

**"IT SHALL NOT RETURN TO ME EMPTY" (ISAIAH 55.11):
INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE IN CHRIST FOR PROCLAMATION**

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Thank you for turning up during such a busy week.

It is a humbling thing for me to stand here. To be entrusted with tenure is to me an acknowledgement that my teaching and scholarship, my commitment to my colleagues, my students, to Wartburg and to the church have been recognized as being in-line with the mission of this school. I am grateful to the Board of Directors for commending the honor and responsibility of tenure, and to you, President Olson, Dean Nesson, and my colleagues, faculty and staff, for your continued support and friendship. Likewise, I am grateful to our students, past and present, to our colleagues across the road and to many in other places both near and far, I am grateful for your friendship.

I'm increasingly convinced that scholarship is properly done when it's done in conversation as conversation... when what we offer as scholars is offered as a penultimate glimpse of a truth which is and will remain elusive in this age. Friendship and collegiality make this conversation so much richer.

My final word of gratitude goes to my family. To our children, Isaac and Shonagh, for your patience and for what you teach me about reading and learning, and to Amy for your companionship, support, and encouragement. I am in your debt. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION: ADDRESSING BLUE DUCKS

The title of this lecture comes from Isaiah 55, to which I'll turn a little later as God's promise to the world about the activity of God's Word.

En route to that promise, I want to focus first on the subtitle: Interpreting Scripture in Christ for Proclamation. My goal for this lecture is to contribute, if only in a small way, to the ancient, on-going, and I might add urgent conversation about the place and interpretation of Christian Scripture particularly but certainly not only related to proclamation... the interpretation of

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Christian Scripture for Christian preaching. My basic claim is that when Scripture is interpreted in Christ, every text in the Bible is preachable.

As an onramp, I want to turn back the clock just under 500 years to the Reformation, in particular to Luther’s addressing — in his own evangelical, blunt force way — what I think is a similar situation.

In January of 1526, Luther published a linguistic, musical, and cultural (!) revision of the mass, the worship service, the English title often used is: “The German Mass and Order of Divine Service.”¹ In the final section of the document, under the heading, “The Sunday Service for the Laity,” Luther provides direction for those leading the mass about the order and purpose of Sunday worship, he gives them new liturgical tunes, and he offers commentary for each bit of the service as it rolls along from beginning to end. In the order of service, after the Gospel is read (actually intoned)² and the congregation sings Luther’s paraphrase of the Creed (we’ll come back to that in a moment!),³ the sermon follows. What Luther says in his commentary about the preaching would not likely be received well by many preachers today (He might not get invited to speak at the Festival of Homiletics!) as he is quite pessimistic about preachers and their abilities,⁴ in particular with regard to their ability to interpret Scripture properly and to proclaim Christ. Rather than have preachers prepare their own sermons, Luther recommends:

...the sermon for the day... should be read for the people out of the book [of prepared sermons], not only for the sake of the preachers who could not do any better, but also to prevent the rise of enthusiasts and sects.⁵

Luther’s pessimism is rooted in the danger of the sermon’s lack of and/or incorrect engagement with Scripture, that is, the preacher’s inability to interpret Scripture properly. He goes on:

For unless spiritual knowledge and the Spirit Himself speak through the preachers..., the final result will be that everyone preaches his own whims and instead of the Gospel and its exposition we shall again have sermons on blue ducks.⁶

¹ WA 19.44-113; LW 53.511-90; PE 6.151-189. I am grateful for Pr. Matthew Agee for drawing my attention to Luther’s language about preaching in this document.

² Luther includes only two readings — epistle and gospel.

³ LW 53.78. The hymn is “We All Believe in One True God” (Wir glauben all an einen Gott). ELW 411.

⁴ Not the first or only time Luther got on this particular bandwagon. Cf. “Treatise on Good Works,” PE 1.224-225.

⁵ PE 6.180.

⁶ Ibid. I omit Luther’s parenthesis that comes where the ellipsis comes in the quotation: “whom I do not wish hereby to limit, for the Spirit teaches better how to preach than all the postils and homilies.”

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Ah, the danger of blue ducks!⁷ In short, a blue duck is the sermon that results from a disregard for the formative (norming!) nature of Scripture for preaching and thereby undermines the proclamation of the Gospel. Scripture necessarily norms and forms the sermon, the proclamation of the Word, the preaching of the Gospel. This is crucial because it is by means of the proclamation of the Gospel that the Spirit works faith within the hearer.

