

## Lutherans and the Bible - Part 4

This is the fourth week of our looking at how Lutherans interpret the Bible. The information being shared comes from a variety of resources including **The Book of Faith** and a video series entitled **How Lutherans Interpret the Bible** by the Reverend Doctor Mark Allan Powell. The topics include:

1. Word of God
2. What Lutherans Say About the Bible
3. Where the Bible Comes From
- 4. Interpreting the Bible in Context**
5. Determining Right From Wrong
6. The Many Meanings of the Bible

The first 3 weeks we talked about the Bible being the written Word of God and it tells us what God wants to say to us. We focused on what Lutherans say about the Bible; that Christ is the ultimate word of God; that the Bible draws us to Jesus - to peace, love and hope; and the 5 principles used when studying Scripture. This week we look at the biblical context.

So how do we **interpret the Bible in Context?** There are 2 contexts that we focus on when interpreting the Bible: historical and literary.

**Historical Context:** When we look at the historical context we look at the background, the situation and the environment or the state of affairs at the time the text was written. It is the how, the when, and the why under which that text was written. For example, when Jesus sends the disciples out and tells them not to bring purse, luggage, sandals and not to greet anyone, this passage was written for a specific context and time for the disciples.

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If this is taken out of that context that would mean that we are not supposed to wear sandals, bring our purses and greet people when we share the good news with others.

**Literary Context:** When we look at the literary context that means we look at the type of literature that is written. There are many types of literature in the Bible. For example, there are poems, prophetic oracles, parables, miracle stories, historical accounts, genealogy, law codes, hymns, letters, legends and folk tales. When these were written, the original group knew what each of these were. The people at that time knew if a story was true or if it was fiction. Jesus would use fiction so that people would understand what it meant to love our neighbor. These parables (stories) were used to illustrate a point. The story of Jonah and the Big Fish is understood as Hebrew Folktale and it is like a parable and serves to get the point across to God's people. In today's context, we have a category of literature that we call "fairytales". We can identify a fairytale because it usually starts "Once upon a time" and ends with "and they lived happily ever after". When we read the Bible we seek to understand the type of literature that we are reading and how the people would have understood the story back then. For example, stories about talking trees, talking snakes, are usually fables that are written to tell a truth. When we tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood, no one is concerned about a talking wolf because we understand it as a fable. Truth can be conveyed through folktales and stories. If we read the account of Adam and Eve as history, then the point is to provide a description of what the world was like a long time ago. If we see it as a folktale, then it teaches us about sin and humans trying to be gods. Christians will agree and disagree about whether or not a particular story in the Bible is a historical account or folktale and stories.

Let's put what we have learned about historical and literary context into practice using the Book of Revelation.

*Literary context:* the Book of Revelation is a type of literature that is called Apocalyptic literature. It was a very popular type of literature in the 1st century. It is what we would call science fiction or fantasy today. There is a lot of angels, dragons and monsters. Apocalyptic literature is symbolic so we don't think about literal monsters and beasts doing these things. It does not predict the future in highly specific ways but instead gives general images that reveals a person's vision of the future broadly. It is not chronological and instead is cyclical which means that things may happen in the same event versus one thing following another. And finally, Apocalyptic literature was written to

convey messages to the people at the time it was written. The symbols used would stand for things at the present time for the reader.

*Historical context:* We are interested in the meaning this had in the first century. For example, the number of the beast in the **Book of Revelation** is 666. For us to understand what that means we need to understand the use of numbers at the time of this writing. For 1st century people, everyone had a number as well as a name. For example, Jesus had the number 888 and that number became important to early Christians. The Roman emperor Nero had the number 666, so when people read that number they knew that it was Nero that was being spoken about. So while this book talks about the future, it used language and images from its own time. At the time that Revelation was written, Christians were being severely persecuted by Nero for their beliefs and so we understand this Scripture as an inspirational message of ultimate hope to those who suffer. At that time, it provided comfort and helped envision what it will be like when God returns. And today, Revelation provides us with comfort and hope in our time of suffering. It is a book that said then and says now that ultimately - when the "dust settles" - we win!! The new Jerusalem will descend, there is no hunger, no darkness, no mass shootings, no grief, no death. There will be no more crying for God will wipe away every tear from every eye.

As you engage Scripture this week, think about the type of literature and the historical context and listen for how you might "see" something fresh and new!