

**Sermon**  
10/9/22

*The Word of God will Not be Chained*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

I want to share a story about a close friend of mine also named Dan. Dan and I met years ago. We worked together as counselors at a Lutheran summer camp and retreat center in the Santa Cruz mountains of central California.

From the beginning, we shared a love for theology, for asking questions and for seeking answers to those questions as an expression of our faith.

Today we have a few other things in common as well: we both earned PhDs in theology from the same graduate institution, we are both Lutheran pastors, and we both have excellent taste in music.

We love hip hop.

Dan was also a year ahead of me in seminary, the place where a person trains to be a pastor, which brings me to my story.

It was a brisk but bright and sunny autumn day of my first semester at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley. I had been attending classes for several weeks, my favorite of which was a foundational course called “Luther and Lutheranism.”

The professor was a man named Timothy Lull, the dean and eventually president of the seminary who quickly became “larger than life” to me as well as many other students in those days, including my friend Dan.

Lull was an expert on Martin Luther. He wrote a 500-page dissertation at Yale on Luther’s view of baptism. After graduating, he published an enormously popular anthology of Luther’s writings, a copy of which we have in our church library and which we used for his class. He even met the ghost of Luther – or so he would claim – in his 1999 book, *My Conversations with Martin Luther*.

That day, Lull was going to talk about Luther’s understanding of the Word of God. I remember hurrying to class (I had trouble being on time even then), when I saw Dan, who was also on his way to class.

“How’s the Luther course going?” he asked when he saw me. “Fine,” I replied. “Today we’re covering Luther on the Word of God, but honestly – I don’t see the point. I mean, if the Bible is God’s Word, what more is there to say?”

“Now wait a minute,” Dan said, slowing his pace. “You know the difference between Scripture and the Word of God, right?”

I paused.

“There’s a difference?” I asked.

“Absolutely!” Dan continued. “Luther taught that the Bible *contains* the Word of God, “but you have to distinguish it from Scripture.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The Word of God is too dynamic to be reduced to the words of Scripture. It’s a Living Word,” Dan replied. Had he had his Bible open to 2 Tim. 2:8-15, our second reading for today, he may well have pointed to v. 9 of the text itself: the Word of God cannot be chained even, it would seem, to Scripture!

## A Pickle

Now, you can imagine my confusion. Perhaps you’re feeling it too: how can the Word of God be *different* than the words we have about God in Scripture? What does it mean to say, as Dan did, that the Bible *contains* the Word of God, or to distinguish it from the Living Word?

Yet perhaps you also share with me another feeling I experienced that cool but sunny seminary day: somehow, the distinction Dan made felt liberating – even inspiring! It was as if the door to a Harry Potter-like chamber of secrets had been opened, behind which one could see mounds of gleaming treasure ready for the taking.

Lull, the professor I mentioned a moment ago, made a similar comparison. “Envision Lutheranism,” he once wrote,

as a very large house with an even larger attic – one from which many traditions and treasures can be brought down into the main rooms every time it’s necessary to redecorate. . . . We have old, neglected options [for thinking and living our faith] waiting to be rediscovered” (Lull, *On Being Lutheran*, p. 98).

Assuming, then, that one of these treasures is the distinction our tradition makes between Scripture and the Word of God, what (again) does this mean? What is the Word of God?

How does it differ from Scripture, how does it relate to Scripture, and *why on God’s good green earth* does it matter?

These were the questions that inspired my search for understanding Dan’s distinction in seminary (and beyond). Here are a few of the answers I found.

## Uncovering the Treasure

First, the distinction Dan made not only goes back to Luther. It’s also one of the earliest insights he had upon rediscovering the gospel.

Now the gospel, you may recall, is the good news that in Christ God loves you no matter what and that nothing – not even death – can separate you from such love.

In 1520, just after the Reformation began, Luther explicitly equates the gospel with God’s Word.