Note that Luther here speaks of Scripture from the vantage of “spiritual knowledge” and the work of the Holy Spirit. What does Luther mean by “spiritual knowledge”? I suggest that this isn’t all that complicated. Simply put, it is reading Scripture from the perspective of faith in Christ rooted in a Triune confession of God. Hence, Luther’s placement of the Creed — the *regula fidei* — the rule of faith — his hymnic paraphrase of the Creed, “We all believe in One True God,”⁸ between the reading of the biblical text and the preaching of the sermon. This is an important liturgical and hermeneutical movement⁹ from Scripture to proclamation through the Triune confession of faith.¹⁰ To recall Luther again:

For unless spiritual knowledge and the Spirit Himself speak through the preachers... the final result will be that everyone preaches his own whims and instead of the Gospel and its exposition we shall again have sermons on blue ducks.¹¹

At the risk of starting out by channeling Luther’s pessimism (with which I don’t fully agree), the concern that he is raising here is as contemporary as ever. Preaching that is not rooted in Scripture and more specifically in an understanding of Scripture that begins and returns to Triune faith¹²

⁷ ...*blau en[d]ten*... WA 19.95.

⁸ Luther’s hymn was first published in 1524 and is “an amplification” of a medieval single-stanza hymn. In “The German Mass,” he locates this hymn by name between the reading/singing of Scripture and the sermon. While James F. Lambert, *Luther’s Hymns* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1917), suggests that this hymn was sung after the sermon with exception of funeral services during which it was sung prior to the sermon. (83) Given what Luther conveys in “The German Mass,” it seems that Luther’s intent was that it precede the sermon during the Sunday service. Additional information, cf. LW 53.271-273.

⁹ The *lex orandi, lex credendi* foundation of this hermeneutical suggestion calls for further exploration.

¹⁰ Cf. S.D. Giere, “‘As a Bee Gathers Honey’: The Rule of Faith in Luther’s Interpretation of the Old Testament,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 41 (2014) 39-44; Christine Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” *Modern Theology* 18 (2002) 49-73. I am also indebted to *regula fidei* frameworks presented in: Nathan MacDonald, “Israel and the Old Testament Story in Irenaeus’ Presentation of the Rule of Faith,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3 (2009) 281-298; and Don Collett, “A Place to Stand: Proverbs 8 and the Construction of Ecclesial Space,” Unpublished paper, 2013.

¹¹ PE 6.180.

¹² Christian preaching “is... unapologetically doxological in proclaiming the glory of the Triune God, the divine mystery who is the source, means, and goal of all our feeble attempts to bring Christ to speech.” Michael Pasquarello III, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation* (Baker, 2006) 37.

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centered in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is always in danger of the whimsical hatching of blue ducks.¹³

With the danger of blue ducks — that is, the personal whims of the preacher that trump the proclamation of the Gospel — in front of us, I want to return to the thesis: When Scripture is interpreted in Christ, every text in the Bible is preachable. I should not need to spend much time defending the use of Scripture for proclamation. This is common place. What I’m arguing toward is the theological and imaginative posture from which we interpret Scripture for proclamation — the “spiritual knowledge” about which Luther wrote, that with the power of the Spirit opens the whole of Scripture to the proclamation of the Gospel. Preaching is not about us or our whims or our desires. It’s about who God is and what God does in Christ.

Moving forward from blue ducks, I want to say a bit about preaching in relation to the being of the church before exploring further this idea of all Scripture existing in and being read within the horizon of Jesus Christ — Scripture read in faith for faith¹⁴ — interpreting Scripture in Christ. Finally, we will turn to Isaiah 55, as an articulation of the evangelical promise that God’s Word does what God intends, which may well be the most difficult promise to trust in an age of measurable results.

THE CHURCH & PREACHING

This approach to Scripture — interpreting *in Christ* — comes within the context of a distinct understanding of preaching and its location with our ecclesiology and theology.

What is the church? If we ascribe (which I know many of us have promised to God that we will) to Augsburg Confession, Article VII, “Concerning the Church,” the church is “the assembly of believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”¹⁵ If we take this hook, line, and sinker, then preaching, within this Lutheran Confessional articulation, is at the heart of the church’s identity. It’s not extra. It’s not superfluous. It’s central to the church’s being.

What then is preaching? According to the Apostle Paul, preaching is the proclamation of Christ and him crucified. Recall what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:

¹³ “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. 2 Cor 4.5 (RSV)

¹⁴ Rom 1.16-17

¹⁵ BC 42.1 — German text.

