

“Renewed by Scripture”

Mark S. Hanson  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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It is a great privilege to participate in this LSTC leadership conference with such a timely and significant topic. Before I begin my lecture, I want to say thanks be to God for the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. I am so impressed with the vision of theological education that shapes this generation. Thanks be to God for each of you in your lives of faith and places of ministry. Together, we are Christ’s body.

In the February 2007 issue of *The Lutheran* I wrote of the holy privilege of accompanying my 95-year-old aunt and godmother on her final baptismal vocation of dying in the faith.

She was a vibrant, wise woman of faith. At age 78 she became engaged to an 88-year old man who was still serving as a visitation pastor. At 88 she called and asked me what I thought about her preaching once a month at Commonwealth Nursing Home. I said, “That’s great,” figuring she wasn’t really seeking permission anyway. The Saturday before the first Sunday she was to preach, she called and asked, “Are you preaching tomorrow, Mark?” I answered, “Yes,” and she replied, “So am I. I’m going to use the lectionary text from Luke 13 where Jesus is being asked if he thinks the eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem.”

“What are you going to say?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve been reading the commentaries,” she said, “maybe I’ll talk about the difference between moral and natural evil.”

I said, “Well, you go, Betty! I think I’m going to stick with talking about the righteousness of God.”

She called me back that evening and said, “I gave up on evil. I’m just going to preach grace. It’s what the people most need to hear.”

Having taken the month of December off as a mini-sabbatical, I and my wife Ione moved into Betty’s apartment because she was next door in the care center. In mid-December the doctors gave her four to six days to live. She died in mid-January. In her weakening condition she did not have much energy to talk. We sat in her room, held her hand, sang Christmas carols, read, and prayed. Often her lips would be moving and I would hear a whisper. I would ask, “Do you need something, Betty?” She would reply, “Oh no, I was just saying passages of Scripture to myself.”

One morning she felt a little stronger, but didn’t have the energy to read the newspaper. She asked me to read it and summarize two interesting articles for her. One story was about the growth of the Christian church in China and the other was

about Senator Tim Johnson's surgery. After I read the second story, she said, "Well, we better repeat Psalm 121 and pray for him." So we did.

In her dying, Betty was using her Christian faith's mother tongue—the language of Scripture. In her childhood home, as the youngest of five children, Norwegian was her mother tongue. That began to change, however, and she was the first person in her family to be confirmed in English.

As a high school and college English teacher, Betty was well versed in the literature and grammar of the English language. She was also fluent in the first language of faith—the language of Scripture.

One day in the time of her dying she said to me, "Oh Mark, I feel so sorry for all of the people who have not memorized portions of the Bible, especially the psalms. It will be much harder for them in their dying and in their living." She continued, "Mark, can't you make ELCA pastors require memorization in confirmation like we had to do—memorizing scripture, the catechism, and hymns?" "No, Betty," I said, "that would be the synod bishop's responsibility to mandate."

In my speaking throughout the ELCA, I often have wondered—no, more accurately, I have suggested—that we are becoming a biblically illiterate church. We are paying a high price for our biblical illiteracy. How can we discern what God is doing in our lives, in and through the church, and in the world if we do not know the biblical narrative of what God has done in the past and promises to do in the future?

How will we discern the signs of the inbreaking of God's reign today if we do not know the parables of Jesus? Those stories from everyday life that include characters with whom we can identify are stories that introduced Jesus' hearers to what it means to live in the reign of God's mercy and love. When we fail to know the biblical story and how at least Luther and Lutherans approach it and interpret it, we will yield to the cultural default position of today. For many, this is a fundamentalist, literalist, apocalypticist, millennialist understanding of Scripture. Or, like many post-moderns, we will view the Bible as a book that does not reveal the truth—for there is no such thing—but a book that offers a variety of possible truths from which we might pick and choose those that make sense in our lives, at least today.

In January we brought together a group of some seventy-five participants (though many, many more wanted to participate) to help us think more creatively and crucially about what a five-year ELCA initiative on the Bible might look like. Since those helpful conversations, I have begun to rethink the wisdom of talking about the Bible in terms of how literate or illiterate we are in the ELCA. I believe it is more helpful to think in terms of scriptural fluency rather than biblical literacy.

