

In the name of ✝ Jesus. Amen.

Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod Lutherans are hard to classify. Some call us “fundamentalists,” but we’re not the classic fundamentalists, for our theology is much more robust than the five fundamentals which are verbal inspiration, the virgin birth of Jesus, belief that Christ’s death was the atonement for sin, belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, belief in the historical reality of the miracles of Jesus. Some call us Protestants, and indeed Lutherans princes, including Luther’s own prince, John the Steadfast, objected to and protested Emperor Charles V’s attempt to stamp out the “Lutheran heresy.” But this term is so broad as to be virtually meaningless. When sacramental Lutherans and antisacramental Evangelicals and experiential Pentecostals can all be grouped together under one moniker, it’s practically meaningless.

Some say that we are still too Roman Catholic, that Luther and the Lutherans did not go far enough in casting off popery and papal abuses. But the First President of the LCMS (it wasn’t called that then—then it was the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States—but I digress), C. F. W. Walther said that if you think the Reformation was about “*these innocent things* [like vestments, or candles, or crucifixes, or altars, etc.] *as vestiges of the papacy* [you know] *neither what the papacy is, nor what the Bible teaches.*” Ah! There it is; there is the focus of the Lutheran Reformation and of us Missouri Lutherans today: what does the Bible teach. We seek to make sure that as we preach Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, as we preach the forgiveness of sins, etc., all we teach is “*in harmony with God’s Word.*” We’re word of God people.

But that leads back to the classification of fundamentalism again, or perhaps I could call it an accusation, for used this way, it’s always intended as a pejorative. This kind of fundamentalism “*is characterized by a markedly strict literalism as applied to certain specific scriptures, dogmas, or ideologies ...*” [Wikipedia].

In fact, we do take the interpretation of Scripture very seriously. The work is hard and painstaking that Dr. Voelz is doing on his Commentary on the Gospel of Mark; similarly what Dr. Weinrich is doing on his Commentary on the Gospel of John. And this work is to try to draw out of the text the meaning — God’s meaning, Jesus’ meaning — the intended sense of the words or phrase. Most of the time that is the literal sense, but sometimes not. Sometimes Jesus, for example, spoke in figurative language, using metaphors and similes.

There’s no controversy with this, is there? After all, Jesus says in our Gospel, “*I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I*

will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.” Indeed, Jesus’ teaching is filled with figurative language—that’s what the parables are—and they do take work to figure out.

The Bible contains figurative language—indeed, the reason Lutherans want our members, and especially our children, to be able to read well, is so that they can engage with the text of the Bible on its own merits, and be able to tell whether something is figurative or not. Consider, for example, the epistle text from Revelation, as St. John describes the new Jerusalem. That text is filled with figurative language, and the text itself provides the clues: ὅμοιον: similar to (or like); and ὡς: like or as. The Revelation to St. John is full of such figurative language—it makes sense for John was trying to describe what he saw, being “*carried away in the Spirit*”.

But that’s not to say that most of the Bible is simply metaphor or allegory. Adam and Eve aren’t just metaphor, though many want to claim that. Noah and the Ark aren’t figures of speech. Jonah and the great fish aren’t either. They’re not just made up stories written for the purpose of getting to some hidden meaning.

We were just talking about this on Wednesday in Men of Zion as we were considering the fantastic account of Peter’s escape from prison by the intervention of an angel of the Lord. I mean there were chains just falling off and gates opening on their own. Miraculous? Absolutely! But there is no indication that this account is to be read as anything but an historical account.

And if some say, “*But it’s too fantastic to believe,*” where does it stop? How about Jesus being the Son of God, the Word made flesh, born of a virgin? Jesus said, “*I came from the Father and have come into the world.*” Surely that’s too fantastic to believe. Or what about Jesus taking onto Himself the sins of the whole world, suffering and dying as the perfect sacrifice for YOUR sins, taking on the punishment for YOUR sins, triumphing over YOUR sins? Jesus said, “*In me you will have peace.*” Is that just figurative language, or was peace with God really and truly reestablished by Jesus’ atonement? What about Jesus rising again from the dead on the third day, victorious over death and the grave? Is that just metaphor? Jesus said, “*Take heart; I have overcome the world.*” Are you comforted by a mere metaphorical victory? What of Jesus coming again in glory at the last trumpet? What about the dead being raised incorruptible to enjoy everlasting life? That’s no myth. That’s the reality of Jesus’ promise even if St. John’s description of that life is so fantastic that it could only be described in picturesque language.

So, of course, the Bible contains figurative language. But Jesus also speaks plainly to the disciples and us about who He is and what He came to do. Plain

incarnation language. Plain crucifixion language. Plain resurrection language.
“Christ is risen. Alleluia. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia.”

One more thing that Jesus spoke to His disciples and gave to His church on this same night when He says, I’m no longer speaking to you in figurative language. He gave us the Sacrament that we are about to receive. And Jesus is not speaking figuratively here, but plainly when He gives His church His last will and testament. When Jesus says, *“This is my body,”* and *“This is my blood of the New Testament,”* He says what He means and means what He says. He gives us His very own body and blood. Offered up once on the cross, for our forgiveness, life and salvation, He places it here on this altar, as often as we eat and drink it, and into our mouths. Jesus’ plain language here, too, settles it.

Yes, God speaks to us through His Word, sometimes in figurative language and more often speaking plainly. And we know that these words are given to us that *“we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, we may have life in His name.”* Moreover, we know that this faith comes only as the Holy Spirit clarifies this word, illuminates our hearts and minds, and brings us to believe it. Otherwise, as Luther says, this Gospel, *“surely is and remains an obscure or figurative way of speaking.”*

So, how shall we Lutherans be classified? We are word people and faith people, trusting that faith comes by the Word, that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation for those who believe. And that’s so whether it’s the water and the word sacrament of Holy Baptism—remember without the word of God it’s just *“plain water and no baptism,”* but *“with the word of God, it is a baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit”*—or it’s the words associated with the Lord’s Supper—remember, *“whoever believes these words [given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins] has exactly what they say: ‘forgiveness of sins’”*—or it’s the words that we hear in church or the words that we read from the Bible, God is applying His word to you in these ways for your faith, your life and your salvation.

And so I conclude with this comforting promise of God contained in His word about His word couched in figurative language: *“as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water 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 shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* *“This is most certainly true!”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.