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When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.¹⁶

Is there not more to talk about than Christ and him crucified? Probably so. Did not Paul himself talk about other stuff... sometimes quite important stuff? Did not Paul speak about the mystery of God in lofty words and wisdom sometimes? Yes he did and so should we. But (and this is a big and important but) the content of our proclamation always begins with, is centered in, and returns to Jesus Christ and him crucified. This is the heart of God’s self-revelation.¹⁷ This is the heart of God’s knowable activity in and for the world. To recall Paul in Romans 3 — God reveals God’s love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.¹⁸ Preaching, a task at the heart of the church’s being, is at its heart proclaiming Christ and him crucified, the revelation of God’s incarnate, crucified and risen Love¹⁹ for sinners, the Gospel.

While neither new nor cutting edge, this notion of what preaching is is an outrageous thing to declare God’s love for sinners. Who, other than God God’s self, other than the eternal, incarnate, crucified, and risen Word, could proclaim something so bold? Who else but the living God can create and sustain life? Who else but God’s Holy Spirit can bring us to Christ and persuade us to trust in this wild notion of God’s love for sinners accomplished by Christ’s death and resurrection?²⁰

Back to the question: What is preaching? It is the proclamation of Christ and him crucified. Who is the speaker? This too is Christ and him crucified — the eternal Word incarnate, crucified,

¹⁶ 1 Cor 2.1-2, NRSV

¹⁷ Luther’s “Heidelberg Disputation” (1518), especially theses 19-21, LW 31.39-58.

¹⁸ Also, Mt. 9.13b — For I came not to call the righteous but sinners.

¹⁹ 1 John 3.9, 1 Cor 13

²⁰ “Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he first leads us into this holy community, placing us in the church’s lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ. Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ, or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not remain buried but be put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure, this redemption. Therefore being made holy is nothing else than bringing us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, to which we could not have come by ourselves.” ML, 3rd Article, Large Catechism, BC 435-436.37-39.

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and risen. The Word proclaims the Word to the world.²¹ This notion is abstract, for we have moved wholeheartedly into the arena of the mystical, of the imagination, when we talk about Christ as not only the content but the speaker. And that’s okay. It is, in a real sense, about imagination — faith-full imagination — both on the part of the preacher and on the part of the hearer and on the part of God, but I’ll leave that part to God. The Word is speaking the Word to the world. The Word is speaking Himself to the world. This is what preaching is.

Most of the students have heard me (probably more than once!) reference an image used by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his lectures on preaching in the mid-1930s at Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer taught:

The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself... [T]he proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through the congregation as the Word.²²

What is preaching? It is Christ himself walking through the congregation as the Word. This imaginative, poetic, faith-full image of Christian preaching serves to center us, to orient our preaching and our hearing. And this Word, who is both speaker and content, is the Word by, in, and through whom the cosmos came to be.²³ This is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.²⁴ This is the Word that sent the Holy Spirit to testify on His behalf.²⁵ This is the Word that continues to be present for us in both Scripture and preaching.

Yes, this is the Word that continues to be present for us and for the world today by the power of the Holy Spirit who witnesses to Christ in both Scripture and preaching — the Word written and the Word proclaimed.

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²¹ “*The Word* exists to be made known; only when it is preached is its objective content fully disclosed. Man was created in the beginning by the creative Word, and destined to live by that which comes from the mouth of God. Men understand themselves aright and receive true human life in the hearing of God’s Word. The Word reaches the objective for which it was sent only when it effects an entrance into men. Man reaches the spring out of which he can draw human life only when the Word of the Creator comes to him.” Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church* (Victor C. Pogue, trans.; Wipf & Stock, 1960), 13

²² Bonhoeffer’s lectures on homiletics are found in: Clyde E. Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Thomas Nelson, 1975). This reference is from p. 126.

²³ John 1.1-2

²⁴ John 1.14

²⁵ John 15.26-27. Formula, *Epitome*, II: Free Will (BC 492.4-6).

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An important aspect of our Reformation heritage is the return to Scripture as the sole norm or measure for doctrine — *sola scriptura*. Scripture is the norming norm (*norma normans*). This heritage is most definitely in play here, but not specifically what I’m addressing. The question is not so much about whether or not the bible is important to preaching. Rather, I want to come back to this notion of Luther’s of “spiritual knowledge”²⁶ or “spiritual understanding”²⁷ in relation to the interpretation of Scripture for proclamation. The question, then, is not *if* Scripture is related to preaching. Rather, the question is *to whom* does Scripture witness?

Without getting too deeply into the argument about trends in biblical scholarship over the past three hundred years or so, to get at this with authenticity to the broader issue and to my place in it as a pastor and scholar, I need to do a little autobiographical reflection, for the simple point of this little tale is: my mind has changed on this question *precisely because of this call to teach preaching*.

