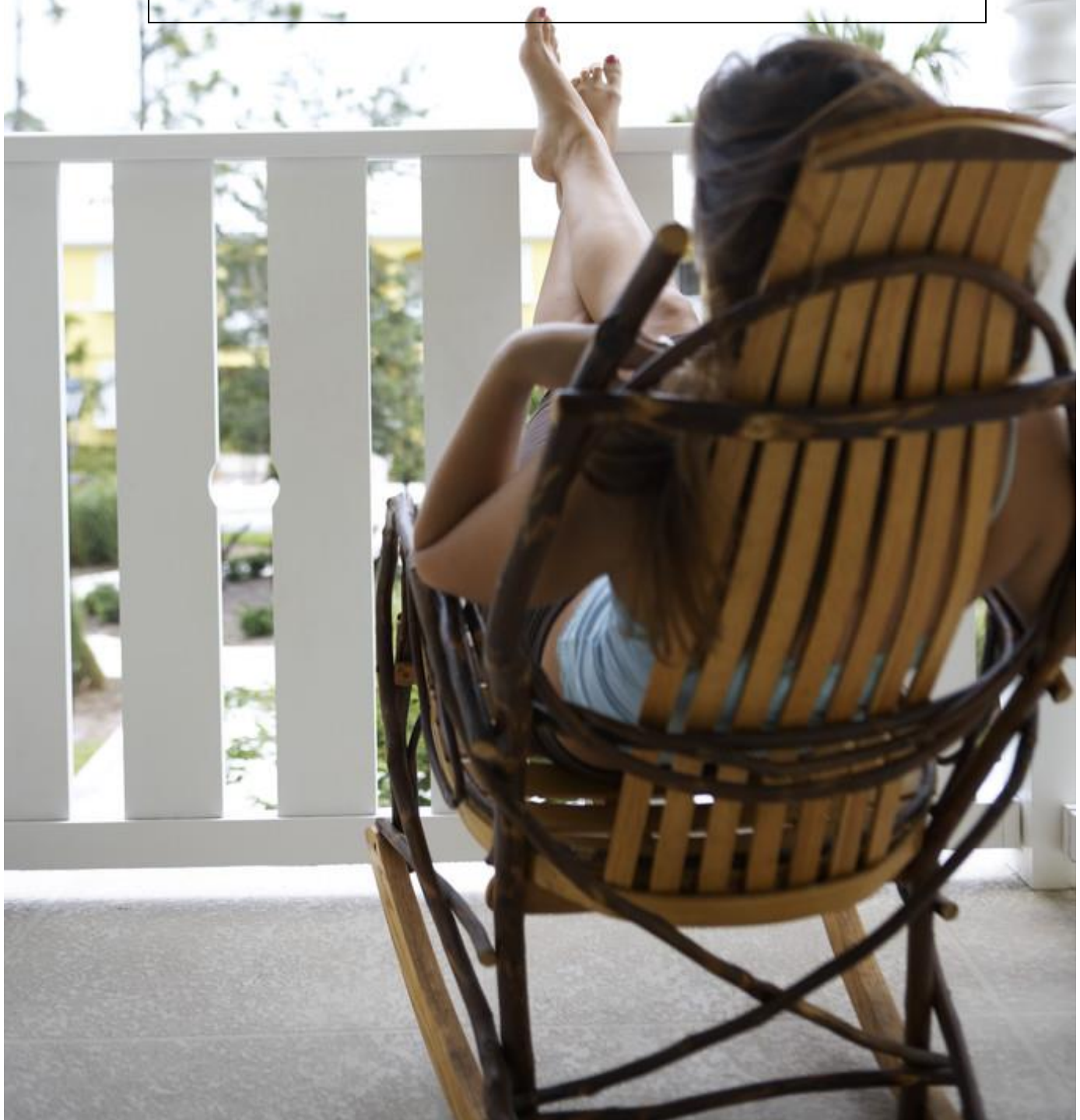


# **Front Porchin'**

**(Making Disciples and Forming Faith in Exile)**

Harold "Jake" Jacobson  
Director of Evangelical Mission  
Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod, ELCA



# Front Porchin'

---

For the past 25 years I have been discovering one of the benefits of small town living is that of the front porch. It is not only a vantage from which to watch the world go by but it is also a place of interaction with that same world. In a world where the front porch has been replaced by the secluded deck (I have both!) I would like to offer the metaphor of the front porch as a particular style of doing outreach in the name of Jesus Christ in the world in which we live.

The role of the front porch was never so clear as it was on the night of September 11, 2001. As I surveyed the neighborhood from the vantage of my own front porch that night I realized that the entire neighborhood had also gathered on their front porches (even the college kids across the street who never sat on the porch). Soon we were migrating back and forth from front porch to front porch. Sharing our fears and sorrow as well as rehearsing our witness of the horrific events of that day. "What would this mean?" seemed to be the question of the evening. Together we wrestled with the question and our new and unfamiliar world that was now our's. Together, we did post-9/11 hermeneutics from our front porches.

As I look back on that night I realize that my life has contained many front porches that have provided the context for shaping/story-ing my life. It was the front porch at home that storied me into world of mystery, of lands far away and times gone by as I sat and read in the swing. It was my grandmother's front porch that storied me into the world of unconditional love that waited in her arms. It was the front porch of my Uncle George with its big wooden rockers that storied me into a larger family context as my cousin and I overheard the family stories. It was my Aunt Marie's porch and the nightly conversations that storied me from a little boy into a young man. It was the front porch of Fred Hagman's house (formerly my grandparent's Jacobson house) that storied me in the coming of my family from Sweden. It was on the steps of Stevens Hall that I was storied into a budding theologian. It was the porch of the Schmucker House that I was storied into a romance of lasting proportions. It was Henry Slicker's wrap-around porch that looked down on Main Street that I was storied into the life of a new community. It is my present front porch where I am storied into reclamation and renewal as I enjoy a good book and a pipe.

In addition to all these actual porches in my life there are many figurative porches that story my life. There are Michelle's Coffee Shoppe, WalMart, Main Street, the football stadium and the baseball field to mention but a few. These are but some of the natural contexts of interaction with the world I live in. How well do we utilize these "front porches" in the work of faith sharing?

I believe that part of the difficulty is that we see evangelism as a "church thing" that gets imposed on our everyday life rather than as something that grows out of our front porch interactions. No one said we had to go out and be neighborly on that dark September night it simply grew out of the deep need we felt – a need to be in community. What happened that night (after we had wrung out the emotion of the day in our rehearsal and questioning) was a profound story-ing of our life together as residents of these United States, the community of Clarion *and* the community of the Kingdom of God. These were

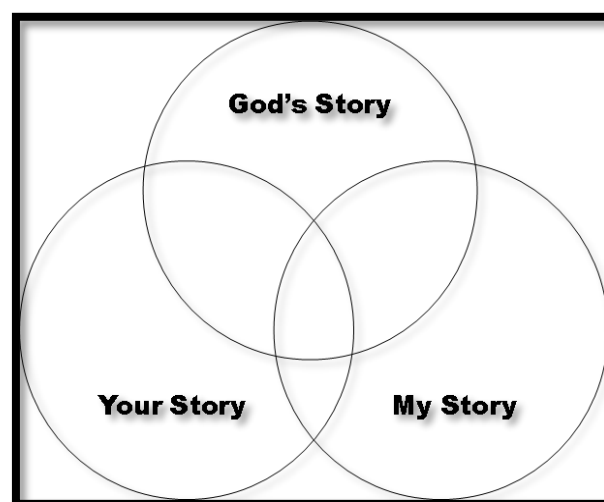
not inherently religious folk that wandered back and forth that night but the kingdom talk grew out of the loss of any other language to adequately carry the weight of what had and was happening to us.

I believe that the front porches of our lives offer to us a *natural* context for such story-ing that can serve as the vehicle for what we traditionally refer to as evangelism. Some preliminary thoughts from my front porch...

Peg, her late husband, Joe, and grown daughter Peggy Jo have been our neighbors now for almost 26 years. One of the rites of spring at their house is the cleaning of the front porch, the bringing out of the porch furniture and the planting of the flower boxes that line the porch. The rite is carried out with hopeful anticipation and faithful precision. When all is made ready and the weather turns warm you will find them seated there every evening until the night falls around them. They host a wide circle of friends and family as well as the occasional pedestrian passerby. I know that sometime over the course of those months between May and November I will be drawn at least once to spend an evening on that porch. It doesn't seem to matter how much time passes between those visits we pick up the pieces of our life together as though there was never an absence.

Why? What makes this possible? I have spent many a night wondering and I believe that I am beginning to gain some clarity. We share a story. It is a story that includes children and grandchildren, hopes, dreams, fears and griefs. It is the thread of that shared story that gets picked up and weaves us back together as front porch neighbors. I believe in this truth is a secret to faith sharing particularly in this part of the country.

Thirty years ago the Lutheran Church in America introduced a program called *Word and Witness*. While its vision was powerful it lacked the clarity of methodology necessary to have the desired impact on the church. One of the keys to that program was the three-fold image of story-ing: God's story, My story, Your story.



According to the program it is where the three stories intersect that faith sharing occurs. I believe that where the program failed was that it was possible to encounter God's Story as an intellectual exercise instead of a story that stories us. The early church referred to this process of story-ing as **evangelization**. As then, so too today, without the nurturing of the story-ing process of God's story we have very little to share from our front porches that will continue to engage those who we encounter there.

