows that the efforts of all men are vain.

In his commentary, based on a series of lectures he delivered in 1526, Luther is fighting a particular battle with a particular medieval reading of *Ecclesiastes* found most clearly articulated in Hieronymus. According to this reading *Ecclesiastes* preached contempt of the earthy world and life that led to and supported a monastic separation from the everyday doings of the world. (The world offers nothing; it is bad, so separate yourselves from it.) This Luther could not abide. So he argued, the proper attitude toward the world that *Ecclesiastes* commends is "that of the man who lives his life in the midst of these things and yet is not carried away by his affection for them." (9) Luther says that the book has been obscure because readers failed 1) to see the purpose and aim of the author, and 2) to understand the Hebrew language and style of the author. (7) (I love that part!) But for Luther the purpose and aim of the author was clear – that we be content with the Word and work of God, take pleasure in the gifts that God has given, and not strive for that which one cannot have.

“This,” says Luther, “is the vanity of the human heart, that it is never content with the gifts of God that are present but rather thinks of them as negligible; it continually looks for others, and then still others, and is not satisfied until it achieves what it wishes, whereupon it despises what it has achieved and looks for something else.” I quote Luther extensively not simply because I think his reading of Ecclesiastes is fascinating, perceptive, and still persuasive. I also think it points us to several crucial insights about a Lutheran reading of Scripture.

One, Luther did not shy away from his version of historical critical interpretation. He cared both about what the Hebrew says and what he understood the author thought. That is, he brought the tools of the university to his reading of the bible. Two, Luther read the text with great care, attending to both the details and the logic of the argument. That is, he brought his own mind to the enterprise of biblical interpretation and did not check it at the door. Reason was his companion, not his enemy, as he read. Three, Luther was not the slightest bit afraid to take on the interpretations of the past and the present when he believed he had a better grasp on the meaning. He understood that interpretations change.

Lutheran principles such as understanding the center and aim of scripture to be “what shows forth Christ.” can serve to free the Scriptures from the pitfalls of literalism on the one hand and secular irrelevancy on the other. But we must be wary of applying these principles too narrowly. This Luther rarely did. He was able to read Ecclesiastes as a book that well describes life “under the sun.” He understood the truth of the skepticism about the world, much as a good post-modern seeker would. But he then took the insight to a deeper level. Our Lutheran principles can serve us well only if we begin with immersion in the text and struggle with the text following the lead of Brother Martin.

And there is one further deep concern that arises from my years of teaching. In truth this concern comes as much from what I have heard more broadly throughout our congregations as it does from my seminary students. And clearly my concern is shared by Eric as evidenced by his earlier comments. When people talk about the scriptures pointing to Christ, they are most often satisfied with simply naming the name, as if that were sufficient. Two passages echo in response.

One is from Mark 8 when Jesus asks Peter “who do you say that I am?” And Peter answers correctly “You are the Messiah.” And then he tells the disciples that he must suffer and be killed, whereupon Peter objects. And then Jesus “rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’”

The second passage is from Luke 24 when Jesus meets the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Not recognizing him, they tell him what has transpired to which he responds:
²⁵ “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

What shows forth Christ is not any old mention of Jesus. One can get the name right and still be wrong about God. At the heart of what shows forth Christ is a theology of the cross.

Two aspects of theology are at stake in this claim. Both aspects were brought home to me some years ago in the 2000 Convocation of Teaching Theologians when we discussed “The Theology of the Cross in the Mission of the Church.” I always wished we had published the papers from that gathering. One theological point that I have already made reference to was emphasized in that gathering by Fred Reisz. The theology of the cross belongs to the doctrine of God. Dr. Reisz noted then that the theology of the cross leads us to know “something fundamental about who God is, how God works, what God wills, and to what God calls us.” (p.6, unpublished paper) That is, the theology of the cross gives us a glimpse into the divine heart. The second aspect of the theology of the cross that I find crucial is most beautifully articulated by Mary Solberg in her book, *Compelling Knowledge*. The theology of the cross is not finally about having a better theological insight about God; it rather points to a way of doing theology in which we come to God from the bottom up rather than the top down. We come knowing we do not know. We come seeking not answers, but a relationship. We come, as Fred Reisz said, as “crushed theologians.” Certainly this says something about a Theology of the Cross in a world so full of suffering.

I myself almost always think of Job as a theologian of the cross. The truth is revealed to Job in his suffering, but not as we thinkers would expect. Job does not think more clearly than his “theology of glory” friends. He, like his friends, is stuck in believing in the theory of just retribution. But the truth of his suffering forces him to throw himself, albeit reluctantly, on the mercy of God. He thinks perhaps that what he wants is some abstract revelation of truth and some answers as to why he is suffering. What Job gets is both an unlooked for identification with the outcast and the unclean and, finally, a deepened relationship with God hidden within a remarkably odd divine appearance. The final logic of Job is not the logic of justice but rather the logic of relationship.