Shortly after the January consultation, Pastor David Vasquez had picked me up at the La Crosse airport to take me to Luther College. We began talking about these things and he shared that his D.Min. paper here at LSTC was "Developing Biblical Aural (not oral) Fluency Through Plotted-Sermons." David very helpfully reminded me of the difference between fluency and literacy. As he writes in his D. Min. paper:

The simple fact that just about everyone in the world is able to speak and understand a language, while only a percentage of the world can read and write in a language or is familiar with the literature of that language, gives strong support to the fact that fluency is more readily available than literacy... . I believe that just as a person can become fluent in a language, one can also become fluent in the Bible, which is our standard (canon) for *God speech*... . There is value in making a meaningful differentiation between biblical literacy and biblical

fluency... . The dynamic nature of fluency helps better understand the process by which we develop the ability to recognize God’s voice in our daily lives... . Fluency is made up of two elements. One can be fluent in “hearing” a language or in “speaking” a language. While it usually takes a long time to become fluent in speaking a language—*oral fluency*—a person’s ability to understand the language—*aural fluency*—is developed at a rather early stage. Aural fluency is on a continuum, from the very basic ability to recognize the language being spoken to the ability to understand it regardless of accent or complexity.<sup>1</sup>

It will be very difficult for us in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to engage in biblical interpretation and to discuss and debate the hermeneutical principles that inform our interpretation if we as a church lack fluency in “God-speech”—the first language of the faith, the language of Scripture.

As I reflect upon my childhood home, we were being taught from the earliest age to become fluent in “God-speech,” the language of Scripture. Long before I could read the Bible, I heard the stories of Scripture read to me. I learned to sing the names of the New Testament books before I could read them on a page—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Acts and the epistle to the Romans. In family devotions we heard the Word read to us, especially on Sunday. We heard it, reflected upon it, sang the Word in hymns, and prayed the Scripture, each taking turns.

When the car was packed for a trip, no matter how excited I was to get started, we would sit down and repeat together the 121<sup>st</sup> psalm. Every birthday it was the 103<sup>rd</sup> psalm. Aural fluency meant, as Paul wrote to the Colossians, letting the Word of Christ “dwell in you richly.” David Tiede reminds us that we dwell in the Word and the Word dwells richly in us.

After four years at a conservative Evangelical Covenant high school, I got to Augsburg College and my first religion class on the Bible, which was also my first exposure to the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture. It was more than a little unsettling. In fact, I remember writing to my parents, saying, “I’ve got to get out of here and transfer to Wheaton. This professor at Augsburg doesn’t even believe in the Bible!”

As challenging as the new interpretive lens was to accept, I at least was relatively fluent in the biblical narrative. There was something within me to interpret.

If we are serious about a major five-year initiative on the Bible in the ELCA, which I believe we need to be, it must include—begin with—a commitment to become fluent in the language of Scripture as the first language, the mother tongue, of the faithful. That will mean hearing the Scripture read in our homes and in worship. That will mean singing the Scripture in the liturgy. One of my frustrations with much of so-called contemporary worship is the texts of Scripture no longer are sung as the words of the hymns of praise or the Sanctus or Agnus Dei. It is much more “me and Jesus.” It will mean praying the Scripture and studying the Bible.

So, how do members of the ELCA view the Bible? The most recent research we have is from 2001. When asked to choose from various statements the one that came closest to describing their feelings about the Bible, 22 percent of ELCA respondents chose, “The Bible is the actual Word of God and is to be taken literally word for

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<sup>1</sup> David Vasquez, *Developing Biblical Aural Fluency Through Plotted-Sermons*, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, March 2002, p. 3-4.

word.” 51 percent chose, “The Bible is the inspired Word of God. It contains no errors, but some verses are to be taken symbolically rather than literally.” 23 percent chose, “The Bible is in the inspired Word of God, but may contain historical and scientific errors.”

In a spring 2006 *Dialog* article titled, “The Bible among Lutherans in America: The ELCA as a Test Case,” Erik Heen, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia writes, “In the ELCA at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was both evidence of a radical shift in the way the Bible was engaged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (witnessed by the ordination of women) and evidence of the persistence of a more traditional Bible piety.”<sup>2</sup> Heen goes on to address the perception, supported by Gallup research in 1996 that took the pulse of American religion, concluding that there was “a glaring lack of knowledge about the Bible, basic doctrines, and the traditions of one’s church.”<sup>3</sup> Such data reinforces the perception that the Bible is no longer central to the life of the Lutheran church and that Lutherans as well as other Protestants have revered the Bible more than they have read it.