A number of years ago I had a college student show up at my office to talk about getting baptized. In the course of our discussions on the Bible I was sharing the stories of Jesus. I became aware that he was getting more and more distressed. Finally, he put up his hand and asked me to stop. "Pastor, you keep talking about this Jesus. Who is Jesus?" After I got over the shock we spent the next weeks with dissecting this question. What became evident very soon was that he did not want a text book description of Jesus. His question was not so much, "Who is this Jesus?" but rather "Who is this Jesus for you?" Biblically framing it, "**Show** me Jesus." Looking back I realized that my incarnation of that Word was less than satisfactory (my judgment). In the years since that encounter I have striven to nurture my own encounter with that Jesus as he reveals himself to me in Word, Sacrament and the incarnated body-the church. I have found if we are to be faithful evangelists then we must be willing to be evangelized by God's story first. To that end all evangelism efforts must start on **our** front porch and with those who gather there.

My front porch growing up was an enclosed three-season porch. It was there on the day bed that I would curl up and read for hours on end. It was in that time of daydreaming that I was story-ed into mysteries of a world beyond my tiny and limited existence. We begin our "porch-work" with the nurturing of the mysteries of our faith. The starting point is our prayer life – both personal and corporate. To be an evangelist or an evangelizing congregation we need to continually check in with the God that has called us into being. This means a daily devotional life and a sense of corporate prayer life as the congregation. One of the great gifts that I was given in my ministry was by a group of women who approached me with the request, "Pastor, we want to start a prayer group." Not really knowing what a prayer group was I said, "Sure...go for it." Little did I know that over the years it would transform my prayer life.

With prayer comes the regular and intentional encountering of God's story. Again, we engage in this encounter both within our personal reading of scripture and the corporate experiencing of the Word in worship, preaching, sacrament and gathered body. Together, these contexts provide a front porch for God to re-story our lives in light of God's story. As we become steeped in this story we will find that it is not about us telling others about Jesus as it is revealing to others that Jesus that is embodied in our lives, individually and corporately.

Memorial Day preparations in our family were a multi-day and two state affair. As I look back on those trips I found that much of my understanding of my place in the world of family was discovered and nurtured in the stories told between the generations as we tended graves and drove between grave sites. Two stops along the way were my Uncle George's and Fred and Anna Hagman's front porches. As the adults enjoyed a repast of cookies and tea my cousin Joanne and I would position our "playing" in

such a way that we were able to overhear the stories of family told. In a similar fashion I would listen intently on the Hagman's porch as dad and Fred shared stories of Fred and my grandfather, my Uncle Art and the cast of infamous Jacobson's that were dead long before I was born.

In much the same way as we gather around Word and Sacrament we overhear the story of God and are story-ed by it. The first task of this strategy will be to immerse the congregation and participants, through daily scripture reading and intentional Bible study, in the story of God as we have received it through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

The second task, and the place where I believe we diverted the intention of *Word and Witness*, is to internalize God's story in such a way that we see how God's story and My story are not separate stories but rather one shines through the other. I was adopted into my present family at the age of 9 months. Their story is not *my* story and yet through the front porches of their lives they have helped me to see that I have been grafted into that story so that to envision telling my story without that larger family story is impossible. How do we tell our story in such a way that God's story speaks in, with and under that story of our lives?

The third task will be the intentional sharing of that story with one another in a non-threatening way so that as we become more comfortable. In a sense what we are talking about is *evangelical socialization*. At an early age my Aunt Marie swept me across the street and into the world of her front porch. It was on her porch swing that I learned to talk with adults about what I believed and felt. It was there that I learned to ask the questions about God and life. She was not threatened by my thousand and one questions and created a safe haven to talk about those things. Our task is to build up our front porches that we provide such a context for the Spirit to bring Our/God story and Your story into dialog.

The common misconception behind most of our evangelism efforts these days is that all we need to do is to tell people about Jesus and they will "get it." How much effort has been spent on well-meaning efforts to teach the Bible in our congregations? However, we produce study resources, interpretive pieces, we write about Jesus, we pursue the historical Jesus...but are we any closer to answering the question? Who is this Jesus?

I believe the answer can be found in the Greek...I mean Greeks. Those Greeks who come to Philip in John's gospel and ask, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Note. They do not demand, "Tell us about Jesus!" They ask to **see** Jesus for themselves. This was the question that had led my college student to seek baptism...I want to see Jesus! It is for this that those who come within the walls of our churches and gather with us outside of them are seeking. Even if they don't know it! This raises for us as Lutherans (and not exclusively us) two dilemmas: "Have we ever **seen/encountered** Jesus?" and "How do we **embody** Jesus in such a way that someone else can see him?"

We have been steeped in a tradition that has taught us about Jesus but at least in the last half century has not done well with inviting us into an encounter with Jesus. Now as we face declining attendance, bare Sunday School rooms, and larger budget deficits we want to know, "How do we do evangelism?" Actually the question is more like, "How can we get more people in the pews, giving offerings and having children to fill our Sunday Schools?" If this is where we begin we might as well stop. Any gains

will be short-lived. There is no magic bullet.

Making Disciples/evangelism is hard work these days because no one is going to help us (in fact society is actually working against us). It is also hard because it requires a whole shift in our thinking and our way of being church. It calls for intentionality. It takes more than sprucing up the grounds and making sure a visitor can find their way around our churches (if one might stumble in by accident). It requires intentional faith formation - both on the part of the pastor and congregation as well as those who come to become part of the church. It is not rocket science but rather a return to the abc's of the church. It means taking advantage of our front porch and the activity that occurs there. This paper will look at the story-ing process as well as how to better utilize the front porch opportunities in our churches and our lives.

A note on "story" before we begin: My preaching tends to be anecdotal and every so often someone (often one of my children) asks, "Was that story you told really true?" My answer is always, "Yes, but that doesn't mean that if the others in the story were asked to tell the same story it might not be different. Truth does not always demand factuality. This also applies not only to My Story and Your Story but also God's Story. It has only been since the age of Enlightenment that we have been concerned by factuality and accuracy. This has spilled over into our study of God's Story. The search for the historical Jesus that began around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has given way to the Jesus Project of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Neither movement has provided satisfactory answers to those who wish to rationalize scripture. As my organic chemistry lab partner in college once challenged me, "Show me where Adam's sons wives came from in the Bible and I will believe in God!" The Bible's truth is not in its factuality but in its witness to the living God. It is a truth that shapes us as God's people as we strive to live together.

A word of caution before we go further: Sometimes our front porches become so deteriorated that they become incapable of carrying the full weight of our evangelism efforts. One of my fondest memories with my dad was the Saturday that he invited me to assist him in fixing our front porch. We ripped off the façade and exposed the decaying beams that were almost holding up the porch. We then jacked the porch off of the rotting beams and replaced them with fresh lumber. In many ways this strategy is as much about shoring up our front porches to make them usable to do the work of evangelism as it is about "evangelism programming". In some cases it is not that our front porches have deteriorated – they simply don't exist. One of the architectural phenomenons of our time is the movement from front porches to secluded decks. In many ways our worshipping communities have followed suit. For some of us, therefore, this process of evangelism will also necessitate new construction.

## Chapter 1 Process

In both the Hebrew Scriptures (Isaiah 43:10) and the New Testament (Acts 1:8) the announcement is made to God's faithful people that they are to "be my [God/Christ] witnesses." The thought of witnessing turns the boldest of Lutherans blood cold and causes the knees to go weak..."Not I, Lord...certainly not I!" I do not believe that this reaction is caused as some have claimed because Lutheran's are inherently shy but rather that we have not had an adequate model which is biblically and theologically sound to work with.

The first truth about evangelism is that it is not a program. Many will come and say I have found it! Do this and your church will grow. We readily put our money down before the newest messiah and are surprised when it doesn't work as promised. We who are skeptical of the \$19.95 TV sales pitch still readily succumb to "evangelism huckstering". Evangelism is a process. Furthermore it is part of a larger process of faith formation called **evangelization**. Evangelization is the witness of those women and men who have been grasped by the good news of the Christ event, the paschal mystery, Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. In short, it is the process of forming faith and making disciples.

But how does this process work?

If we take the earlier diagram



as our model the we need to first recognize that there are multiple ways to bring these three stories together, some helpful to a process of evangelization and some not. I propose that the following process is both biblical and theologically faithful to our tradition.

**My Story.** Spoken or unspoken we bring to any sharing of stories our own story. Our hopes and dreams, anxieties and fears, the events of our lives and the world we have lived in have shaped who we

are and more importantly how we see ourselves. What is your story? In chapter 2 I will propose some exercises to help us better understand our stories and the impact those stories will have as we seek to share our lives of faith with others.

**God's Story.** It is not just any story that we are called to share as evangelists but rather we have been called to share the Good News of God's faithful revelation in Christ Jesus. Do we know that story? I believe that our fear of evangelism grows out of our conception that one needs an "expert" to understand Scripture. If we as Lutherans truly believe that we cannot come to Christ by our own reason or strength but only through the gift of the Holy Spirit then at some point we need to start relying on that gift instead of settling for our own inabilities. Note: it is only after the Pentecost in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that the apostles (those *sent ones*) are in fact empowered to share the good news. That said we must be diligent in our study of scripture and avail ourselves to this saving Word. In chapter 3 I will propose a course of study to help congregations enter into Scripture without being overwhelmed by it.

