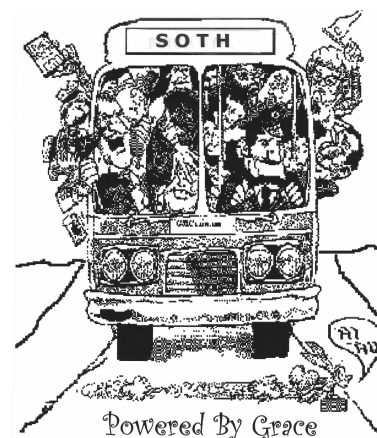


## The Bible—What is it?

The engine of Shepherd of the Hill's bus, "Powered By Grace" roared as it began ascending Monarch Pass. Unlike other buses that struggle with steep mountain terrain, "Powered By Grace" has no problem. There is no mountain she cannot climb or dark valley she cannot descend. When you are powered by Grace, obstacles become opportunities. The advantage of riding on a bus with over 400 seats is the mutual love and support experienced with fellow travelers. Life can be challenging and sometimes lonely. Traveling with others is more enriching than walking through life alone.



Mildred Reisenhouser found this out. Two years ago when her husband Raymond died, she found herself all alone. Her children lived in different parts of the country and after the funeral they returned to their homes, occasionally calling to see how she was doing. Her greatest support came from her friends at Shepherd of the Hills. There she found the understanding, love and support to continue on without her beloved husband. They had been married for 52 years. Although comforted that Raymond is now with the Lord, Mildred is often overwhelmed by his absence. His chair sits empty at the dinner table and his side of the bed is silent as Mildred cries herself to sleep: "Raymond", she whispers, "How can I go on living without you? I miss you so much. Will the morning ever come? When will the light shine again?"

For Mildred, the words spoken during worship services began to take on added meaning. During the Lord's Prayer, she holds the hands of those next to her and prays: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." The prayer continues, but her mind is lost in the words: "Thy will be done ... Thy will be done." Then she hears deep within her heart: "My will was done. It was Raymond's time. He is with me." A wonderful peace rests upon her for the first time since the funeral. She feels a deep security knowing God's hand had guided Raymond and is now guiding her. At the communion rail she feels the warm hand of her friend on her shoulder. "The Body of Christ broken for you ... The Blood of Christ shed for you." "Amen" she says, "Thank you Lord." Now, more than ever, she treasures her faith community. The long night is slowly coming to an end. The light of dawn is breaking through the clouds of pain and sadness. God visited Mildred. That night she offers prayers of thanksgiving for Raymond and the wonderful 52 years they had together and then fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

Now, several weeks later, Mildred is sitting toward the front of the bus with Connie Daniels, whose husband, Bill, had passed away thirty years ago. But, unlike Mildred, Connie's husband's death was not all that sad. He was a hard-core alcoholic who was verbally and sometimes even physically abusive. Although they continued to live together, she realized their marriage was in trouble the first time he struck her. When he refused to enter an alcoholic rehabilitation program, she feared what the future would hold. But, the years of alcohol abuse had taken a toll on Bill's liver. They were only married five years when he died. Bill had accumulated a fair amount of money by helping to operate a popular beverage company his brother Jack owned. Bill's abuse continued, even on his death bed. Before dying he gave Connie strict instructions to spend most of their fortune on a \$10,000 casket and a huge \$400,000 stone. During the funeral, many people remarked how good Bill looked in his \$10,000 casket and how beautiful Connie looked with a huge \$400,000 stone in her diamond ring!

Mildred and Connie were engaged in a lively conversation about the end of the world. "Its coming soon!", Connie said, "Perhaps in two to three years." She indicated that her son, David, had explained it all to her. "How do you know it's near?" Mildred asked. Connie replied, "Because it says so in the Bible." She went on to point out scripture passages her son had highlighted in her Bible. But, Mildred was not persuaded. She knew enough church history to know that many people in previous eras had read the Bible and made similar predictions only to be proven wrong. Yet, she was sad that Connie had become so obsessed with this belief.

Joshua, the hitchhiker they picked up near Texas Creek, was listening to their conversation. Mrs. Hinklemeier observed him as he began to untie the top of his backpack. "Watch out!" she said, "He's getting something out of his backpack! Maybe it's a gun!" Others looked at him with fear.

They were surprised when Joshua pulled a Bible out of his backpack. "There's no need to be frightened", he said. "It's not a gun, but in the hands of some, it can be dangerous. This book has inspired countless acts of love and kindness, but, interpreted by confused people, it has caused a great deal of hatred and violence. Approach this sacred book with humility. Remember, you are human and your understanding is not God's understanding. Those who claim to have the mind of God often attempt to manipulate others in His name."

"The Reformation was an attempt to change that", Pastor Bob said. "Luther and his reformers proclaimed that 'God's Mind' and the 'Pope's mind' were not synonymous, rendering attempts to manipulate others in His name more difficult. Sadly, each generation will find people still seeking to put themselves or their ideology between God and His people. That is why the church is always in the process of Reformation. Lutheranism has often understood itself, not as a denomination, but as a Reformation movement within the Christian church.

The ELCA proclaims that God is revealed through the Bible, and, that God is sovereign over the Bible. The church avoids any attempts to make the Bible divine, or a book of riddles to decipher the end of the world, or reduce it to a rule book for others. ELCA teaching states: *The Bible's authority rests in God. Lutherans believe that people meet God in Scripture, where God's heart, mind, relationship to - and intention for -humankind are revealed. Through an ongoing dialogue with the God revealed in the Bible, people in every age are called to a living faith.*

*Lutherans believe that the Bible is the most important of all the ways God's person and presence are revealed to humanity. That is because it is in reading the biblical books we hear and encounter the living Word of God, who is the risen Jesus. (Luther taught the Bible is like the Bethlehem manger containing the living Christ.) The Bible contains the story of God's interaction with humankind, first through the understanding of the Jewish people (Old Testament - 39 books), and subsequently to all people through God's self revelation in Jesus (New Testament -27 books).*

*We also find in the Bible human emotion, testimony, opinion, cultural limitation and bias. ELCA Lutherans recognize that human testimony and writing are related to and often limited by culture, customs and world view. Today we know that the earth is not flat and that rabbits do not chew their cud (Leviticus 11:6 ). These are examples of time-bound cultural understandings or practices. Christians do not follow biblically prescribed dietary laws such as eliminating pork from one's diet (Leviticus 11:7) because the new covenant we have with God has replaced the Old Testament covenant God had with his people. Because Biblical writers, editors and compilers were limited by their times and world views, even as we are, the Bible contains material wedded to those times and places. It also means that writers sometimes provide differing and even contradictory views of God's word, ways and will. Listening to the living Jesus in the context of the church, we therefore have the task of deciding among these. Having done this listening, we sometimes conclude either that the writer's culture or personal experience (e.g., subordination of women or keeping of slaves) seems to have prompted his missing what God was saying or doing, or that God now is saying or doing something new. By no means does that human presence in sacred Scripture detract from the Bible's testimony to God. Rather, this human testimony provides layers of faith and insight by those who contributed to the canon of scripture. The Bible's reliability lies not in reading it as science or proscription, but as humankind's chief witness to God, reflecting on faith as it is to be lived.*

"As you can see", Pastor said, "The ELCA does not offer simplistic answers when dealing with questions of faith. Today, when a growing number of churches are claiming to understand the mind of God and offer superficial answers to the complexities of life, the ELCA invites us into the mystery of the Word made Flesh. It exhorts us to *listen to the living Jesus within the context of the Church* and find our security in Him. He is alive and present at this very moment."

~ P.B.