Professor Schattauer, who chaired the search committee with which I interviewed back in the Spring of 2006, said to me sometime during the process that if I was offered and accepted this call to teach preaching, a discipline related to but not the same as what I had pursued during my doctoral studies, it would change my focus. I did not hear him asking me to give up what I brought to the table as an Old Testament scholar. Rather, I heard him asking if I was open to that which might naturally happen when a bulk of my time and scholarship were refocused toward preaching and away from the stuff that had occupied much of my research and attention over the previous years.

It turns out that Thomas was on to something.

As a pastor, preacher, and scholar I’m a product of the Modern machinery of biblical studies, well-rooted in the promise of historical-critical methodologies, and impacted by the many methodologies meant to serve as correctives to Euro- and androcentric ways of reading Scripture... ways of reading often imposed upon others. As a college student and then as a seminarian, I was exposed to historical-critical methods as well as to reader-response and ideological approaches. My concern then as a student and reader of Scripture was (among other things) the history of Ancient Near Eastern traditions that confluence in the Priestly creation story, the liberative trajectory of the Exodus, the role of the suffering servant in relation to the Babylonian Exile, the complicated redaction history of Job, the midrashic nature of certain NT texts, and the silence of

²⁶ PE 6. 180. “... *geistlicher verstand...*,” WA 19.95.

²⁷ LW 53.78.

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and violence toward women and outsiders throughout nearly the whole of Scripture. All important aspects of the biblical text. In short, I learned a great deal, all of which I am grateful for.

After four years in the parish, during which I delighted in preaching and in time spent with parishioners digging into biblical texts, Amy, our son, Isaac, and I packed-up and moved to Scotland that I might study at St Mary’s College, the University of St Andrews.

As a post-graduate there, I immersed myself in such things as the paleography of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the textual traditions of the Greek versions of Old Testament texts, and (among other things) the Postmodern musings of Kristeva and Derrida, which confirmed to me that the texts with which I was working were fragile fragments intimately tied with other fragile fragments partially ligatured to the phantasmal narratives of the world’s religions.²⁸ Most primarily, I spent time working with hermeneutics and the history of biblical texts in their interpretation. I was overblown by the richness and diversity of interpretations of scripture within the traditions of synagogue and church, and how true the statement is which the Babylonian Talmud attributes to Rabbi Ishmael: “And just as a hammer divides rock – just as [the rock] is split into several pieces, so too one scriptural text goes forth in several meanings.”²⁹ I had great fun giving loads of attention to texts with philological rigor and postmodern playfulness. I learned a great deal, all of which I am grateful for.

Then, I ended up receiving and accepting the ridiculous and privileged call to teach homiletics here at Wartburg. Granted I was a preacher long before receiving my current call, and I’m not ashamed of all the sermons I delivered. At the same time, this new call invited me into to reconsider how we Christians interpret Scripture especially for preaching. Being an Old Testament scholar, my particular interests gravitated to considering how we as Christians consider and preach the OT as distinctly Christian Scripture. Within a Christ-centered understanding of what preaching is, how do we preach texts from the Old Testament? As I began poking around in others’ work on the question and working with students in their preaching (I’ve learnt a great deal from my

²⁸ Sparing the good reader of the important but also tedious philological detail of the thesis, but I draw the reader’s attention to a portion of the work’s final paragraph: “Building off of the teaching of R. Ishmael recorded in the Babylonian Talmud that the biblical text when the subject of interpretation is “like a rock that shatters upon the strike of a hammer,” and also of post-modern philosopher of language, Julia Kristeva, who observed that every text is an intertext, that is a mosaic of other texts, I wrote: “There is a theological edge to this ‘postmodern’ observation in that [a] text is dynamic insofar as readers continue to sort out, organize, and reorganize the intertextuality of the text — to read and interpret. The meaning of a text, then, is not wholly in its author, *Sitz im Leben*, form, literary context, and (most dangerously) in any individual’s or community’s interpretation. Texts live and breath by means of their interpretations. Without continued reading and interpretation texts are subject to deaths of irrelevancy and/or petrification... Lest meaning become static and die, this little book looks to the wondrous diversity of the past with hope for the life of text, today and tomorrow.” S.D. Giere, *A New Glimpse of Day One: Intertextuality, History of Interpretation, and Genesis 1.1-5* (BZBW 172; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009) 292-293.

²⁹ *b.Sanh.* 34a

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students!), suspicions that I had developed were increasingly confirmed. In many ways, we Christians have lost touch with what it means to think of the Bible, and in particular the OT as Christian Scripture. And in an intimately related way, we Christians (perhaps just we Lutherans though I doubt it) have at least in some measure lost touch with what is at the heart of Christian proclamation.