**God's Story/My Story.** The critical failure of much of what we call Bible Study becomes a head trip. We learn *about* the Bible. The Bible is sacramental in that it points beyond itself to God. The purpose of having scripture is not that we come to know *it* but rather that we are invited into a deeper relationship with that God that we call, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So often the prophets were called to "eat" the Word of God before going to proclaim it. How do we eat and digest this Word, sweeter than honey, that we have been given in such a way that we begin to see our life story within the context of God's good news? Chapter 4 will deal with eating habits.

**My Story/Your Story.** One of the problems with "program evangelism" is that it cares little for the nature of who it is that you are called to share the good news with apart from sense of target audience. If we affirm in our theology the dignity of each human being as one created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26) then we are called to treat those to whom we are sent with that dignity. This means that we enter into relationship with them. We come to know their story and share our story. How else can we possibly know in what way to share God's story with them in such a way that it becomes truly good news? Chapter 5 will offer help in intentional listening and story-ing.

**My Story/Your Story/God's Story.** Finally we reach the object of our journey as those who have been sent. Did I tell you that this work of evangelization is not a *quick* fix? In Chapter 6 I will share two tried and true models of evangelization : spiritual direction and the catechumenate. Both of these processes offer us insights how to approach the integral task of evangelization or perhaps better said, making disciples and forming faith.



## Chapter 2 My Story

I grew up in a town where it wasn't terribly important for me to know my story because everyone in town knew my story. They knew my parents and my grandparents. They remembered when I was brought home for adoption. It mattered little what I envisioned of myself for they were ready to redefine and correct any misconceptions of myself that I might have (How many of our congregations function in a similar way?). If asked to tell my story I would have easily deferred to the community.

In startling contrast the congregation in which I was raised (which was not in my hometown) was a place where I was free and encouraged to explore who I was as a child of God. While my mother and father were well known assumptions about me were not made (at least not shared with me). I had my own identity. Even if I did not know who I was yet they seemed to be in no hurry to pronounce judgments or assign attributes. I was given space to grow and explore apart from my parents and never did I ever feel that I was just a child. There was a sense of importance (sacredness) in my simply being who I was. Looking back I realize how important that experience was to shaping my life of faith. This is the atmosphere that we need to create as we seek to encourage the construction and telling of our stories.

How do we do this work of construction? Many of us have had the experience of ice breakers that have asked us to share who we are and found ourselves stuttering and stammering or searching what of me is of any interest to these people? As hard as it is culturally for us to focus on ourselves it is a critical piece of this process to understand who we are or better how we see ourselves as children of God.

### **Exercises:**

**1) What three things about yourself is it important for others to know about you if they are to understand you? Share with someone. (Variation: create a Facebook type quiz..."How well do you know \_\_\_\_\_". Formulate questions about yourself and invite others to take the quiz).**

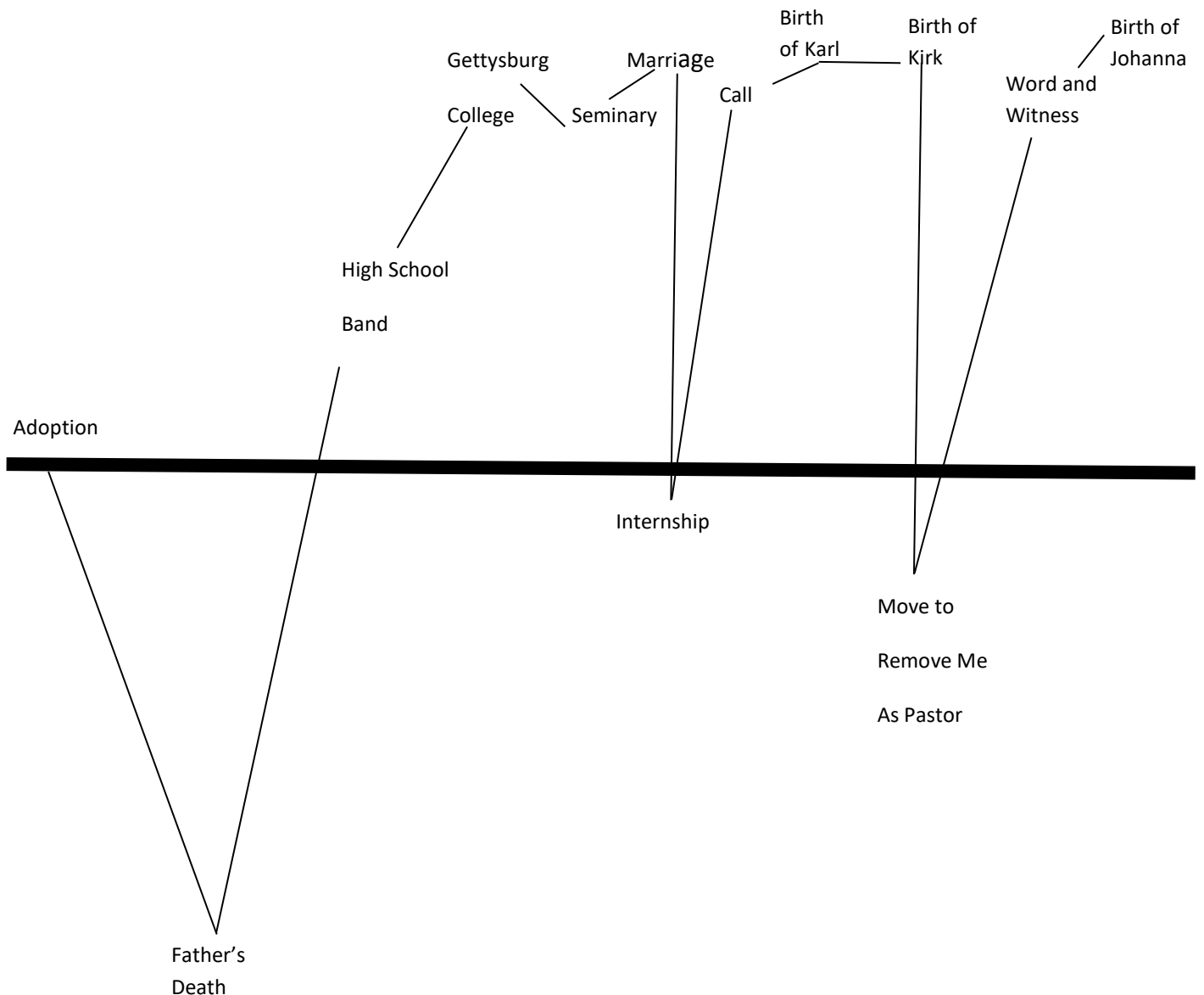
**2) Take time to graph your life story. Where are the highs and lows? Where was God in the midst of those moments? How have those times served to change or deepen your relationship with God, the church, and others? Where in your present time is God stretching you and calling you to conversion? To begin to understand our hopes and dreams as well as our fears and anxieties extend the graph into the future and repeat the exercise.**

**See next page for my graph (Figure 1)**

**If you are using this in Bible Study or as church council discussion material you might chart the story of the congregation (you need not haul out a history of the congregation). What are the episodes of the congregation's life that people remember and speak about? How are recent pastors remembered (both by the congregation and by you). Have there been times that have rocked the congregation? Have there been occasions for great celebration? Where was God in the midst of those moments for the congregation (and for you)? Where is God today? What areas of the life of the congregation are you being called into conversion and new life?**

**3) (Group Exercise) Ask the group, if it were to write a story of their life (as an individual) what events would you include? What questions might it want answered? Write these on newsprint or a board and then invite the members of the group to begin to address these for themselves as they write their biographies. You can then repeat the process for the group or for the congregation.**

Figure 1.



## Chapter 3 God's Story

That student that I spoke of in the opening of this paper who was looking for Jesus highlights the new and important task of telling and telling in new ways God's story. The new challenge is that we do not have a common scriptural vocabulary. This is true of those we are seeking to reach but it is also true of us within the church. In the 1960's and 70's we replaced Biblical content with an emphasis on values and the curriculum of what's happening now. I do not mean to denigrate those efforts only that what is left is a generation that lacks the grammar for serious telling of God's story. In my work in developing the adult catechumenate model of evangelization in the ELCA I created what I believe a first step in reclaiming this grammar. I call it "The Church's Top 40+". I believe if we all know and can tell these 50 some stories from scripture we have a common language of symbols, images and stories to address in a coherent way the story of God and God's people. These form the syntax of biblical conversation:

### The Church's Top 40+

---

1. Creation (Genesis 1:1—2:4a and 2:4b-25)
2. The fall (Genesis 3)
3. Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16)
4. Noah (Genesis 6:5—9:28)
5. Babel (Genesis 11:1-9)
6. Call of Abram (Genesis 11:31—12:6)
7. Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15)
8. Joseph (Genesis 37-45)
9. Burning bush (Exodus 3)
10. Passover (Exodus 11:1—12:36)
11. Crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13:17—15:21)
12. Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21)
13. Golden calf (Exodus 32)
14. Great Commandment (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)
15. Samson (Judges 13-16)
16. Goliath (1 Samuel 17)
17. David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1—12:25)
18. Elijah meets God (1 Kings 19:1-13)
19. Job (Job 1:13-22)
20. Psalm 23
21. Call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:1-10)
22. Infancy narratives (Matthew 1:1—2:23; Luke 1:1—2:52)
23. Temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13)
24. Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-11; Luke 6:20-23)

25. Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:5-14; Luke 11:2-4)
26. Sower and seeds (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8)
27. Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
28. Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42)
29. Prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)
30. Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31)
31. Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)
32. Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12)
33. Woman at the well (John 4:3-42)
34. Bread of life (John 6)
35. Woman caught in adultery (John 7:53—8:11)
36. Man born blind (John 9:1-41)
37. Good shepherd (John 10)
38. Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44)
39. Feeding of the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14)
40. Prediction of Jesus' death (Matthew 16:21-28; Mark 8:31—9:1; Luke 9:21-27)
41. Lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15:3-7)
42. Great Commandment, New Testament version (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28)
43. Final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46)
44. Passion (Matthew 26-27; Mark 14-15; Luke 22-23; John 13-19)
45. Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)
46. Resurrection (Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10)
47. Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
48. Thomas (John 20:24-29)
49. Jesus appears to the disciples/Ascension (Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:36-50; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:6-11)
50. Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13)
51. Stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8—8:2)
52. Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-30)
53. Grace (Romans 1-3)

This list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather a starting point.

One of my pet peeves is that in this church whenever we advocate reading the Bible we put another book in between the Bible and ourselves. The *Book of Faith* initiative is a prime example. Before we can read the Bible we have to construct a hermeneutic and a style of study. I believe that before we can have those discussions it would be helpful if we know the book of which we speak. I advocate that we cannot use the above stories enough in the life of our congregations. Use them as personal devotions, open meetings with a dwelling in them, I have gone so far as to develop Sunday School curriculum around them...the possibilities are endless and the results are crucial if we are indeed serious about our call to share the story with others.

That said, those that gather on our front porches both from the street as well as those that regularly gather together with us as church need assistance dealing with material that is 2000 years or better removed from them. To that end I developed a simple introduction to scripture that can serve as a model for Bible Study or such opportunities as dwelling in the Word.

*Wrestling with Jakob (and sons)* hopefully offers a new way of approaching scripture that leads us to an encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus, Peter and Paul, the God that calls and gathers us in the Spirit.

***[Several expanded and in-depth programs and curricula on Introduction to the Scriptures are being developed by the author]***

A second difficulty for many of us in the church in appropriating the Scriptures into daily life is the fact that we rarely deal with the Bible as a whole or in overview. Instead we encounter it piecemeal in Sunday morning periscopes or by book in Bible Study. What follows is intended as a brief overview that can serve as a framework for our ongoing encounter with the Bible. As such I will not be utilizing the common Old/New Testament demarcations.

Where do we begin? Surprisingly, not with Genesis or Matthew. Instead we begin with the historical event of the Exile. The year - 580 BCE.

Babylon (Iraq) has just kicked the backside of God's people, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and taken as POW's the cream of the crop of God's people...anyone who might be able to organize a revolt or resistance to Babylon's occupation. This produces a crisis of epic proportions. Suddenly, all that God's people have held as sacred and invaluable was left in ashes and rubble.

Their prior existence as God's people was built around three promises from God:

- Promised Land
- Promised Temple worship
- Promised king like David forever

All of these are taken away and God's people find themselves in a full-blown faith crisis.

- Who is our God? Is there God?
- Who are we without our promises?
- How do we live in community together here in Babylon?
- What does God want us to do with our lives?
- And as time goes on...Will our children have faith?

In the midst of their anxiety and fear they begin to ask the question: When have we found ourselves in a situation like this before? Their answer: in the Exodus. *(As economic crisis grips the present-day United States I find my older friends remembering and rehearsing the Great Depression in much the same way).* It too was a time when existence was at the mercy of the arbitrary power of the Pharaoh of Egypt. This

too was a helpless and hopeless situation. In steps God with God's "champion", Moses. Deliverance, the establishment of Covenant (I will be your God and you will be my people), and the giving of the Law (This is how I expect my people to live together) ensue. The story of the Exodus becomes the defining story in Israel's history: God's people find themselves in a hopeless/helpless situation usually at the hands of a foreign power-broker (one also often characterized by a failure of God's people to keep covenant with God and with each other)...God intervenes...God reestablishes the broken relationship.

While God's people find themselves sitting by the Tigris and Euphrates, dangling their footsies in the river and reflecting on the Exodus they begin to formulate questions about their current situation. The first of those is, "How did we get in this mess in the first place?" Their answer (as we find it in their historical books: 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings *et al*) was that it's all been downhill since we got a king. In addition to the historical recital that we find here the prophets also waded in on the situation both prior to the Exile and during it. There is a call to recommit to the keeping of the Torah/Law. The prophets' message is both a note of judgment and hope. One of the sources of that hope is the promise of a deliverer/Messiah (like Moses) who will enable God's people to return to the promised land. That promise is fulfilled when Cyrus, King of Persia (and newest bully on the block), sweeps in, defeats Babylon, and sets God's people free to return home.

Rather than the mass exodus of a previous generation this return to the Promised Land was carried out by a relatively few of the exiles. Upon returning home they found their situation pretty desperate...and it only gets worse. Before long Alexander and his Greek fraternity sweep in and again reduce God's people to a vassal people. In time they are replaced by Caesar and his cohorts. With each new wave of "occupiers" comes renewed resistance (often violent) and a renewed reflection which leads to the development of speculation on the coming of a Messiah. This Messiah was to be a great military leader that would kick the invaders back home and reestablish the Glory Days of Israel or he would be a religious leader who would reestablish right worship of God, or a combination of both. It is into this speculative situation that Jesus of Nazareth is born.

The earliest "Christian" writings in scripture are not the gospels but rather writings of Paul. One can hardly construct a biographical narrative of Jesus from the works of Paul. Paul is far more interested in supporting the budding congregations of early Christianity in the midst of their "crises" and divisive tendencies. In many ways Paul functions like a modern bishop or "firefighter".

It is not until around the later part of the first century that we find the new literary genre we know as the gospels. The gospels are not biographies in the modern sense of the word but are rather theological reflections on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Mark is the evangelical gospel. Mark calls us into the story of Jesus and sends us out with that same story to share with others. With Matthew and Luke the church is developing and catechetical/teaching materials are needed: Matthew is the curriculum for Jewish converts (Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses) and Luke for those non-Jews (where Jesus has a heroic flavor like those of Greek mythology). John's gospel is our gospel – the church's gospel. John is writing to insiders who gather for worship regularly. As a result, John had little need to remind to a people who attend the Eucharist about the institution of the Last Supper but he does need to remind us about how we who gather at that meal are sent to serve (foot washing). John's

intent is to call the church to continued faithfulness through the crucified and risen Christ with Abba/Daddy God.

There are several pieces of biblical material that I have not touched on, first, the material in Genesis. While in Babylon God's people were redefining their identity beyond that of a particular people dedicated to a particular piece of land. Genesis is a cosmic rehearsal and collection of the stories of the past that point to the cosmic nature of God and God's extensive relationship with them that even predates their being called out of Egypt. It is not all that unlike some of the foundational stories of our own nation: Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, Paul Bunyan, John Henry and Joe Magarac.

There is also the Wisdom literature (sic. Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). This material is an attempt to push the boundaries of faith beyond the confines of Temple and synagogue and into the streets. It is practical theology. In modern times there is a resurgence of this type in much of the "New Age" materials.

Finally, there is the apocalyptic material of books like Daniel and the Revelation of St. John. These are perhaps the most misused books of all of scripture. Rather than timetables for gloom and doom they are actually meant as books of hope. Apocalyptic literature in general appears in times of crises. It is an attempt in the midst of uncertainty and terror to remind us of how the story is going to turn out. If we know that in the end all will be in God's hands we are enabled to live with hope and confidence even in the midst of terror (*When in college I was dragged by friends to my one and only experience of a horror flick. I left after 45 minutes. For six months I slept with the lights on and music playing. What I realize now is that I did not know how the story ended and so the terror persisted*). "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end..." God's got this one under control we can live securely as God's people regardless of what we may encounter.

#### **Exercises:**

**1. Pick one of the stories from the list of Top 40+. Make a point to read it daily for a week. At the end of the week find someone to tell the story to and in your own words share the story with them. I have the Bible on CD so I will pick a story and play it in the car for a week every time I go somewhere. Repeat this exercise periodically until you work your way through the list.**

**2. This exercise can be done individually or as a group. Pick a story from the above list (DO NOT READ IT). Write down as much of the story as you can think of or make a list of things you already know about the story. (characters, locations, time, etc...) Then make a list of things you would like to know about the story. Use the questions as the basis for discussion or for research... asking your pastor might start an interesting discussion also.**

## **Chapter 4 My Story/God's Story**

Regardless of the methodology there is always a tendency within the church (and with Lutherans in particular) to make the Bible a head trip. Regardless of our starting point and our best intentions we fall

prey to talking *about* the Bible, *about* God, and *about* Jesus. Frankly, it's safer that way. To allow Scripture to become a matter of the heart is to open ourselves and the world to be transformed – under no circumstances should that be taken lightly!

Yet if it does not become a matter of the heart it will remain words on a page. The miracle of the Christ event is the incarnation...the Word become flesh. It is that enfleshed Word that we are called to bear to the world. As with the Greeks who came to Phillip, those who come to us come not to find out about Jesus but to encounter Jesus in the flesh and it is the earthen vessel of our flesh that Jesus has taken on. It is not a matter of getting the Scripture into our hearts but seeing the Christ who already abides there. We are but sacraments, blessed and broken, that reveal the one who dwells among us full of grace and truth.

How do we come to know this Christ who dwells in, with and under us? In the early church it was called breaking open the Word. It was the activity of the catechumenate as they gathered in preparation for baptism. They would gather around the texts that they had just heard in worship with questions very similar to those we used in the last chapter: What does this word have to say about: Who is God? Who am I? How do we live in community together? What does God want us to do with our lives?

The issue becomes for us, what does this word have to say about our lives of faith? Where does God's story meet My Story? We need to reach the point where we begin to do this questioning every time we hear scripture shared whether it is on Sunday morning in worship, in our homes for devotion, when we gather for Bible Study, or when we read scripture at the beginning of a meeting. This does not happen overnight nor does it happen without some intentionality.

I believe the best approach is multifaceted and saturated. Do it whenever and wherever to opportunity arises.

- Don't wait for the pastor to tell you what the readings for Sunday morning mean. Read the texts prior to Sunday (if your church does not provide a listing of the next Sunday's readings ask for them to be provided). Sit with those readings and your questions. You will be amazed at what you begin to hear in those sermons.
- Instead of being satisfied with those little reflections on the readings that so many devotionals provide sit with the daily reading(s) and your questions.
- Use the questions as the structure for your Bible Study instead of turning to the "resident expert" to illuminate the text.
- As you begin council or committee meetings use the coming Sunday's gospel reading and the questions to prepare yourselves to do the work that is before you. It might be helpful that before you begin the process you might identify the issues before you in that meeting (i.e. As we begin our devotions tonight let us remember that we will be dealing with matters of worship planning or budget or faith formation, etc...).
- Start small group gatherings in your homes, coffee houses, restaurants with multigenerational gatherings around Scripture and these questions.



At Grace we prepare a single-sheet brief introduction to some of the key points in the reading assigned for discussion (i.e. In Isaiah 40 we remember that God's people find themselves in Exile in Babylon. They struggle for answers to the questions before us. The prophet offers a word of comfort and hope.) that are made available to all who are meeting for this purpose. Usually an opening prayer and a listing of the questions are also included. (See the example below. Weekly "Grace Dwells in the Word" are available by Monday night of each week @ [www.growinginraceclarion.com](http://www.growinginraceclarion.com)).

## Grace Dwells in the Word

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Pentecost

**Prayer for receiving the Word:** Lord and Savior, open now your saving word. Let it burn like fire within us. speak until our hearts are stirred. Lord, we thank you for the good news that you bring. Amen.

**GOSPEL: (Scripture was written to be heard. Please, give it a voice. Read it aloud.)**

**John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15**

<sup>26</sup>When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. <sup>27</sup>You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

<sup>4b</sup>

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. <sup>5</sup>But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' <sup>6</sup>But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup>And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup>about sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>10</sup>about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup>about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

<sup>12</sup>I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

- What does the passage have to say about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)?
- What does the passage say about who I am?
- What word does the passage speak about how we live in community together?
- What does God want me to do?

**Jakob's Notes:** 15:26-27 is Jesus' third promise to send the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. God is the source of the Spirit's presence with and mission to the believing community. The Spirit's function is to testify (see 14:1-11, 17). The community's witness is the visible sign of the Spirit's work as witness and continuity between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the church. 16:4b-7a is the fourth promise of the sending of the Spirit. Jesus' glorification (death, resurrection, and ascension) is the complete revelation of God (17:1-5). This requires Jesus' departure. The Spirit's ministry is to make Jesus and his

work present and available for the community in Jesus' absence (see 3:19, 8:26, 9:39, 12:47-48). Vs. 9 World's sin is not to believe in Jesus, the incarnate Logos of God. Vs. 10 "the rightness of God" is that in death Jesus goes to God and completes his work (17:25). Vs. 11 In Jesus' glorification the embodiment of all that is opposed to God is defeated and God is victorious. 16:12-15 is the fifth promise. The Spirit will proclaim the teachings of Jesus to the community in the new and changing circumstances of their lives. Jesus' words and actions glorified God, made visible the identity of God (1:14, 18; 17:4-6). The Paraclete's proclamation will do the same for Jesus.

**Exercise:** *Use a story from the Top 40+ and prayerfully reflect on it using the questions:*

- ***What does the passage have to say about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)?***
- ***What does the passage say about who I am?***
- ***What word does the passage speak about how we live in community together?***
- ***What does God want me to do?***

This process of internalizing the word done in this way accomplished two outcomes. First, we take and eat that Word that comes to us sweeter than honey and secondly, we begin to become more comfortable talking about scripture and our faith with others. If we become more comfortable talking about these things with those we know how much easier will it be when we find ourselves in situations with those we do not know as well?

## **Chapter 5 My Story/Your Story**

I am sure that we have had the experience of watching a commercial on the television and wondered who they were aiming at because it was obviously not us. There is intense research behind the decisions of what commercial to run when and with what shows. Much of what passes for evangelism these days tries the same "targeted" approach. Who is your audience...boomers? X-ers? Young adults? (note rarely does anyone ever target the over 50 crowd). Such an approach is not only dehumanizing it is unbiblical. Jesus didn't have a target audience but rather responded to those that his Father placed in his path. So too with us. We rarely have to go looking for encounters...God has a way of laying them at our feet (on any given day we would gladly have had God lay these persons at someone else's feet). They are coworkers, family members (often in-laws), students, teachers, they are those we share coffee with, those who wait on us, those who sit next to us on the plane, those sharing a waiting room...the list is endless...God's target is indeed the whole world!

When I was young my mother used to introduce me, "This is my son, Harold, Oh, he's shy." For years I used to think that the O. in my name stood for "O, he's shy." I simply assumed that I was shy. It was quite convenient. There are things shy kids do like read books and take music lessons and there are things that shy kids don't do like play sports or volunteer for parts in plays. While pursuing my clinical studies I picked up a book one day from the hospital chaplain's library entitled, ***Shyness***. What I discovered was that I was not shy after all but I was socially challenged.

This condition has led to an intentional and at times painful and awkward rehabilitation. The first thing I discovered was that God had indeed blessed me with the gifts necessary to begin with – two ears. As we seek to build relationships with those God has graced our lives with we begin by listening. That is easier said than done because we are not taught to really listen well these days.

For the past decade I have been resourcing a domestic violence agency on the art of active/reflective listening. Reflective listening is a special type of listening that involves paying respectful attention to the content and feelings of another's communication, hearing and understanding; and then letting the other know that he or she is being heard and understood. It is a two-step process that calls us to 1) hear and understand what the other is saying through words and non-verbal communication; 2) reflect (express) the thoughts and feeling you heard through your own words, tone of voice, posture and gestures so that the other knows that he or she is heard and understood.

A high premium placed on being "heard" today probably because it happens so rarely in our culture. The church specifically has languished under the conception (accurate or not) that it is no longer listening to the people/world. If we are to have any significant outcomes with our efforts to share our faith then we must establish relationships in which there is an element not only of trust but also the sense of having their needs, wants, desires, fears, etc..., "heard".

Some of the skills that are utilized in this reflective listening are:

- **Feedback:** A response that acknowledges what you heard the other say.
- **Questions:** Clarification questions only! (i.e. "I am not sure I got this point you were making, are you saying....?" or "I am confused, are we still talking about your experiences in this church or another?").
- **Paraphrasing:** This will be awkward at first but the more you practice the easier it gets. Repeat back to them in your own words what you think you heard. (i.e. "Let me be sure I have this right, are you saying...").
- **Confrontation:** A relationship needs to be very developed before this can be used successfully. I find it most useful when getting conflicting communications. In a case where the person insists that they are at ease with a certain topic and yet their body language speaks of holding it in tightly I might say something like, "I hear what you are saying but you look uncomfortable with this issue." Other times it might be conflicting statements and I might challenge with a question for clarification, "You have said 'x' and 'y', which is it that you intended?"

In my work with domestic violence victims I have discovered that there are serious roadblocks to the building of this trust and "hearing". I have encountered many of these in efforts to "evangelize" me as well as debriefing those who have been "evangelized". These include comments that are:

- **Probing or Questioning:** "Inquiring minds want to know" often more than we need to know or that others wish to share. Questions should always be only for clarifying things that we are unsure of in the conversation.

- **Criticizing or Name-Calling:** Most of us would not intentionally engage in this kind of behavior and yet it is easy to subtly slide into it. Calling into question the way another is putting together their faith or beliefs that they might hold says that you are more interested in preserving your faith system than in hearing their struggles. For example, I have a friend that occasionally consults a medium. The first time he mentioned it I internally recoiled. What I have discovered because I did not cut the conversation off by criticizing his choice was that his experiences with this medium for him are very similar to what I have encountered well-respected therapists doing with clients. The name-calling can be even more subtle. Labels often are a “polite” form of name-calling: unbeliever, seeker, un-churched are used regularly in evangelism “speak” and yet their nature categorizes and judges those they label.
- **Sarcasm:** It requires a fairly sophisticated understanding to decipher sarcasm. Our ability is greatly impaired when in stress or dealing with emotional issues.
- **Interpreting/Analyzing:** As we are building relationships our task is not to try to “figure the other person out” but rather to hear what they are sharing.
- **Moralizing/Ordering/Threatening:** These are often tactics that many have encountered when engaged by “evangelists”. I have discovered that even getting close to these with someone who has experienced an “evangelist” or church using them is enough to send them running. Such statements as, “If you do not wish to spend eternity in hell then you must accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior” are sure-fire ways of ending a relationship.
- **Arguing/Lecturing/Persuading:** Remember as you begin working on a relationship you are being invited in to listen...do not abuse that. It is not your agenda that is important but the Holy Spirit’s – don’t confuse them.
- **Sympathizing/Reassuring/Excusing:** While these seem a noble responses they can easily become a message that says that it’s ok for them to stay where they are in their journey. The work of the Holy Spirit is always transforming us...we don’t need to try to help by closing doors on such opportunity.