It is interesting that the 2001 survey of ELCA members also indicated that almost 50 percent of the respondents read their Bible at least once a week. Heen asks, “Why is there this sense that the Bible is not being engaged when—even in 2001—polls tell us, people continued to have a high understanding of the inspiration of the Bible, its authority, and engage it regularly?”<sup>4</sup>

Heen suggests the answer to this question lies in the deep changes that American society underwent in the 1920s and 1930s. The frequency of Bible reading may have stayed steady or even increased during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but “the surrounding social context of this reading shifted radically during that century to the extent that the world of the Bible and the world of dominant North American culture became realities of a different order. The Bible became a book from a different time and different place; a book that was increasingly difficult to apply to one’s own life.”<sup>5</sup>

So, although the Bible was read, and with great interest, increasingly few were able to discern with clarity exactly how Scripture was to be the rule, the norm, the guide for contemporary Christian faith and life. This gap between the Bible and its readers had not always been there. “The increasingly complex accommodations that were needed to bring biblical texts into harmony with the discoveries of modernity became too daunting for many to master with confidence,” Heen concludes.<sup>6</sup>

A clear example of this tension is last Monday’s [February 5, 2007] *U.S.A. Today* where a lengthy article titled, “The Bible vs. Science” appeared. The article began, “Some creationists have decided to pick a fight that is neither necessary nor wise. Let science be science, and let religion be religion. The two need not be reconciled. After all, shouldn’t faith be enough?”<sup>7</sup> That is a far cry from the engagement between religion and science occurring at LSTC. In the context I have broadly described we are preparing to bring a recommendation to the April 2007 meeting of the ELCA

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<sup>2</sup> Erik Heen, “The Bible among Lutherans in America: The ELCA as a Test Case,” *Dialog*, Volume 45, Number 1, March 2006, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>7</sup> Tom Krattenmaker, “The Bible vs. Science,” *USA Today*, 5 Feb. 2007.

Church Council, and I hope they will transmit it to the August 2007 Churchwide Assembly, calling the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to a five-year collaborative initiative to be named, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible.” The goal will be to raise to a new level this church’s individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching and appreciation of Lutheran principles and approach for the use of Scripture.

The language no doubt will be revised, but I trust you sense the two-fold focus of the recommendation:

1) Broadening and deepening engagement with Scripture throughout this church, or more accurately stated, “Scripture’s engagement with us.” By this we imply no disrespect for what has taken place and is now occurring in terms of the reading and studying of Scripture.

2) Teaching and learning and advocating for and appreciating Lutheran approaches to Scripture, while recognizing there is not just one Lutheran hermeneutic.

Now put away your Blackberries, Treos, and laptops. Don’t join those who immediately e-mail me challenging the statement that there is not just one Lutheran hermeneutic by saying, “How can you dare say that and still consider yourself a confessional, faithful Lutheran?”

The problem with these critics, of course, is they believe there is just one Lutheran hermeneutic, but they do not agree on what the one Lutheran hermeneutic is. There are those who argue that only Scripture interprets Scripture. Others contend that Christ—the Gospel—is our only interpretive lens. Others remind me that it is Law and Gospel. Still others maintain that a theology of the cross is our hermeneutical key. All of which are true, plus other principles such as contextuality, canon within a canon, and, as Mark Powell has argued, “binding and loosing,” as it is understood in the context of Mathew’s Gospel. The one hermeneutic I wish we could set aside is the hermeneutic of suspicion with which some approach this proposal on “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible.” People on differing sides of various issues, including ELCA debates about the place of persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-gendered in this church, have sometimes spoken as though people on the other side simply need to attend to the Bible correctly and they will change their minds.

We don’t presume that this initiative will solve all such problems or bring unanimity in this church. The Bible has never done that. Church history tells us that this is too simple an understanding of how God speaks through the Bible. The Bible’s power is rather to awaken us to wrestle with godly questions and to build communities that assume guidance will be found by searching the Scripture together.

It begins with biblical aural fluency: hearing the Word. In Luke 4, Jesus said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” But that would imply a hearing deeper than simply aural: hearing tied to both faith and understanding. When Scripture engages us, we are guided, we are questioned, we are inspired, we are given patience and hope, and we are moved from mere confidence in the Bible’s words to a deep trust in the God who speaks to us through the Bible.

Again, I don’t know if the title “Book of Faith” will survive, but I hope so, because as God’s living speech, the Bible nurtures faith. It is also approached with faith, that is, with the confidence that God will speak through it because God has spoken through it to us and our predecessors in the faith.