I have another colleague known to many of you, Charles Amjad-Ali, a Pakistani Christian. Charles and I often tease that we are twins who were separated at birth, he a Muslim and I a Jew. We both came to Christianity as adults profoundly influenced by the reading of scripture. For Charles, what most captured him were passages that pointed to a theology of the cross. In preparation for my remarks today I asked him which particular passages he would point to. He spoke particularly of the Christ hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 which points so critically to the vulnerability of God in Christ and even more so on the cross. He spoke of Hebrews 13:12 and its imperative that Jesus was crucified outside the gate and we are to join him there. But most surprisingly to me, but perhaps not to you, the two passages which Charles identified as his almost daily mantra for Christian piety and righteousness, as most central to his theological and missiological vocation both come from Paul’s letters to the Corinthians.

The first which Charles said kept him sacramentally focused is 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus **on the night when he was betrayed** took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant **in my blood**. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

The second which reminds Charles daily of the missiological and eschatological relevance of the cross is II Cor. 5:19-21 -

¹⁹..In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I am struck, whenever the conversation moves to considering the theology of the cross, how very deep and broad the conversation becomes. Somehow we must find a way to convey this breadth and depth if our project is to help our people get to the heart of the gospel.

IV. What We Teach Is Not Necessarily What Folks Learn

We must find a way. This challenge is at the heart of our task. We must find a way. We must find a way to communicate, to tell the story, to reach the people. The theological portion of my remarks is very near and dear to me. My guess is that many of these notions are near and dear to all of us gathered here. And our clear wish is that others in the church know these things as we know them. But the truth is that though we might teach them rightly, we are never assured that what we say is what folks hear. We come then to yet another lesson I have learned in my years of teaching.

Back in the ancient of days when I received my own seminary training, we assumed that if we were good students and good scholars, then good teaching would naturally follow. Then I went to Luther Seminary where being a good teacher was highly valued. So I had to learn how to teach. And on the whole, I have been a pretty good teacher, a pretty good lecturer, a pretty good seminar leader. Then in the last ten or so years, we have been presented with a new challenge. The challenge comes from the new teaching/learning theory rising from colleges and universities. On my outline I have given you a link to a seminal article. I have also reproduced two charts given to me by my colleague Dick Nysse to help illustrate the theory. And if you google "university teaching learning", you will, in just a third of a second, get about 145,000,000 hits. The issue is not what we teach, but what the students learn. My, but this is a scary idea. As a good teacher, I sometimes assumed that if the students didn't learn, this was largely their problem. But the truth is, if they are not learning, I am not really teaching effectively, no matter how good or insightful my lectures might be. Grading student papers can be an arduous task, but the true burden is what it teaches me about what they have not learned. I am challenged to rethink everything.

This insight, that the goal of education is learning rather than teaching, ought not to surprise me at all. The challenge comes not only from contemporary educational theory, it comes from the pages of scripture itself. I think of the scribe Ezra and his fellow teachers as they spoke to the people in Nehemiah 8. First they read the words of scripture. Then they blessed the Lord. And then, the text reports, they

...helped the people to understand the law.... They read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

The key is not the reading of scripture or the teaching of scripture. The key is whether the people understand. Again and again in scripture the emphasis is not on **speaking** the word but on **hearing** the word. Gail O'Day in her article in the *Word and World* volume that you were sent, makes this point most profoundly in her reading of Luke 4. She notes that Jesus does not say, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in my speaking" – but rather says "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Our basic notions of how the Bible works as law and gospel is not tied to texts as written but to texts as heard.

One direction we could go with this insight is to speak of the aurality of scripture. People must hear the Word, not merely see or read it. This is most certainly true. But the notion of "hearing" is certainly deeper than aurality. Hearing, true hearing, is tied to understanding. And any deep hearing is tied to the particularity of the hearer, to the experience of the hearer, to the expectations of the hearer. Given the importance of reception, of the learner, to the whole educational and theological enterprise, it behooves those of us involved in leading this initiative to understand how people learn and to attend to their experience and expectations.

For example, *we* expect and want people to read scripture primarily to encounter God. But many people come to scripture looking for wisdom about how to live, about how to be good. The Bible as wisdom book. When *we* read the bible, *we* might have all manner of reasons for questioning the value of inerrancy on the one hand or on the other for rejecting the proposition that everything is up for grabs. But what are the presuppositions of the various people in our pews and **not** in our pews? All of the theological language we use may or may not communicate what we mean to say. How do people hear language about the cross? When Monica Melancthon spoke at Luther Seminary earlier this winter, she noted that theology which places emphasis on suffering is heard very differently by the dalits of India than by the privileged classes. The cross then is not necessarily heard as good news. How do people hear the distinction between law and gospel? We who live in America have a very high regard for law. The rule of law is part of the fabric of our society. Can we then blithely use this word for a different purpose and not expect our parishioners to be confused?