#### Exercises:

**1. Take some time to remember a pleasant or exciting time/event in your life. Try to remember as many details as possible. Share this memory with a partner (pay particular attention to how it feels to share this with another and how you feel that you are being heard). Partner, remember that your task is to listen. Questions should be for clarification only. Focus of what it feels like to listen. Switch roles. When both have shared talk about your experiences and listener and hearer. What did you feel? Which was harder, listening or speaking? How did you feel received by the one listening.**

**2. Repeat exercise #1 using a difficult situation or tough time in your life.**

**3. I have found a very helpful exercise to use with all ages that begins to reach the emotional level that often develops when we talk about faith issues is this:**

**Ask participants to close their eyes and remember back to a September day...this particular September day had a great impact on many of our lives...the day is September 11, 2001...(allow time for it to sink**

*in before continuing)...remember where you were when you first heard or saw the new...What are the sights, words, sounds, images that come to mind? What did you find yourself doing? How did you feel? (allow them some time to dwell in these)*

*Now I would ask you to partner with another and share your memories of that day. Remember you will each have an opportunity to speak so when you are the listener – LISTEN! Pay particular attention to your own emotions/reactions as both listener and speaker.*

*Allow 15 minutes for this (You will have to break off the discussion). Debrief what has occurred. How did it feel as listener? speaker? Were you heard? Did you have difficulty reflectively listening?*

If you can find *Word and Witness* materials (they are out of print) the book on “Telling the Good News” has a more in-depth treatment of the art of conversation and visiting complete with scenarios and exercises. One word of caution, most of these scenarios assume a structured visit. Most of my “evangelism” today happens in the midst of casual conversation on a wide variety of front porches often neither theirs or mine.

What we experience in the midst of encounters like this is the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus reminds us, “Where two or three gather in my name, I am there with them.” Whenever we engage another in this way we enter into a sacred moment. I have found when I can remember that it is easier for me to keep perspective.

## Chapter 6 My Story/Your Story/God’s Story

As I mentioned earlier every encounter with another is a sacred moment and every such encounter brings with it the mystery of the incarnate Jesus, therefore, we do not have to *bring* Jesus into the relationship – he’s already there. Our task then is to point to the already existent presence of Christ. What we are essentially talking about is faith – perceiving what God already promises to be true.

I like to use an old Sufi story to illustrate. Nasirdim was a world-famous smuggler, Everyone knew he was a smuggler they just couldn’t catch him at it. Some days he would go down to the border and the border guards would strip him of his clothes, take all the bags off of his donkeys but in the end they never found anything suspicious.

Nasirdim retires at age 30 a wealthy man and decides to throw a party for the border guards. After a few drinks one of the guards becomes emboldened enough to ask, “Nasirdim, we know that you are a smuggler and yet we could never catch you. Now that you’re retiring what was it that you were smuggling?” Nasirdim paused and then disclosed, “Donkeys.”

It is not that Jesus is absent from people’s lives it is rather that we don’t perceive his presence. Our task as evangelists is to show the world Jesus. We do that incarnationally...we are embodied witnesses.

In my work as a spiritual director I have found myself better able to recognize the Spirit's movement in a person's life. This does not happen magically or overnight. For me it has come as I have learned to seek to discover the presence of that Spirit working in my life. That is why the piece My Story/God's Story is so critical to effective evangelism. That piece also needs to remain a continuing discipline. It is only when we begin to recognize the murmurings and stirrings of the Spirit in our own lives that we can begin to recognize them in the lives of those who end up on our front porch.

A second learning from my work as a spiritual director is that my task is not to *take* them *somewhere* (even if I believe I know where they need to go). My call is to walk with them. It is to listen to them and to God/Spirit in the midst of that journey helping them to see and to recognize the presence and movement of God in that journey. We are called to be sacramental pilgrim listeners. Sacramental in the sense that we point/reveal one who is beyond us. Pilgrim in that we journey *with* them. Listeners in that our primary function is to listen to both them and God in a way that we might be faithful sacraments revealing the presence of God to the other.

I have also found that the more I dwell in my own spiritual journey (piece My Story/God's Story) to the point of being better able to see God acting in my life and the more I dwell in God's Story (immersing myself in God's syntax) the easier and more natural I am able to bring those two elements to bear upon my encounters with the Your Story piece.

#### **Exercise:**

**Chose an experience (*I have found that using one from the previous section often works well*). Talk about how God was present in that situation (feeling that God was absent in particular situations is perfectly acceptable). Following the presentation to the group. Invite the group then to provide Biblical stories, personalities, themes or images that this presentation surfaced for them. (*This will be difficult at first but be persistent*).**

## **Chapter 7                      Where Do We Go From Here**

In the first six chapters of this book I have laid out a process of faith sharing that is designed to work within the life of the congregation. As we seek ways of composing and sharing our faith stories among people with which we already have a common story we will find it easier when needing to share that story outside of the congregational setting.

I encourage you to create opportunities throughout the year to do faith sharing in meaningful ways. This may be in small group settings, one on one's, council or committee meetings.

The poster congregation for Front Porchin' is Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in White Oak, PA. They chose to implement the process through a Bible study model. They began with a small group gathered around the Top 40+ Bible studies. Using the method of encountering scripture in chapters 3 and 4 they started. Finding themselves at the end of the list after a year

they realized their work was not done. They created their own list of parables for the second year of encounter. They are now on year three and gather 20-30 people every Tuesday morning. I was recently able to join them for some “testimony” on their experiences. It was a powerful gathering as the group shared their faith stories and their journey together over the past three years. They spoke of it not only transforming their lives but also the life of the congregation.

This is but one way to root the Front Porchin’ process into the life of the congregation. Others have used conversation starters at church dinners such as: “Who first taught you about Jesus?” “Who were exemplars of faith in your life?” “What are your favorite memories of church as a child?” “What is your favorite part of worship?” Other congregations have established the practice of beginning council meetings with the question: “Where have you seen Jesus this past month?” Still others have begun including Faith Sharing Moments as part of their announcements before worship.

## Chapter 8                      Next Steps (or Front Porchin’ 102)

For the last several years I have been getting requests to provide additional materials. As I began that process I was surprised that the Front Porchin’ process itself drove my thoughts.

Several years ago, I was having breakfast with my good friend and Baptist colleague, Keith Richardson. **We were discussing the future of the church. He shared with me that he had been discerning in his prayers that** if the Baptists were to have a future in this rapidly changing world that they would have to learn grace. He went on to say that the Baptists don’t do grace well but that we as Lutherans do. Yes, we do, thank you.

In the world we are living in, both secular and religious, grace is a very unpopular word. I believe that without grace we will continue down the dark path we have been on for decades both as church and society.

We have been given a great opportunity to lead the church boldly into the future. What we do in this synod over the next several years will have an impact on the whole church and the communities we live in as well. I will not sugar coat it – it will be hard work. It will take the best that each one of us has to offer to the effort if we are to succeed.

I feel like I have been stumbling in the dark these past few years in trying to lead us into the future. A light is beginning to dawn. I am beginning to understand better what kind of leadership (the more the merrier) it will take to keep pace with the speed with which the world is changing. I also feel like I’ve just been hit over the head with a heavenly **graceball** bat. Grace is what transforms us, the baptized, on a daily basis so why was it so hard to realize that it will be grace that will transform us as the church and the world.

As I have been working on a follow-up to my work on faith sharing, *Front Porchin'* I have identified three general loci for God's transforming grace: ourselves/Home; the gathered body/Church and the neighbor/World. I will focus our discussions and our future programming around those three loci. I have included the working outline below.

# Transforming Grace

## Overview

As I look at the implementation of Front Porchin' (FP) in the life of a congregation I have located three loci of activity (home, church, community) within the larger context of the three stories (My Story, God's Story, Our Story). If we are looking at transformative grace emanating from the work of Front Porchin' then these three loci are the places where that grace needs to be nurtured and tended. The work of transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit but we open and nurture the space for the Spirit to work.

It is important to recognize that the transformation process operates in all three areas but may proceed at different rates. I personally may experience transformation in my life before the congregation reaches the same level of transformation. This can be frustrating for both the congregation and the individual. Careful monitoring of this is a necessity so that the frustration does not become debilitating for the process.

## My Story

Our transformative journey in grace always begins where we are. We begin with **My story**, whether we do that as an individual, as a congregation or as the community we are called to serve. Who are we? What is God up to in our lives?

## Home

One of the startling discoveries that I have encountered in my work with FP is the level of unreflective living we do. Our society encourages us to be reactive (we are more easily controlled and manipulated that way). The reflective life has always been a hallmark of Christianity but has been too often relegated to the cloister and religious orders.