He writes:

You may ask, “What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used, since there are so many words of God?” I answer: the apostle explains this in Romans 1. The Word of God is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the spirit who sanctifies [i.e., makes us holy]. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes [or trusts] the preaching (*Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2 ed., p. 394).

Notice Luther’s reference to the gospel, which he defines elsewhere as the “good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth” concerning Christ and how, through him, God has overcome for us sin, death, and hell (*ibid.*, p. 97; 110).

Or again, you can think of the gospel as what Luther calls “a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, which one *sings and tells* with gladness” (*ibid.*, p.108; italics mine).

Do you hear that, the dual-emphasis Luther puts on proclaiming the gospel in terms of preaching *and* singing? The richness of our tradition, beginning with Luther, recognizes that *both sermon and song can become the Word of God* when they convey to us the good news of God’s love for us in Christ and we truly hear it for ourselves.

“You are loved,” God says to you.

Sit with that for a moment.

Some of you may recall the way Cantor Kyle and I began our recorded services throughout the pandemic. We, too, wanted to highlight the various ways God’s *Living Word* comes to us in worship. “Welcome this Sunday to Queen Anne Lutheran Church,” I said at the beginning of every service. “Wherever you are listening, whatever challenges you might be facing, we invite you into this space, one where you can hear the good news through proclamation, spoken and sung, a time where you can be still and know God is God.”

Welcome to Queen Anne Lutheran, I could have just as well said, where you might just encounter the *Living Word* which, if you’re not careful, could leap off the page of a hymn or enter your ear through the homily, sinking into your heart and filling you with gratitude and gladness for the sheer gift of life as well as its loving source *which loves you more than you could ever fathom*.

Of course, Luther knew that this Living Word comes to us not only as a message of comfort, the kind that puts us at ease by reminding us of “the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content” (*ibid.*, p. 95). It may also challenge us by calling us radically to reorient our lives (Erlander, *Baptized We Live*, p. 10).

Since Luther, others have clarified and refined his talk of the Living Word. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, for example, spoke of reading parts of the Bible as a

love-letter. Most of us know the experience of being told “I love you.” Imagine *God* speaking to you this way in and through the words of Scripture!

Granted, it’s easier to receive and experience the message of “I love you” when we hear it instead of when we simply read it. The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth agrees accordingly with Luther when he says that Scripture can *become* the Word of God when we receive the good news for ourselves and experience it as a personal address.

Let me share an example.

Imagine you are Lazarus, the one whom Jesus loved according to John 11. You died. A tomb enveloped you in darkness, but then something surprising happens: in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, you awaken. A sliver of light emerges between the rock that seals your tomb and the outside world. You hear voices outside. Slowly, you rise to your feet and walk cautiously toward the light. As the rock is rolled away, you see Jesus, standing there, ready to greet you. “Lazarus,” he says to you quietly, referring to your death. “You were not meant for this. Now take my hand and rise.”

Imagine if those words were spoken to you directly. If you feel even remotely grasped by them, then you know the power of the gospel, the power of personal address, the power of the Living Word!

### **Distinguishing but Not Separating**

Now, you might ask yourself, if the Word of God is the gospel, the message that God in Christ loves me to a degree far beyond what I can fathom, and that such love can renew me and change me, then why do I even need Scripture? Why not simply focus on the message and toss the good book with all its problems out?

Luther had an answer for this (as did Barth). “For him,” as the historian Justo Gonzalez writes,

what was important was not the text itself of Scripture, but the divine action to which the text testifies. The Word of God is Jesus Christ, and the Bible is the Word of God because it leads us to him. [Only later did a group of Lutherans pose] the question of the manner and sense in which Scripture is inspired. The answer that most gave [was] that the Holy Spirit told the authors what to write and ordered them to write it (*The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, p. 176).

There are, in other words, two ways of defining God’s Word in the Lutheran tradition. The first goes back to Luther who emphasized the Living Word as dynamic, as “a story or an encounter through which God addresses us and calls for repentance, revolution, a[nd] redirection [in] life” (Erlander, p. 10). This makes the Bible “indispensable” as the only witness we have to Christ, who is the Word in its primary form, as well as the basis of our proclamation.

Without the Bible, in short, we have no access to Christ and the gospel shrivels into slogans.

The second way of defining God's Word is to equate it with every word in the Bible. This view of inspiration, which (again) was developed by a group of Lutherans roughly half a century after Luther died, maintains that God directly influenced every author of Scripture to write what God wanted. We will return to this view when we discuss 2 Tim. 3:14-4:5, one of our readings for next Sunday.

For now, we should be clear that the Word of God for Luther is *fundamentally* an address, "not a 'street number' or a 'formal lecture,'" as the Lutheran writer Dan Erlander points out, but an appeal the Spirit speaks to each of us through the proclamation of the gospel in word and song (*ibid.*).

## **An Objection**

But wait. It's one thing to cite Luther and the Lutheran tradition. But what about the Bible?

Did Luther get his view of God's Word from Scripture, or did he just conjure it up out of thin air?

For a long time, I was skeptical. I knew Ephesians 1:13 defines the "word of truth" as the "gospel of your salvation." But is the "word of truth" the same thing as the Word of God?

Then along came 2 Timothy 2:8-15, our second reading for today. Notice how it begins: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendent of David." Here we have the basic ingredients of Paul's gospel, possibly one of the earliest Christian creeds.

As you can see, the resurrection was the *essence of the good news* for the earliest Christians – not the cross. But what about the equation of this message with the Word of God? Like Eph. 1:13, Col. 1:5 calls the gospel the "word of truth" – only here something is different. In v. 25 the author links the Word of God with the "mystery" he proclaims of salvation in Christ.

This is a big deal! Upon seeing it, as Luther once did, "I ran through the Scriptures from memory" to see if other writings confirmed what I found.

They did.

In 1 Thess., for example, Paul says that "the word of the Lord has *sounded forth* . . . not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place [his audience's faith] in God has become known" (1:8; emphasis mine).

Again, in 1 Thess. 2:13, Paul gives thanks "that when you received the word of God that you *heard* from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (emphasis mine).

Obviously, Paul isn't referring here to Scripture when he mentions the Word of God. He wasn't going around the ancient Near East handing out Bibles! The Bible as we have it didn't even exist.

No, he preached Christ, crucified *and* risen, and that, for him, is the "word of God" that comes not by reading but by hearing, the Living Word that is the proclamation of the gospel (see also Rom. 10:17, variant translations).

Maybe Luther got it right. He was, after all, a professor of biblical studies. Perhaps he rediscovered what Dan shared with me that sunny fall day in seminary: the Word of God cannot be chained, as our second reading says, *not even to Scripture*.

It's too dynamic.

It refuses to be tied down.

It's *rooted* in Scripture, yes, but it can't be *reduced* to Scripture.

## Conclusion

We have heard the meaning of God's Word as personal address for Paul, for Luther, for Kierkegaard, for Barth, for Erlander, and for my friend Dan. But does the concept of the Living Word resonate with you?

If it does, then *everything* changes. Instead of simply seeing the Word of God *as* Scripture, we start asking, "Where is the Word of God *in* Scripture?" Where is the promise of God's grace and forgiving love in the passage we are reading?

Take a look once more at the second lesson.

Could it be in the last line, possibly an early Christian hymn, that even "if we are faithless, he [Christ] remains faithful"?

Or could it be the reference to Christ himself, which begins and ends 2 Tim. 2:8-15, he who, alone in history, has *conquered death*, such that His presence continues to spiral through history and lives among us as we gather together in his name (see Matt. 18:20)?

These questions I leave to you, along with my hope that the Living Word – whether it's a line you heard in our readings, a phrase you heard in one of our hymns, or the bread and wine that brings to you the Living Word in visible form –

finds its way into your heart.

May this Living Word comfort you, sustain you, feed you, heal you, and save you.

In Jesus' name,

Amen