And what of our insistence that we want to highlight Lutheran insights? What if those who we teach are far more interested in being Christian than Lutheran? Does emphasizing our "Lutheran-ness" end up being more of a liability to the faith than an asset? Even if our goal is to help folks understand the Lutheran contribution to how we can read the bible, we must use language that communicates without the technical language. We must be open to language that breaks open our theology in ways even we cannot imagine.

In a teaching paradigm, we believe if we teach our Lutheran ideas more clearly, all will be right. But in a learning paradigm, we must find new language which communicates and persuades within mutual conversation. Such new language then has an effect not only on the other but also on us. We become learners. We change. And more significantly we become open to being changed by the other. Theology doesn't then simply go from us to them. It goes back and forth between us. And then it must go beyond us to yet another.

Which is finally the most interesting challenge of all. In the new teaching/learning paradigm passed on to us by the theorists, I, as an educator, must understand my task to be the learning of my students. But at a seminary, my students are not simply learning for themselves. They are learning also for the sake of others. They are learning for the sake of those who will then be learning from and with them as they live out their future callings. And in turn their future parishioners or students will be learning not only for themselves but for their neighbors. Given our role in God's mission, we are part of an ever expanding circle, an ever expanding set of learners. As Kenn Inskip's research clearly shows, we are not done with our work when only the pastors and other leaders become engaged. This talk I am now giving can only be judged successful if you hear something that helps you become critical links in this ever expanding circle. The issue is then not how are we reading the bible but why and for whom.

Our hope is that by organizing ourselves in different work groups, we will be better able to pay attention to issues of receptivity, of how learning works given particular groups and particular tasks. We are, of course, back in the province of proclamation, and we pray the Spirit is present in our work together.

VI. Words Matter.

I have one final point I would like to make that grows directly from these last comments. If deep hearing is our goal, then words matter. How we say what we say matters. How we ask questions matters. How we name things matters. One of the first books I was given when I began teaching 25 years ago was *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson. Lakoff is now very much in the news as one of the gurus of progressive politics with his more recent book, *Don't think Of an Elephant*. Lakoff and Johnson's theory is that metaphors are not mere afterthoughts, mere embellishments of speech, not merely poetic. Rather we live out of our metaphorical understandings of reality. For example, all our language about argument is taken from war. We win or lose arguments. Arguments are 'weak' or 'strong' or 'right on target'. Arguments can be demolished. We so think of argument as war that we are incapable of thinking of argument as mutually uplifting or as a dance. In *Don't think of an Elephant*, Lakoff claims that the political party that sets the metaphor, the party that frames the debate also sets the values and the message of the debate. Just lately I was talking to a colleague about these ideas, and he noted that when we frame the discussion of scripture around issues of authority, we are framing scripture in a very un-Lutheran manner. The issue of biblical authority, as we currently understand it, is a modern biblicist issue. This got me to thinking. How should we frame the issue of scripture?

I am helped once again by an insight in Kit Kleinhans' article. She says,
The church today would do well to follow the example of Luther and the
Confessions, whose efforts focused less on defending the status of the Bible than
on using the Scriptures, through translation and evangelical interpretation and
preaching, for the sake of the church and the world. (p.409)

I have broached this subject in any number of conversations. And my communal
ponderings led me finally to the title of this talk, *The Living Power of Scripture in the
Midst of Change*. The metaphorical frame that works for me is one that captures the
dynamic relationship we have with the Bible. In the midst of our reading and hearing and
struggling, our scripture convicts and uplifts and makes demands and promises. Scripture
is alive through the power of the Spirit. The power of scripture participates in and gives
witness to the power of forgiveness and mercy, the power of love and justice, and the
power of the cross. I hear echoes from 1 Corinthians 1.

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to
us who are being saved it is the power of God.

But what I hear may not be what others hear. I invite you into this act of pondering.
How should we frame the issue of how we read the bible? What metaphor presents itself
to you as you consider both our theological heritage and our present challenges? My
hope is that my reflections in this address leave room for all of us to further our thinking
about the project before us and that together we can imagine a future in which the people
of God engage the bible ever more broadly and deeply.

I invite us to end as we began, singing the final verse of the *ELW* hymn #312

Jesus, Come! For We Invite You.

Jesus, come! Surprise our dullness, make us willing to receive
more than we can yet imagine, all the best you have to give:
let us find your hidden riches,
taste your love, believe, and live!