

**October 10, 2004**  
**Psalm 119:97-106, II Timothy 3:10-45**  
**Dr. Lewis Galloway**

**“A Living Word”**

My wife Bunny’s maternal grandfather, the Rev. Marion Huske, was a Presbyterian Minister who began his ministry in the mission field of Brazil, but had to return to the States because of health. He served churches in Virginia and North Carolina. He served one congregation for 32 years and then, at a time when most ministers retire, he went on to serve another church in order to help the congregation relocate. Granddaddy Huske continued to preach until he was well up into his eighties. I met him when Bunny and I were students in seminary. Even in his late eighties, he was always reading, studying or reflecting on some biblical or theological theme. When we visited him, he called us “theological tadpoles” and warned us “not to become too bookish.” It was odd advice for a man who had had an enormous library. Even in the retirement home, he had books piled all over the floor. I have in my hand the Bible that he gave to Bunny on her eighth birthday. In the front he inscribed this verse from Psalm 119, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” He was a man who lived his life by the word of God. He wanted his granddaughter to live by God’s word.

In writing to Timothy, Paul urges Timothy to live his life by the word of God. You may recall from last Sunday’s reading from II Timothy that Paul is Timothy’s spiritual mentor. They have traveled together and established churches together. These experiences have strengthened the living faith that Timothy had received from his grandmother and mother. Now that Paul is in prison, he is afraid that his difficult situation will be a source of discouragement to Timothy. The persecution, rejection and imprisonment that look like failure from the world’s point of view are actually serving the purposes of God to advance the gospel. Paul is able to trace the pattern of Christ’s life in the joys and sorrows of his own life. The scriptures bear witness to the truth that the suffering of the faithful is to be expected. He urges Timothy to look to the scriptures in order to understand how God is working in his life. Paul writes, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.” Scripture teaches us what it means to live our lives by the word of God.

When Paul speaks of the scriptures, he is talking about the writings of the Jewish people, the Hebrew Scriptures, which the church calls the Old Testament. The stories and sayings of Jesus, the story of the church, the letters of Paul and the vision of John which we know as Revelation had not yet been completed in written form or gathered together to become what we now call the New Testament. The early church believed that the Hebrew Bible pointed to Jesus. It took the church several centuries to bring together all of these ancient witnesses along with the testimony about Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit into what we now know as the Bible. The church selected the writings they considered to be “inspired,” which means “breathed into by God.”

These “God-breathed” writings became the “unique and authoritative witness” to the mighty works of God.

The Bible tells a story. It is a story about life and death. The Bible tells what is most true about your life, my life and the life of the world. The story is about the same kinds of experiences that each one of us has and is all too often too afraid, too numb, too worn down, or too proud to talk about. The story tells us about a God who creates this astonishing universe and this beautiful world we call home. This God loves the creation in spite of the creation’s rebellion against the Creator. It presents a man named Jesus and the community he created, a community marked by cowardice and courage and fear and faith. The story is not only about those who believed in him, loved him and followed him, but also about those who ignored him, despised him and killed him. The story tells us about God who is made known in the man Jesus, who is the crucified and risen Son of God. This story awakens our imagination to a new world of the Spirit where “if only it were true” becomes the only truth strong enough on which to build your whole life.

To some of us, the Bible is so familiar that we hardly hear it anymore. We think we know the story, but what we know is a watered-down, artificially sweetened blend of everything we’ve every heard or read about Jesus. Others of us have been taught to have such respect for the story that we tiptoe around it like a sleeping guest that must not be disturbed. We hear parts of the story read by churchy voices sounding ponderous cadences that only reinforce our notion that the story is far removed from us and the world of family squabbles, unsatisfying work and hidden loneliness in which we live. We don’t let our imagination anywhere near the Bible for fear that our imagination, like a playful child in a gift shop, will do some unholy damage to it. Some find the Bible boring because preachers and teachers with the best of intentions have explained away all the offending parts and reduced the mystery of the gospel to more manageable platitudes. Still others of us have only heard disconnected little bits and pieces of the story. We are like a person working a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle who suddenly realizes that she has focused so intensely on the little parts of a waterfall, cow or human face that she has forgotten the complete picture the puzzle makes.