A question I am sometimes asked—especially in the question-and-answer period at synod assemblies—is, “Bishop Hanson, do you believe in the Bible?” How would you respond? I feel as though it is a trap because no doubt the questioner has the answer that I am supposed to give clearly in mind: “Yes.” But I suspect the desired “yes” is the certainty of the fundamentalist understanding of Scripture rather than the confidence of which I just spoke. I respond to the question by referencing how we in the ELCA describe the Word of God in the section on Confession of Faith in the ELCA constitution:

- 2.01. This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- 2.02. This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.
  - a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
  - b. The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
  - c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.
- 2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.<sup>8</sup>

As Erik Heen reminded us in his lecture to the January “Book of Faith” consultation, “Chapter two of the Constitution (2.01) begins with a confession of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This confession can function as a reminder to us that the Bible itself is taken up in the Triune God’s economy of salvation. Or said somewhat differently, the Bible is the Means of Grace of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup>

The christological focus of the Lutheran understanding of Scripture is very evident in 2.02. Although the section ends with the statement on Scripture, it does not begin there. “This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.” The constitution sets out three statements that articulate our understanding of the Word of God. It begins with the Word of God understood as the second person of the Trinity. It highlights the Word’s role in creation, its incarnation in Jesus, and the Word’s power to create anew.

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<sup>8</sup> *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions* as adopted by the Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (April 30, 1987) and as amended by the First (1989), Second (1991), Third (1993), Fourth (1995), Fifth (1997), Sixth (1999), Seventh (2001), Eighth (2003), and Ninth (2005) Churchwide Assemblies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

<sup>9</sup> Erik Heen, “Scriptural Theology and the ELCA: Challenges and Resources,” January 19, 2007, Chicago, Ill. p. 4.

In the second statement, the Word of God is the Word proclaimed as Law and Gospel, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed. Interestingly, Heen suggests, the efficacy of God's Word experienced as judgment and promise is not limited to the Bible in this statement.

Only in the third section is the Bible explicitly mentioned: the Word of God written in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. But here the purpose of Scripture is also announced, "To create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world." In other words, Scripture does something. What follows then in the ELCA constitution is this statement, "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life." So, Heen reminds us, "The authority of Scripture follows from how the Bible functions to achieve God's purposes."<sup>10</sup>

In response to the question, "Bishop, do you believe in the Bible," after reviewing what we say the Word of God is—the Word incarnate, proclaimed, and recorded—I say I believe in the Triune God who reveals God's self to us and God's loving purpose for the whole of creation through God's living Word of address. No, I do not believe in the Bible in the biblical sense, though I have confidence that it is God's living speech inspired by the Holy Spirit and the authoritative source and norm of this church's proclamation, faith, and life.

Well, obviously, the answer doesn't satisfy the questioner, but it does bring the conversation around to what we mean by the authority of Scripture. We had a lively conversation at the January consultation about whether "authority" or "power" is a more helpful word in our context. David Tiede has suggested that "power" may be a more useful word than "authority" because it points to the Lutheran conviction that God speaks, so the Word is living and effective.

We can and we should use all the scholarly tools that allow us to dig deeply into the treasure of Scripture, but we must never assume that we are in control. God's speaking is served by our deep study of the Bible, but it is still God who speaks God's Word of judgment and mercy, promise and purpose.

I was persuaded by David Tiede and Diane Jacobson's argument concerning the use of the word "power" until I recalled what Joseph Sittler once shared about the distinction between power and authority. As a child he did what his grandfather told him to do because he knew that he had to. Why? Because his grandfather had power. He did what his grandmother told him because he wanted to. Why? Because his grandmother had authority. Needless to say, the conversation regarding the power and authority of Scripture will and should continue throughout this church. I have found most insightful Kathryn Kleinhans' article in *Word and World* (Fall 2006), "The Word Made Words: A Lutheran Perspective on the Authority and Use of the Scriptures." Permit me to read just a few sentences.