And so my mind changed about the interpretation of Scripture for proclamation. To whom does Scripture witness? My mind has changed from focusing first on humans — the Bible as a the result of human activity — to focusing first of God and in particular God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.³⁰

Allow me to elaborate just a bit more in relation to the historical sweeps of what I’m addressing.

To whom does Scripture witness?

There are three basic answers: (1) God, (2) humans, and (3) both God and humans.

Without getting too detailed about these answers and the historical progression they represent, I think that these three answers provide a glimpse at the broad strokes of the history of the bible’s interpretation and its future. While we could argue over when exactly to draw the historical line — whether with Decartes (1596-1650), Spinoza (1632-1677) in the 17th century or with the likes of Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893) — somewhere between the early 17th century and the mid 19th century there was an epistemological shift in the answer to the question to whom does Scripture witness. Prior to the shift, if you asked a theologian to whom does the biblical text witness, their first answer would in one way or another be God. After the shift, the theologian would first answer humans. Of course, this is an oversimplification, but the general point is correct. A shift in *first answer to the question “to who does Scripture witness”* happened. This is what Michael Legaspi calls *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, when we moved from a scriptural bible to an academic bible, with the study of the academic bible prospering in a post-confessional framework.³¹ That is, confessional commitments were no longer seen legitimate ways of knowing what the bible said. Most significantly after the shift the Old Testament could not easily be read within the horizon of Christ because of a basic historical problem. It was written before the birth of Jesus. There are many aspects to this shift in the

³⁰ This is, of course, not to the exclusion of the human aspect. Rather, it is about priority. God has chosen to reveal God’s self in this way, a way that is sometimes messy and covered with human fingerprints.

³¹ Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; Oxford, 2010). Also, cf. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (Yale, 1974); Murray A. Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (T&T Clark, 2005).

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relation of the study of the bible and confessional commitments... about the basic question to whom does Scripture witness. It is a complex set of phenomena which we're only beginning to understand even as the church begins to come to grips with the ramifications, especially with regard to proclamation.

So, what has been gained and what has been forgotten in this shift from God to humans? We have gained...

- (1) in that Christian interpreters and the Bible itself were unleashed from certain unhealthy and unbiblical ecclesial controls;
- (2) historical and cultural knowledge from our heuristic exploration and knowledge of the worlds of the bible and the history of its origins; and (among other things)
- (3) insight into some significantly lopsided aspects of Scripture, not least of which are the relative absence of female characters and voices within largely patriarchal religious and cultural systems.

Indeed, we have gained a great deal. What have we forgotten? What we have forgotten...

- (1) the theological framework within which the Old Testament (in particular) is understandable as *Christian Scripture*;
- (2) a sense that Scripture is God's written Word that witnesses to the Triune God and in particular to Jesus Christ, and
- (3) the permission to wrestle with what Luther taught: “All of Scripture everywhere deals only with Christ.”³²

There is much more that could be and perhaps should be said about this historical development and the current reality. I'll save that for another time. What I'd like to accent today is a hope that we at least consider a third option — a movement into a post-critical³³ period.

By post-critical I do not mean that we pitch what we've learned about the text and its historical background during the critical period but that we reengage a precritical imagination that

32 “Avoiding the Doctrines of Men” (1522), LW 35.132.

33 “Post-critical” is a term already in use, probably originating with George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Reason and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster/John Knox, 1984) 122f. While I do not always agree with the theological use of those who employ the approach, I find the term's theological and historically descriptive quality useful. A summary of the basic postcritical interpretive assumption: “‘Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation’ refers to an emergent tendency among Jewish and Christian scholars and theologians to give rabbinic and ecclesial traditions of interpretation both the benefit of the doubt and the benefit of doubt: the former, by assuming that there are dimensions of scriptural meaning which are disclosed only by way of the hermeneutical practices of believing communities and believing traditions of Jews or Christians; the latter, by assuming, in the spirit of post-Spinozistic criticism, that these dimensions may be clarified through the disciplined practice of philological, historical and textual/rhetorical criticism.” Peter Ochs, “An Introduction to Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation,” in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation*, Peter Ochs, ed. (Wipf & Stock, 1993) 3. For a summary of the approach, cf. “Postcritical Biblical Interpretation,” in Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, eds., *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Westminster/John Knox, 2011) 156-158.

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the text witnesses to God in Christ. Such an imaginative move means unapologetically reading Scripture in faith for faith — reading Scripture in Christ... in such a way that there is no text in Scripture which does not live within the horizon of Christ.