Paul invites Timothy to read the scriptures with imagination. To read the Bible with imagination means to feel free to ask questions, to express frustrations and doubts, and to ask what the story leads us to think, to know and do. We need to feel the freedom to place ourselves within the story. We want to look at our own lives, beliefs, values and experiences in light of our reading of Scripture. As we read the Scriptures we will see the stories of God and God’s people that make sense of our own lives. If I were to ask you to tell me about your life, you might respond initially as if you were filling out an insurance application with the usual litany of name, age, marital status and occupation. Once we get beyond the “facts” to the level of meaning, I believe you would tell me stories about your life, your years in college, your marriage, your troubles at work, your faith, your parents or your children. Reading the Bible awakens us to the stories that make up our lives. As those who hear the stories of the Bible, we are able to discern the pattern of God’s mighty work and the presence of Jesus in the

world in which we live. When we tell the stories of our lives in the light of faith, then we begin to see our very ordinary stories as faith stories not at all unlike the stories of the Bible.

Luke Timothy Johnson has written in his book *Scripture and Discernment*:

Of all the stories humans can tell, the most fundamental one is surely their religious history, the story of their experiences of God in the world. Strangely, however, this story is seldom told by individuals in the faith assembly... Yet, if God is alive and active at every moment, and if people are being called to faith by God's activity, then there must be such a story, at least implicitly, in the lives of all those who believe. Why is it not being told? And why do those who overcome embarrassment and try to speak this story find that they do not even have the words to tell it? (p.30)

Reading the Bible gives us the language to tell our own stories of faith, of failure, of courage and of hope. Reading the stories of the Bible with your children will help them see the activity of God in their lives and discover the words that help them tell their stories of faith. This is one reason why the Bible Ministry is giving youth and children's bibles to our families. We want the word of God to be "a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." As the children are presented to receive the sacrament of baptism, we are promising to tell them God's story and give them the language of faith so that in time they can tell their own stories of how God is at work in their lives.

The Bible is the Word of God in a way that no other book is. God continues to speak in creation, in human history and in the lives of individuals, but sometimes we are so overwhelmed with a cacophony of sights, sounds, experiences and voices that it is hard to discern where and when God is speaking. The Bible serves as both a filter and a directional sign. Seeing the world through the eyes of Scripture helps us filter out all the confused signals and false teachers. The Bible is a light pointing our way along the path of life so that we may follow what God is doing in the world. As we see the world through the witness of scripture, we begin to see God clearly in the world of nature, in other books, in other people and in science, history and other fields of human endeavor.

Even more than that, the Bible makes Jesus Christ present to us. As I have said before, the Bible is not opaque. It is translucent. We look through the Bible, which is the written word of God, to see Jesus Christ the living Word of God in our midst.

I once heard preaching professor Dr. Fred Craddock tell about one of his students who was training as a chaplain in a nursing home. One of her assignments was to lead worship at the home. She asked Dr. Craddock to come listen to her sermon to help her develop her skills in preaching. The chapel service was held in a very plain multipurpose room. I like to imagine that a bingo game was on a shelf. Stacks of magazines, glue, yarn and scissors spilled out of an open cabinet. The only thing that

marked it as a holy space was a cloth thrown over a lunch table and a cross and two candles brought in by the volunteers. Some of the residents on walkers or in wheel chairs came in on their own steam. Attendants pushed the more debilitated residents in vinyl reclining chairs. The service began with a prayer and with volunteers leading the singing of familiar hymns. Dr. Craddock said that at the appropriate time the student chaplain read the gospel passage in which Jesus welcomes the little children. Dr. Craddock thought, "What is she thinking? She blew this one. How could she have so misread her congregation? Why is she reading this story about Jesus and the children in a nursing home?"

As she began her sermon, she told about how much the children wanted to see Jesus and how their parents did everything they could to get close to him. She talked about how the disciples roughly pushed them away. They weren't important enough to see Jesus. They were physically unable to come closer. They were powerless. Then she described how Jesus rebuked the disciples and asked the crowds to let the children come near. With tender gestures, she talked about how Jesus touched them, took them up in his arms and let them sit on his lap. Dr. Craddock turned from looking at the student chaplain to looking at the faces of the residents. They followed her gestures with their eyes and drank in her words. Some were smiling and nodding. Suddenly, Dr. Craddock realized how wrong he had been. The residents saw the story of their lives in the story of Jesus and the children. They saw themselves as those children whom the world pushes off and does not value, but whom Jesus lifts up to his breast. For a moment, you could see Jesus right there in that activity room lifting his children out of their wheel chairs, casting off their walkers, and hugging them to his breast.