To seek transformation or conversion in our lives we must be attentive to how God is stirring our lives on a daily basis. One of the simple forms of such reflection is to take 5-10 minutes



either at the end or the beginning of the day and review the past 24 hours with the question, “Where was God in all of this?” in mind.

A more structured form of review that I have adapted from Ignatian Spirituality uses these questions:

This day...

- What am I most grateful for?
- What do I want for myself?
- In what ways have I experienced God’s love?
- What choices have been inadequate responses to God’s love?
- How will I let God lead me into a brighter tomorrow?

Whatever instrument you chose to use the important thing is consistent reflection on our daily life. Each day is a new page in our story. It is from that story that we take the insights to better understand ourselves and the world around us.

## **Church**

How do we story our life together in the gathered congregation?

The first question to pose is, “Is this reflective storying happening already in the congregation and where?” One of the informal ways I have observed this in congregations is in the informal gathering before worship, meetings or other gatherings. What I call “checking in” with one another is storying the congregation. It is collecting the individual experiences into a larger context. This is extremely important work for a congregation to do. A congregation that does this well usually has a handle on the individual stories that make up the congregational family as well as weaving them into a larger story of how God is moving within the congregation’s life.

The question I am asking these days is, “Are there ways to formally or more intentionally do this work?” I am not advocating anything that diminishes the informal sharing but simply offering a more intentional way of sharing life together.

One of those places is in the announcements. In recent years I have observed the repurposing of this time in many congregations. It can be a time to share announcements, prayer concerns, updates and milestones (birthdays, anniversaries, births, new jobs.... etc.). In my very brief stint as a Rotarian I experienced what they called “Happy Dollars” which for a dollar donation you could share good news with the group. What if we had Grace-moments instead where people could have the opportunity to share how God has been at work in their lives recently.

Another area I have been utilizing is meeting times. Using 10 minutes to check in with members of a committee or council and then at the end asking if there are concerns or individuals that we need to include in our closing prayer. I have found this a wealth of

connectiveness. In those settings concern for friends and neighbors seem to surface in a different way than in the worship setting.

As I have worked on this project I am realizing that pastoral visitation in all forms is also a storying process. Intentionally helping individuals to share parts of their story as it relates to the congregation's story is helpful and is also a great source of material to fill the story out or to check out gaps and inconsistencies.

A final, formal way of helping the congregation story its life is a series of questions I use for planning which I adapted from *Canoeing the Mountains*. What is our DNA? What are the things we do in this place that if we ceased to do them we would cease to be us? Another question I have used to come at the story from an outside perspective is to ask, "If this congregation ceased to exist tomorrow what would the community miss or be lacking?"

## **Outreach**

Where do we have inroads into the community already?

Where does the congregation's story intersect with the community's story? How does that intersection shape both stories? For example, in my community I have served as: Little League Coach, YMCA Basketball Coach, a member of the board of several non-profit corporations, a singer in the university and community choirs, a band booster and several more roles. In each of these I was shaped by my interaction with the community and vice versa. The same applies for the church that hosts Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, Boy and Girl Scouts, works with the local domestic violence agency, provides dinners for the hungry, staffs a food bank, etc. A wonderful exercise I have developed is to ask a gathering of the congregation where the congregation already impacts the community. I usually start a list on newsprint. I then ask the individuals gathered to write down where their lives regularly intersect with the public sphere. I then add those lists to the congregational list. The results can be very informative and helpful. I did this with a gathering of about 25 people and in 20 minutes they determined that they had well over 100 Front Porches already reaching into the community from which they share their faith.

We should actively reflect on what we are learning about the community and ourselves from those interactions. How is our ministry being shaped and informed by the outreach into the community? What new pieces of the community's story are we learning? How will these learnings help us in future outreach endeavors? What are we doing well? What is in need of overhaul? What programs have reached the end of their effectiveness?

All too often this kind of assessment of outreach only happens as funding gets tight. If it is to be truly informative it should be a regular part of committee and council work.

# God's Story

## Home

One of the most often asked questions I get as a pastor and now as a teacher of scripture is, "How is it best to read the Bible?" Behind the question is the evangelical tradition of reading the Bible cover-to-cover each year. Many find the thought of this exercise overwhelming.

My answer usually is that there is no right way to read the Bible. As we look at the Lutheran 3-year Sunday lectionary much of the scripture is covered (particularly if you utilize the semi-continuous option for the Old Testament readings). I also suggest the use of the daily lectionary found in **Evangelical Lutheran Worship** or my preference the one found in the **Lutheran Book of Worship**. These provide a nice compliment to the Sunday readings. There are also a host of resources out there for the guided reading of the Bible. I have found that from time I need to break up such reading with focusing on a particular book. I practice the discipline of reading the gospel that will be featured in the lectionary cycle for that year (Mark/John, Matthew or Luke) before Advent of that year.

No matter how we choose to organize the reading of the Bible we do well when it becomes a regular, if not daily part of our life. I find it helpful to connect it with my daily devotions/meditation. Often the Bible reading helps to inform my prayer/meditation.

Regardless of the methodology there is always a tendency within the church (and with Lutherans in particular) to make the Bible a head trip. Regardless of our starting point and our best intentions we fall prey to talking *about* the Bible, *about* God, and *about* Jesus. Frankly, it's safer that way. To allow Scripture to become a matter of the heart is to open ourselves and the world to be transformed – under no circumstances should that be taken lightly!

Yet if it does not become a matter of the heart it will remain words on a page. The miracle of the Christ event is the incarnation...the Word become flesh. It is that enfleshed Word that we are called to bear to the world. As with the Greeks who came to Phillip, those who come to us come not to find out about Jesus but to encounter Jesus in the flesh and it is the earthen vessel of our flesh that Jesus has taken on. It is not a matter of getting the Scripture into our hearts but seeing the Christ who already abides there. We are but sacraments, blessed and broken, that reveal the one who dwells among us full of grace and truth.

How do we come to know this Christ who dwells in, with and under us? In the early church it was called breaking open the Word. It was the activity of the catechumenate as they gathered in preparation for baptism. They would gather around the texts that they had just heard in

worship with questions very similar to those we used in the last chapter: What does this word have to say about: Who is God? Who am I? How do we live in community together? What does God want us to do with our lives?

The issue becomes for us, what does this word have to say about our lives of faith? Where does God's story meet My Story? We need to reach the point where we begin to do this questioning every time we hear scripture shared whether it is on Sunday morning in worship, in our homes for devotion, when we gather for Bible Study, or when we read scripture at the beginning of a meeting. This does not happen overnight nor does it happen without some intentionality.

If one believes that the conversation with scripture is a "live" conversation, then the traditional way of engaging that content leaves much to be desired. Most of Biblical scholarship approaches the task with a methodology akin to an autopsy. That is not to say that the tools of Biblical scholarship are not highly useful but more critical is *how* we use them to assist us in a conversation with a dynamic Word?

I prefer to begin with the Biblical material using an inductive rather than deductive methodology. Rather than beginning with the question, "What does the text mean?" I suggest we begin with "What is the text saying to me?"

To that end I encourage the following process as a starting point for engaging the scriptures whether for devotional use, sermon preparation or serious study of the Bible:

- Read the text. Preferably out loud.
- Read the text a second time paying particular attention to words or phrases that attract your attention. Pay special attention to questions that may arise as you listen to the text. I keep a pad of paper beside me when I am doing this and write the notes down as I go.
- If I was using this exercise for devotional reading I would use these notes as a beginning point for my meditation and prayer.
- For our purposes I suggest we use these notes, especially the questions, as an entry point into our conversation with the text.

In this way I would argue that we begin with the assumption that the text has something to say to us today as well as having had a word to say at the time of its first offering. Now we are prepared to bring the tools of our scholarship to bear as we begin to explore the mysteries of this centuries-long conversation.

## Church

The central loci for encountering God's story as the church is in the *Rite of the Word*. The community gathers around a particular story. That story is explicitly shared in the readings for the day and in the preached word as well as implicitly found in the liturgy, the hymns and in the meal.

What does this portion of the liturgy look like in our weekly celebrations? It has become vogue in many places these days to truncate the reading of scripture in worship. Limit the number of readings (sometimes to one), edit the prescribed readings to eliminate unwanted or controversial parts or simply to shorten it, dispose of the psalmody or eliminate the reading of scripture all together. What do we say about the priority of the Word with practices such as these? What story do we tell? How we tend to God's story in public worship says a great deal about how we view the place of that story in our lives and what impact it might have on living in this world. How we share that story in worship also speaks volumes. Do we read it from a book or a bulletin insert? Do we hear it from a variety of different voices (young, old, male, female)? Is the sermon always from the pulpit or delivered in the midst of the people? Are a variety of different styles of delivery used? The worship and music committee would do well to periodically ask the question, "What are we saying about God's Story?"

As we look at how to effectively encounter God's story in the life of the congregation I believe the best approach is multifaceted and saturated. Do it whenever and wherever to opportunity arises.