The designation of the Bible as the "Word of God" communicates the understanding that biblical authority derives from God as author and thereby also as authorizer. Biblical authority is a dynamic concept, not a static quality that adheres to a text in isolation. It embodies a constellation of relationships connecting the Triune God, the text, and those whom God addressed and addresses through the text. The authority of the written Word of God derives from the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

personal authority of God and the Word and issues forth in authorized agency, that is, the spoken proclamation of the Word of God for Christian faith and life.<sup>11</sup>

She goes on to say, “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.”<sup>12</sup>

Kleinhans says, “The task of the Christian church is to witness to how the Triune God is at work in the world and to demonstrate the trustworthiness of this biblical God. The Bible is foundational for this task, but just as Luther translated Hebrew and Greek in German, so the church is called to translate the biblical message into new idioms so that people today can hear God’s Word persuasively in their own lives. Luther presents a powerful and memorable image of the Scriptures as ‘the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies.’ Perhaps less well known is that Luther also describes the gathering of the Christian people as a ‘manger’ where Christ is placed before us.”<sup>13</sup>

Her words called to mind what Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*:

I will keep the Bible, which remains the Word of God for me, but always the Word as heard by generations of human beings as flawed as I. As beautifully as these witnesses write, their divine inspiration can never be separated from their ardent desires; their genuine wish to serve God cannot be divorced from their self-interest. That God should use such blemished creatures to communicate God’s reality so well makes the Bible its own kind of miracle, but I hope never to put the book ahead of the people whom the book calls me to love and serve. I will keep the Bible as a field guide, which was never intended as a substitute for the field. With the expert notes kept by those who have gone before me, I will keep hunting the Divine Presence in the world, helped as much by the notes they write in the margins while they were waiting for God to appear as by their astonished descriptions of what they saw when God did. I know that nine times out of ten, the truth scripture tells is the truth about the human search for God.<sup>14</sup>

When all is said and done, the proposal for a five-year initiative, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible,” is not a churchwide program. It is about the renewal of the power of the Word in this church. Over the generations there have been many such renewals. Luther’s own work was the beginning of this for Lutherans. In our own time, we can point to the impact of intense efforts like the Bethel Series, Word and Witness, Search, and Crossways. They were more than curricula or materials, more than initiatives. It was about renewal, hearing the Bible, reading Scripture,

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<sup>11</sup> Kathryn A. Kleinhans, “The Word Made Words: A Lutheran Perspective on the Authority of and Use of the Scriptures,” *Word and World*, Volume 26, No. 4, p. 402-403.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2006) page 107.

people studying the historical and the contextual, the literary forms of the Bible, and discovering the Bible's relevance for daily living—the power of the Word.

Anticipating Church Council and Churchwide Assembly support for this renewal initiative, “Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible,” it is my hope that Scripture will engage us personally in this significant focus of our life together in mission in the ELCA. The members of the ELCA, visitors to ELCA congregations, participants in outdoor and campus ministry, students in Lutheran schools and campus ministries, and residents at Lutheran social ministry organizations will hear Scriptures read. We will grow in our aural fluency as we hear Scripture, pray and sing, and read the Bible in devotions and worship.

It is also my hope that Scripture will engage us communally and contextually. As Professor Jane Strohl writes in *Hearing the Word: Lutheran Hermeneutics: A Vision of Life Under the Gospel*, “Once the evangelical faith was unleashed, the spiritual autonomy of the priesthood of all believers inevitably encountered limits. If Christians should peruse the scriptures for themselves because, as Luther claimed, even a child could read the Bible, and see that the pope was wrong, those urged to exercise their own judgment were not given free reign to harbor private reservations and critiques. Individual Bible reading was never to be less than communally normed.”<sup>15</sup> Strohl continues, “Biblical interpretation must also be mindful of the universality of the scriptures. There are vast numbers of people who live on the same planet and share with us the same Bible, but do not inhabit the post-modern intellectual world.”<sup>16</sup>

Communal engagement with Scripture will mean confronting difficult texts, including the traditional interpretation of those texts and their speaking to our contexts. It is far too complex a topic for this late in this presentation, but I am concerned that we seem more comfortable with use of and at the same time we seek to avoid tension, especially in congregations, over difficult texts, believing that tranquility is the sign of vitality of our ministry and mission. The temptation is to avoid or even repudiate difficult texts, especially those that have or are being read to authorize appalling abuse of women, Jews, slaves, colonized people, and homosexuals.