Let’s think together for a moment about the place of the OT within the New, wherein the clear assumption is that Israel’s Scripture is the early Church’s Scripture. Before the need for the nomenclature of Old and New... before the formal existence of the New, the Scriptures of Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church were the Law and the Prophets and (perhaps) the Writings – Israel’s Scriptures. Clear in the New Testament’s use of the Old is (1) that there is a reverence for Israel’s Scriptures, (2) that Israel’s Scriptures witness to one and the same God as worshipped by the Church, and (3) that the Old anticipates and frames the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word, the Eternal Son, Jesus the Christ, as well as God’s on-going presence with the Church in the Holy Spirit. The writings of the New Testament assume that the Old Testament is Scripture that speaks of...witnesses to the God revealed in Jesus the Christ.

From the vantage of today (sometime after the age of Modernity), it is clear that the New Testament’s understanding of the OT is *pre-critical*.

For example, when the writer of Ephesians quotes Ps 68.18 in Ephesians 4.8, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people,” the author of Ephesians does not justify the fact that they are pulling this verse from the psalmist out of its *original* context. There is no exploration of the extreme difficulty of interpreting Psalm 68 or the grand Divine Warrior and Temple themes that are woven into it. There is no acknowledgement of or wrestling with the violence therein attributed to God (“But God will shatter the heads of his enemies...” 68.21a). Rather, the writer of Ephesians assumes that this OT text speaks of the Christ, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.”³⁴ Does this necessarily mean that for the writer of Ephesians the context of Psalm 68 was unimportant? No. Does this mean that there was an assumption by the writer of Ephesians that within the horizon of meaning of Psalm 68 was Jesus the Christ? Yes. The hermeneutical fact of the matter is

³⁴ Of course, there is a clarification that comes immediately after the quotation of Ps 68.18a, but the clarification bears no need to apologize for understanding this OT text as speaking of Jesus. Rather, it is a further clarification of the text in relation to its speaking about Christ. From Ephesians: “When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Eph 4:9-13, NRSV)

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that Psalm 68.18 has multiple meanings, and the historical, literary, original context is not necessarily the primary meaning.³⁵

Throughout the NT and the pre-critical period, there is quite always a similar interpretive assumption that within the horizon of meaning of Israel’s Scriptures is Jesus Christ, and *vice versa*, that within the horizon of meaning of Jesus Christ is Israel’s Scripture. It necessarily goes both ways. Each text has multiple meanings, and an important meaning is always the text’s meaning with relation to Christ.

If the writings of the Old and New Testaments are to be more than archaeological potsherds that gives us brittle fragmented looks into cultures of old... and if the OT in particular is to continue to speak as Christian Scripture – Scripture that reveals Christ, then it is nearing a necessity that we reengage... that we remember the notion taken for granted during the pre-critical period — that the OT (and Scripture in general) has a surplus of meaning,³⁶ borrowing language from Paul Ricoeur³⁷ to describe an ancient hermeneutical, theological reality. That is, in addition to the literal sense of the text primarily conditioned by or understood in light of the historical, cultural, linguistic contexts out of which it arose, there is something more. This something more is not added to the text like a secret ingredient in a family recipe. Rather this something more is inherent to the text because it is *Christian* Scripture, because it witnesses to the Triune God.³⁸

Earlier I mentioned that this change of mind came for me by way having to deal with Scripture within the commitments and responsibilities of my call to teach Christian preaching. I

³⁵ “The original text as spoken and heard limits a field of possible meanings. Those possible meanings are not dragged by the hair, willy-nilly, into the text, but belong to the life of the Bible in the encounter between author and reader as they belong to the life of any act of the human imagination... To be sure, medieval exegetes made bad mistakes in the application of their theory, but they also scored notable and brilliant triumphs. Even at their worst they recognized that the intention of the author is only one element — and not always the most important element at that — in the complex phenomenon of the meaning of a text.” David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980) 37-38.

³⁶ “In order to be helpful for preaching, biblical studies need[s] to take history seriously, while at the same time taking account of the fact that preaching is not an antiquarian or archaeological endeavor... And so my propose is that preaching would benefit from critical biblical studies that reflect a more inclusive view of a text’s history, a few that takes into account not only its supposed original meaning but also the abundance of meaning that has been found in the text through the centuries by Jews and Christians. We can interpret the Bible for the Christian life — and interpret it accurately, skillfully, even beautifully — only because others have consistently done so before us. Because the space between us and the original *Sitz im Leben* of a given text is not empty, an approach to biblical study that is fully critical and therefore most helpful to preachers must include awareness of the riches that fill that space.” Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament* (Westminster/John Knox, 2005) 165. Davis’ book is beautifully done but would benefit from more specific consideration of the Christological horizon of Old Testament texts.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976).

³⁸ In line with Ricoeur, when he notes that a text by nature of being a text “escapes the finite horizon lived by its author,” and that “what the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.” (*Ibid.*, 29-30) This surplus of meaning that a text has insofar as it escapes the finite horizon of its author in the case of Christian Scripture is the ultimate horizon of Jesus Christ.

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have also learned a great deal about this from Jewish colleagues who call for and invite Christians to be true to the tradition of Christian interpretation. One of them, Jacob Neusner, teaches that “while the world at large treats Judaism as ‘the religion of the Old Testament,’ the fact is otherwise. Judaism inherits and makes the Hebrew Scriptures its own, just as does Christianity.”³⁹ Similarly, Jon Levenson invites Christian interpreters to read the Hebrew Scriptures as Christians and not out of guilt or shame.⁴⁰ As Jews read TaNaK in relation to God’s covenant with Israel, so Christians read the Old Testament in relation to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. With the encouragement of Jewish scholars like Neusner and Levenson, I am encouraged to encourage the church and its preachers to proclaim the whole of Scripture in Christ.

So, what does this sound like?

Well, it doesn’t sound like a formula or a specific set of rules.⁴¹

It doesn’t sound like applying Jesus as a fix-all.

It doesn’t mean disregarding the text.⁴² Quite the opposite.

It *does* mean approaching the text through the rule of faith in the Triune God and imagining the text with all its complexities within the horizon of Christ, remembering that preaching is knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified... remembering perhaps Luther’s

³⁹ As quoted by Christopher Seitz, “Old Testament of Hebrew Bible?: Some Theological Considerations,” in *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Waco: Baylor, 2004) 66.

⁴⁰ A keen critic of the study of Scripture, both Jewish and Christian, Levenson draws his reader’s attention to an unintended danger of a theologically neutral engagement: “...to the extent that Jews and Christians bracket their religious commitments in the pursuit of biblical studies, they meet not as Jews and Christians, but as something else... Though Jews mindful of Barcelona in 1263 or of Schechter’s ‘Higher Anti-Semitism’ will be grateful for the small favor of neutral ground, neither they nor Christians should overlook the costs and the limits of religious neutrality. Nor should a method that studiously pursues *neutrality* be mistaken for the key to a genuine and profound *dialogue* between these two great religious communities.” And, “... Christians must ultimately aim for another sense as well, one that uphold the idea that their two-volume Bible is a meaningful whole, lest their scripture decompose before their very eyes.” Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 84, 103. It is also important to note Levenson’s critique of Protestant Old Testament interpretation that is theological exegesis veiled in/by historical critical language and/or the interpreter’s lack of self-awareness, cf. “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” chapter two, 33-61.

⁴¹ The following are solid proposals for Christian proclamation of the Old Testament that get tangled up trying to establish too much precision of method: Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Westminster, 1973); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Eerdmans, 1999); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2000); Rein Bos, *We have Heard that God is with You: Preaching the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2008). Perhaps a simpler proposal are the nine theses of *The Scripture Project*, “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture,” pp. 1-5, in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2003).

⁴² Ellen Davis is on to something when she suggests that “the gravest scandal in the North American church in our time... is the shallow reading of Scripture,” *Wondrous Depth*, xi. In line with her call to reading deeply, she also calls for an “imaginative precision,” which is particularly interesting in her exploration of the interpretation of the burning bush in relation to the Theotokos. *Ibid.*, 68-72.

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movement in the “German Mass” from the reading Scripture to the preaching through the Triune confession of faith.

We’ll turn for just a moment to John 5.⁴³ This isn’t a how-to from the Son of God. Rather, John 5 provides an interpretive tension within which we’re invited to interpret Scripture in Christ for proclamation.

The chapter begins with Jesus at the edge of Jerusalem. He is at the Sheep Gate,⁴⁴ at the pool called Beth-zatha (Βηθζαθα) known for healing powers that come when an angel of the Lord would trouble the waters after which the first person to step into the waters would be healed. John explicitly tells us that in the five porticoes around the pool lay the blind, the lame, the paralyzed (v. 3).⁴⁵ Jesus, without asking for details, approaches a man diseased for thirty-eight years. “Do you want to be made well?” Jesus asks him. The man, referencing the healing story associated with the pool (cf. v.4), says that he is unable to get in the pool at the appropriate time. Jesus’ healing words to him are unbidden and simple: “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” That’s that. The man unable to walk for thirty-eight years can now walk. Pretty cool, but it is not until the second half of v.9 that the real kicker comes into play: “Now that day was a Sabbath.” Jesus not only heals on the sabbath thereby breaking the sabbath, he also commands the newly healed fellow to take up his mat and walk. Jesus commands another to break the sabbath.