- Don't wait for the pastor to tell you what the readings for Sunday morning mean. Start a group that reads the texts prior to Sunday (if your church does not provide a listing of the next Sunday's readings ask for them to be provided). Gather and sit with those readings and your questions. You will be amazed at what you begin to hear in those sermons.
- As you begin council or committee meetings use the coming Sunday's gospel reading and the questions to prepare yourselves to do the work that is before you. It might be helpful that before you begin the process you might identify the issues before you in that meeting (i.e. As we begin our devotions tonight let us remember that we will be dealing with matters of worship planning or budget or faith formation, etc.).
- Start small group gatherings in your homes, coffee houses, restaurants with multigenerational gatherings around Scripture and your questions.
- The second part of the conversation is to recognize that it is intended to be a tri-part conversation between ourselves, the text and the community. The Lutheran program *Word and Witness* talked in terms of My Story, God's Story and Your Story. One of the struggles that pastors and Bible study leaders have with scripture study is that we tend to do our work in isolation from the community so that when we gather the community we and they often assume we are the "expert." This is contributed to also by the Western reading of scripture that seeks the meaning of the text rather than the text as conversation starter which was the traditional Jewish way of approaching scripture (Rabbi so and so says this about the text and rabbi such and such says something a little different... Now, how do we hear the text today?).
- The textual conversation then if it is to be truly a living conversation is not simply between me and the text but also must include the community (however we define that). As Martin Luther once is reported to have said, "Those who read the Bible alone read it to their own damnation." Maybe he understood the conversation.

A simple model of inquiry is to probe the reading of scripture is to use these four questions:

- What does the passage have to say about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)?
- What does the passage say about who I am?
- What word does the passage speak about how we live in community together?
- What does God want me to do?

## Outreach

Where is God leading us in the world?

All too often when we have the outreach conversation in the church (What should we be doing in the community around us?) we sound a whole lot like every social service agency already at work in the community. What do we bring to such a conversation that is not already being said/done? I would argue that it is **God's Story**. By that I do not mean what I have been subjected to by well-meaning colleagues when they lament: If we could only get Jesus back into the family, school, workplace... etc. we could bring an end to the drug problem, teen pregnancy, unemployment, crime, broken homes.... No, what I'm advocating is listening to the community **through** God's story.

As we begin to listen to the community around us let us listen with ears attuned to God's story as well as the community's story. Are there biblical images that are raised in the conversations? Do you hear overtones of being trapped like God's people in Egypt, hostages to the systems around them? Do you hear a yearning for the Good Old Days like when David and Solomon were king (days in retrospect that really weren't all that good)? Do you hear feelings of living in a strange place like our ancestors in exile? Is the community in anticipation of change (2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah)? Is it a community trying to rebuild in the midst of devastation (3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah)? Is the dominant question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Are they searching for a savior? Do they need to experience grace? Are they feeling lost (parables)? Are they facing death? Are they feeling all dried up like a valley of dry bones? The list is endless.

I would suggest that as these images/stories arise in the conversation that you suspend the conversation and explore the story more deeply. Using some of the exercises from FP in the God's Story and God's Story/My Story sections to begin to wrestle with the question, "What is God trying to say to us through this story?" How then does that relate back to your discussion of the community? Are there insights to be gained? Are there other images raised? Are there other questions now surfacing?

Before jumping into action... sit and listen. You will be amazed at how much more you sound like the church when you are able to do that.

# Our Story

## Church

As we turn to the discussion of Our Story we must rearrange our paradigm and begin our discussion with how this plays out in the gathered congregation (church). As St. Paul reminds us, we are the body of Christ. That is who we are, that is our nature. That is most evident as we gather for the Eucharist. For the past decade I have been using a quote from St. Augustine at the elevation of the bread and cup. I turn to the congregation and say, “Be what you see. Receive who you already are.” We partake of the body of Christ even as we are already members of it and yet are growing into that identity more fully week by week. We tell and have **Our Story** reshaped every time we gather at table.

What is being said in the telling of that story in our celebrations? How would it be heard by one not of our particular clan? I have found travelling around to other Lutheran churches for the past decade has made me much more conscious of how we tell our story at Grace (changing those patterns and habits is not easy but until we notice them for what they are we will continue to communicate the same message intentional or not).

- How are people welcomed? I am an opponent of appointed greeters. Hospitality is the call of the whole people of God. So how would you make a guest feel welcomed in your house? What simple acts of hospitality should each member be educated in to make the stranger welcome (the cool part of hospitality is that sometimes we entertain angels without even knowing it).
- How is worship understood? Is it for the entertainment of those gathered? Is it for the egos of those leading worship? Is it to acknowledge and praise God? I have recently reintroduced an old Augustana Lutheran practice of announcing that, *“God is in his holy Temple; the Lord is with his people; the Lord is near to those who are of a humble spirit. He hears the prayers of the faithful. Let us draw near with boldness unto his throne of grace. Let us prepare our hearts and minds for worship.”* at the conclusion of the announcements as a reminder (most especially for me) as into whose presence we are assembling.
- What things are most important in worship? Sermon? Meal? Music? Comfort? Brevity? The Rite things? An honest assessment is critical. Often times we are not sure what is sacred in worship until we transgress it.
- What do the things of worship say about who we are? How is art used? What is the condition of the sanctuary? What is the focus of worship? How is the worship environment consistent or dissonant from the story you wish to tell? How do you share the meal? Is this consistent with who you are. Do you use a dime-sized wafer or a hunk of bread and what do each of these say?
- Do you use the lectionary and the liturgical seasonal calendar to assist in telling the story?

- Do you celebrate rites of passages beyond baptism, first communion and confirmation?
- How do decisions about worship happen? Pastor? Committee? Musician? What does this say about who you are?

Regularly sitting down and asking the question of what are we saying to each other, God and the world about who we are as we gather will prove instructive. I find it helpful to attend a Roman Catholic Mass periodically to experience the incongruity in their story. I am often warmly welcomed, as a Lutheran the shape of the liturgy is familiar, and the worship clues from cantors and others are usually sufficient to feel at home in worship. Just when I am beginning to feel at home the announcement is made that only Roman Catholics in good standing are welcome at the table. POW! Not my story anymore! While I have not attended a Lutheran church that has excluded me in such an in-your-face way they have communicated that their social hour (worship) is **their** social hour and not mine in 100 different little ways.

The liturgy is **Our Story**. Not mine. Not yours. Not even God's. Our story. How we tend that story will speak volumes to both insiders and outsiders.

As we tell **Our Story** in worship what do we expect to happen? I would argue that the church has had a long-standing outcome of our gathering around the table. This is clearly stated in the final line, "Go in peace. Serve the Lord". As Christ is bread for us in the meal so we are sent out into the world to be bread (the body of Christ) for the sake of the world. We do that both as individuals and as congregations alike.

## Home

### Love of Neighbor

All tables for the Christian are *de facto* extensions of the Eucharist. What we do individually/family we do as the whole body of Christ. We all too often, and particularly in terms of outreach, view these separately. What we do is always part of the larger story. That larger story informs and instructs us just as our actions and words speak to that same story adding congruence or dissonance.

This point was driven home recently in a very helpful conversation with a church development person who shared his philosophy (theology) of looking at the distribution of assets at the end of our days in a wholistic fashion: family, charitable causes, institutions, etc. Should we not look at our outreach in a similar wholistic manner?

What causes do you support either monetarily or as a volunteer? How does your being part of God's Story: Inform those choices? Support you in that work? Challenge you to see the world differently? Is that story pushing you in new directions?

I have insisted that every one of these places in the world that we are involved in is a Front Porch which serves as a platform for us to be part of God's unfolding story. I am not saying that to be faithful we have to run around with bright yellow tee shirts announcing that we are God's



Hands or that we need to name Jesus for it to be Christian discipleship. What I am saying is that when we are asked the question about why we do this work we should be ready and prepared to tell My Story...God's Story...Our Story.

## Outreach

What are the needs of the community?

In many ways everything we have talked about thus far has led us to this point. If we are conscientious in the above process then we are poised on our Front Porches ready to venture out into the world (the revelation at this point is that we are already there – in the world, that is!). At this point we could probably put together a pretty accurate assessment of the community into which we are being called. The problem is that it is **our** assessment... **our** version of their story. We need to be able to listen to their story.

We can do that very effectively one-on-one where we live, work and play. Sometimes, however, we need a birds'-eye-view. One of the most effective ways to do this is for the congregation to invite segments of the community in for a forum/discussion on a particular topic. In the conversations and interactions with the community you may have discovered what you think are the needs of the community. The forum is a good way to double check your assessments as well as provide coordination/cooperation and generate first steps.

A number of years ago we were struggling with getting a good picture of the youth not involved in our congregation that resided in our community. We invited everyone we could think of whose job entailed interacting with youth on a regular basis: Children and Youth Services, Drug and Alcohol, School teachers, the judge, law enforcement, day-care workers, mental health, counselors and parents. We asked them to address the youth population through the lenses which they most often encountered them – in short, tell us your story of youth in our community. There were two startling revelations coming out of that: First, these people rarely interacted with each other and secondly, there were several clearly defined issues facing the youth of the community which came out of those discussions. Pastor Mark Fischer, 12 Apostles/Saegertown, recently held a similar forum for his community around the issue of the opioid drug issue. His experience was very similar.

As we discussed in FP, we as church are called to listen these days with three sets of ears to three sets of stories: My Story, God's Story and Your Story. Our Story grows out of the continual interplay and interweaving of these three stories. It is an ongoing process that requires practice and discipline. I designed FP as a way to begin this work within the life of the congregation. Hopefully this guide, ***Transforming Grace*** will open new doors that enable us to share the story of God as it has taken shape in our lives with others.