



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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*"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).*

A favorite author of mine is William Willimon (say that quickly ten times), a Methodist Pastor, who is the Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University. He is at his best in a recent article in the Christian Century, I will quote him at length because the article is so relevant.

"In a lecture on 'The Renewal of the Inner City Church,'" Jim Wallis (Editor of Sojourners Magazine) told a group of pastors true stories of declining inner city churches that had, by the grace of God, rediscovered their mission and begun to thrive. I was inspired, but in the conversation afterwards one pastor after another criticized Wallis's speech. They accused him of looking at the church through rose-colored glasses. One even implied that he had lied.

"That evening, I told Wallis that I was appalled by the groups' reaction. 'I wasn't,' he said. 'That's the reaction I always get from mainline, liberal pastors. They are amazed when God wins! Scared to death that Easter just might, after all, be true.'"

What an incredible statement! I have been trying to articulate similar sentiments for decades, but have not found the precise words which Wallis employs. I have focused on a 'theology of abundance' rather than a 'theology of scarcity.' I have tried to explicate the power of vision, have tried to will the discovery of better leadership models, and have tried to inculcate the words of Jesus when he declared that 'all things are possible.' But I never quite found the eloquence of these words from Wallis to Willimon. Listen to them again.

"They are amazed when God wins. Scared to death that Easter, just might, after all, be true."

Of course if Easter is true, it changes everything. It makes so much of what passes for theological discourse today irrelevant. The whole current rage (emulating a similar process a century ago) of searching for the historical Jesus is really beside the point. Bishop Spong with his 'post-christian' chatter won't even survive as a footnote. If Easter is true, the raging malaise in mainline Protestantism will be seen for what it is, a denial of Easter.

Willimon continues, "Luke includes a story of Jesus' preaching success (Luke 4:21-30) with a great crowd 'pressing in upon him to hear the Word of God,' following a frustrating night of fishing failure in which the disciples 'caught nothing.' Then, when Jesus speaks, the disciples realize astounding, net-bursting success. Its comforting to see Jesus's sermons so well received after the unpleasantness at the synagogue in Nazareth.

"Now Jesus is the master not only of the word of God but also of fish. We who so often feel powerless over the elusiveness of language, the scarcity of natural resources, the horror of world hunger, are thrilled to witness the unveiled, magical power of Jesus. (Hear Willimon's words here, 'the unveiled, magical power of Jesus, how counter-cultural is this?")

Its too soon in Luke or the new year for an Easter story. Still, any time we're working the night shift with Jesus, we must be prepared for an outbreak of Easter." (Yes!) "We witness what it is to be astounded by a death-defying Jesus, moved from failure and scarcity to life and triumph. Its wonderful!"

I once had a bishop tell me that any congregation which is experiencing 'astounding, netbursting success' must be guilty of heresy, must have sold out to a theology of glory. He went on to imply that anyone who truly followed Jesus would ultimately experience 'empty nets.' He seemed to be scared to death that Easter, just might, after all, be true.

The Gospel tells us that God wins. Jesus wins. The forces of sin and death are routed and the battle has been won.

Willimon then describes the difficulty of believing in Easter, "The reaction of Peter, the premier, quixotic disciple, the first of the church, to all of this abundance-producing power. 'Get out of here: I'm a sinner.' Now they want Jesus out of Galilee because of his fishing."

"Peter moves from the security of fixed, failed reality-- 'We fished all night and have nothing,' into full, uncontained reality, he moves from calling Jesus 'Master' to the even more exalted "O Lord.' Then things become

unmanageable and scary, Peter sees his situation as a lack of faith rather than a lack of fish and he blurts out, "Get out of here Jesus."

Willimon now comes to the crescendo of his article, "Personally, I've got a better theology of ministry on Good Friday (Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures) with all sorts of sound sociological, psychological reasons for death and defeat, than I have a pastoral theology robust enough for Easter (he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures)."

"Most of my sermons, even in Epiphany or Easter, work the theme, 'Ten reasons why you are not really the Body of Christ, even though you thought you were when you came to church this morning.' There's a reason why Marcus Borg in 'The Heart of Christianity' labors to disjoin the pre-Easter Jesus from the post-Easter Jesus. It is easier, I think, to be in the boat with Borg's historical Jesus, wisdom teacher, movement initiator/social prophet, than with Jesus the Resurrected Christ who rocks the hell out of my dead and dying world. Though Jesus tell us 'don't be afraid' when he promises us to teach us to fish like him, its scary. Get out of here Jesus!"

I am looking forward to attending with the throngs Mel Gibsons movie on 'The Passion.' I understand it is an excruciating portrayal of the crucifixion. I realize we cannot get to Easter unless we go through Good Friday. But I hope, truly hope, that there is some hint of Easter, some clear and unequivocal sign of the resurrection. I still remember the rather shocking and breezy musical of a generation ago entitled 'Jesus Christ Superstar;' which ended with Jesus hanging on the cross. All I could think as I left the theater was how incomplete and unfulfilling it was. It seemed almost as if the creators of this event were 'scared to death that Easter, just might, after all, be true.'

"Willimon then tells a practical story from his own congregation, which people of Hope could appreciate; 'I was not present at the finance committee meeting the night they voted on next year's budget. The next morning I got a call from the chair. 'Preacher,' she said, 'great meeting last night. I opened with prayer and it was like the Holy Spirit descended on us. With little discussion we unanimously approved next years budget, a 10% increase over this year's. It was wonderful. There is a new spirit in this congregation and we are going to ride with it.'"

"I said in love, 'let me get this straight. The church that

is five per cent behind on this year's budget is going to have a ten per cent increase next year. That's crazy. I'm the spiritual leader of the congregation. I will tell you when the Holy Spirit gets here. There is no way that you will pledge that budget.'"

"Well, you weren't there and we've already voted, so that's that,' she replied. On Sundays during October the chair reported on our progress during worship. The second Sunday of the month she rose and said, 'I never thought I would live to see the day in this church. I am pleased to announce that we have pledged next year's budget in full.' The church erupted in spontaneous applause."

"Which is all the more amazing considering that this is a huge increase over this year's budget.' Applause again. Now as I remember there was somebody who said, 'You will never pledge that budget.' Help me remember. Who said, 'That's crazy, you will never pledge that budget.' Who said that?"

"Sometimes I despise the anticlericalism of the laypeople as much as I fear the unwanted intrusions of the Holy Spirit. It isn't easy when you are fishing with Jesus. Get out of here Jesus!"

Willimon concludes his article, "Fellow Duke Professor Stanley Hauerwas says that our culture is built on the fear of death. He thinks this explains our health care system, our government, our economy, our fascination with health clubs, and all the rest. I am now fond of saying that this culture is built on an even greater fear, the threat of being raised from the dead."

I have waited a long time to read an article like this. It is something to ruminate upon, to seek to ascertain the deeper and mysterious meanings, to let the words echo throughout our minds and spirits. But above all let the words of Jim Wallis challenge our own sense of powerless and often cynicism with the words:

"They are amazed when God wins. Scared to death that Easter, just might, after all, be true."