Now the sabbath is not a peripheral commandment. It’s rather central to creation and faithful adherence to the covenant. Yet, here Jesus breaks it and commands another to break it as well.

Hold that in tension with what happens at the end of John 5. Not that the in-between stuff is unimportant, but for the sake of time we fast-forward to the very end, where we find the sabbath-breaking Jesus saying this to the religious leaders: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”⁴⁶

This is the imaginative tension into which we as Christian interpreters are called. It is a tension that holds fast to the notion that all of Scripture is in some way about Christ and yet Jesus Himself does at times critique Scripture.

⁴³ John 5 is but one example among many texts that inform this movement. Others include Luke 24

⁴⁴ Cf. Neh 3.1

⁴⁵ Jn 5.4 is omitted in the NRSV, as it reads: the invalids... “waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.” Cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, ad loc.

⁴⁶ John 5.46-47, RSV.

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Pre-critical interpreters made this move without thinking. Scripture witnessed to the Triune God and in particular to Jesus Christ. This was obvious. With the strong winds of the critical period we have in some respect and to differing degrees forgotten this instinct... this way of reading and knowing. The movement to a post-critical period includes regaining trust in what Jesus, the sabbath-breaker, says at the end of John 5. “Moses wrote about me.” This is the heart of the “spiritual knowledge” of which Luther spoke. When we forget this basic tension, we’re more likely to hatch blue ducks.

ISAIAH 55

Recently I was reading a bit about the author Flannery O’Conner (1925-1964), whose work is noted for its willingness to enter wide-eyed into the depths of the human condition and to do so within the horizon of Christian faith. When asked about the relation between her writing and faith she said this: “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that.”⁴⁷

This notion of interpreting Scripture in Christ is a way of seeing — of seeing all Scripture in its real textual complexity and ultimately in relation to Jesus Christ. The organic images of Isaiah 55.10-11, can help us envision this reality:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.⁴⁸

The promise here is clear. God’s word is active. It accomplishes. It does what God intends.

But what is it that it does?

For this we look to the prophet’s metaphor: as rain and snow come down from heaven, they do not return until they have watered, until they have caused the earth to bring forth and sprout. And what is it that grows? Seed for the sower and bread for the eater. Nourishment. Life.

The plain sense of this poetic text is clear. God’s Word, as the spring rains that have been greening-up our little town, that have awakened worms from their winters’ nap, that reintroduced

⁴⁷ Quoted in Wilfred Stone, Nancy Huddleston Packer & Robert Hoopes, eds., *The Short Story: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 1976) 440.

⁴⁸ Isa 55.10-11, NRSV

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life and color back into the Mississippi valley landscapes... like all of this rain, God's Word does what God intends.

The narrative context and theological witness of this portion of Isaiah 55⁴⁹ locates this promise as coming from YHWH, from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the God of Israel, the Triune God. This Word which YHWH speaks is the eternal Word, who became incarnate, was crucified, and rose from the dead. This Word that dwells among us... that speaks Himself to the world in the sermon. Such is the promise of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... the God who invites our trust in the promise that God's Word does not return empty.

It is my hope that this little reflection will encourage us as preachers *and* hearers in a world that longs for the proclamation of the Gospel to listen to the whole of Scripture from the vantage of “spiritual knowledge” confident in God's promise about God's Word — that it doesn't return empty. We may not always see measurable results, but let us not lose faith and replace the Gospel with blue ducks, Jesus Christ and him crucified for our whims.⁵⁰

From the vantage of faith in Christ, every text in Scripture is preachable. What a place... what a vista from which to view Scripture and the world!

I have learned a great deal and I continue to learn, all of which I'm grateful for.

Thank you for your attention.

⁴⁹ The fact that many theologians and exegetes in the early church

⁵⁰ From a 1515 sermon of Luther: “Whoever wants to read the Bible must make sure he is not wrong, for the Scriptures can easily be stretched and guided, but no one should guide them according to his emotions; he should lead them to the well, that is to the cross of Christ, then he will certainly be right and cannot fail.” Quoted by H. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 173. Also, lecturing on Psalm 6, Luther: *Crux Christi unica est eruditio verborum dei, theologia sincerissima*. *Ibid.*, 248.