Ellen F. Davis, in a chapter titled, “Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic” in the book, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, cautions against such a move at least without the community engaging in what she calls “critical traditioning, the willingness to engage in radical rethinking of a formerly accepted theological position.”<sup>17</sup>

She challenges us to consider how the biblical writers themselves dealt with difficult texts, how they handled elements of the tradition that they could no longer accept as ethical or edifying. She asks, “For what is hermeneutics but the art of negotiating difficulty within the biblical tradition?”<sup>18</sup> She contends that the history of biblical hermeneutics “began centuries before the closure of the canon, as the people

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Strohl, “The Social-Cultural Context of Biblical Interpretation Today,” *Hearing the Word: Lutheran Hermeneutics: A Vision of Life Under the Gospel*, ed. David Ratke (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2006.) pp. 66-67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2003) p.170.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

we now call the biblical writers responded to the pressure of the tradition *they* had inherited.”<sup>19</sup>

What a privilege it has been for me every time I am at a synod assembly or professional leaders gathering, and Barbara Rossing is on the program. For she so persuasively, clearly invites people into the book of Revelation in its historical context, taking on the ideological hermeneutic of the fundamentalist, apocalypticist, millennialist reading. I often hear murmurs from the hearers saying, “Why didn’t anyone tell me this before?” as they hear God’s promises in the Revelation to John so differently, so freshly, so appreciatively.

It is also my hope that our engagement with Scripture in this coming initiative will be cross-cultural. Listen to Richard Perry’s argument in his reflection, “What Sort of Claim Does the Bible Have Today?”

What I am suggesting is that culture (i.e, the totality of life lived by the people) *and* Jesus became and still are the norms of evaluation of what sort of claim the Bible has for us today. Thus, people of African descent raise questions about Scripture and the interpreter. There are Lutheran hermeneutics shaped by the multiplicity of cultures in society. Unearthing the sort of claim the Bible has today needs to take into account the social location of the interpreter and the religious community to which he or she belongs. One must recognize that any interpretation of the central claim of the Bible is false if it does not rise out of particularity, especially within the African American community.<sup>20</sup>

“What we too often forget,” Peter Nash reminds us, “is that the [biblical] texts themselves bear witness to cross-cultural experiences within the canon. This witness can be read as a positive example for living with the Word in today’s multicultural societies.”<sup>21</sup>

What if every cross-cultural experience in the ELCA—be it between urban and suburban congregations, with American Indians on a reservation, or global companion synods together—involved engaging the Scriptures in our diverse context, hearing the Word interpreted through the lives of others, and—through their interpretation—rethinking, and reframing our lives of faithful witness?

My hope is that in this initiative we will engage Scripture ecumenically. I appreciate what Cardinal Kaspar calls an ecumenism of life—a grass-roots spiritual ecumenism where people of faith read and study Scripture and pray together without the permission of religious authorities or the prerequisite of full-communion agreements.

What was interesting in my meeting with Pope Benedict was that we both spoke in our formal, written greetings of our desire that as Lutherans and Roman Catholics we not ignore what we have accomplished in our dialogue, especially the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” or deny the difficult questions that still divide us, but also look together at the Word of God in the life of the church as it

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 166

<sup>20</sup> Richard Perry, “What Sort of Claim Does the Bible Have Today?” *Hearing the Word: Lutheran Hermeneutics: A Vision of Life Under the Gospel.*, ed. David Ratke (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2006.) p. 74-75.

<sup>21</sup> Peter T. Nash, “Cross-Cultural Reading of the Bible,” *Word and World*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 1993), p. 398.

shapes our witness in the world. The next ten years give two marvelous occasions to have that focus. In 2015 the Roman Catholic Church will celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Dei Verbum*. In 2017 Lutherans will commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation.

With our three reformed full-communion partners, we are exploring what an ecumenical commitment to reading and interpreting Scripture might be in the context of our relationships. And, just as you are doing here at LSTC, we need interfaith conversations on our sacred texts. I remember an imam in Washington, D.C., expressing frustration to me because in the attempts to have Muslim-Christian dialogue, he had discovered both that the Muslims know the Christian Bible better than the Christian participants and that the Christian participants know nothing about the Koran. As we live in increasingly diverse communities and are aware of the centrality of sacred texts in the lives of our neighbors, what a marvelous time to engage in study of our scriptures together.

As I trust you can sense, I am speaking of something far more than a churchwide program. In fact, that which I am describing is already taking place throughout this church. I am confident that it is of the Holy Spirit and, being of the Holy Spirit, it will bring renewal to our lives of faith, to our loving and serving our neighbors, our striving for justice and peace, our caring for creation, and our proclaiming Christ in word and deed. If that is the result, then once again this church will be renewed by the power of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit.