



The family Bible

By Bishop Jessica Crist

Do you have a family Bible that has been passed down from generation to generation? Many of us do. Sometimes they are in German or Swedish or Norwegian. Sometimes they are in King James English. A family Bible is not only the word of God. It is also, in many cases, a record of births and deaths, of marriages and baptisms. Thanks to the legacy of Gutenberg and of the Protestant Reformation, the family Bible has been a treasure in more ways than one. For many families settling on the American frontier, the family Bible was one of the only—if not *the* only—books that a family owned. It was a prized possession.

Lutherans are a Bible-believing people, but we are not a Bible-worshipping people. We take the Bible very seriously. But we don't take it literally. Our Confession of Faith in our constituting documents states: "The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world."

The Bible is the written word of God. But as Christians we believe that there is something more than the written word. We believe that Jesus is the Word become flesh, the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death and resurrection God fashions a new creation. Reading the Bible from start to finish doesn't make you a Christian. Being baptized into the life and death of Jesus Christ, who died on a cross so all might live, makes you a Christian.

Martin Luther was a biblical scholar. He didn't find it acceptable that the Bible was not in the language of the people, that Bibles remained in churches, chained to a stand. He personally translated the Bible, going back to the original languages rather than the Latin of the Middle Ages. And he found, as one always does with translating, that translation involves interpretation, nuance, understanding the original context in which the passage was written. He understood that the Bible is a living, breathing treasure.

And so diverse! One only needs to look at the four Gospels to see that the Bible is not a continuous narrative but contains many strains, many fragments that come together into a rich whole. The Bible has histories and poetry, letters and hymns, prophetic narratives and apocalypics, and much, much more. The flavors of different times and places, of different authors and circumstances very much color the Bible. It is the word of God. And it is, in many ways, our family story.

One need only read the psalms to cover the range of human emotions—from grief to joy to rage to thanksgiving. At one point when my husband was hospitalized for almost three months, I took to reading the psalms aloud to him. And it was amazing how they seemed to reflect our



human condition.

When I was a campus pastor, I had many requests to do weddings in the MIT chapel, designed by Eero Saarinen. I remember one young couple who were insistent that the service not be "religious." They didn't want any of this "God stuff." So you can imagine my shock when I got to the chapel and found a red, white and blue Bible "decorating" the altar. "It's for my grandmother," the bride pleaded. "It will keep the peace."

The Bible is not a decoration. And it does not necessarily keep the peace. Nor does it settle all questions. In our church today we are struggling with social issues and trying to connect them with our biblical faith. And it's not always easy. Sometimes the things that seem most obvious at first, upon closer inspection turn out to be far more ambiguous than we first thought.

The Bible isn't a rule book for life. While it contains many rules, regulations, prohibitions and admonishments, it also contains many stories that give a different

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spin. Contrasting the ancient laws about adultery, we encounter Jesus telling the one without sin to cast the first stone (John 8). Confronting the purity laws about disease, we see Jesus touching, healing, curing lepers (Luke 17). Against the dietary laws we experience Peter's vision of being commanded to eat forbidden food (Acts 10).

The Bible is indeed a precious treasure. But it's precious when shared. It's precious when it is read, studied, translated, retranslated, interpreted, discussed, debated, prayed, sung. Remember the parable of the tal-

ents? The proprietor gave something valuable to each of the agents. Two made something of it, multiplying the investment. But one hid it, hoping that by protecting it he at least would not lose it. We have the Bible as a treasure in our faith life, not to hide, not to protect, not to chain to a podium or cling to the past, but as a guide and inspiration, a hope for the future.

There is more than one faithful way to read the Bible as Lutheran Christians, and there is a long tradition of debate about the meaning of various parts of the Bible in our lives

today. It is a debate that didn't start with the 2009 Churchwide Assembly and will not end with it. As faithful Christians we understand that we do not agree on all things. There is room in the church for all of us.

When I began this article I wrote of "the family Bible" as a particular Bible handed down within a family. I would like to conclude with the concept of the family Bible as something we all share as members of the human family. Regardless of the translation, we are part of the family that reads and accepts the same Bible, and the same Word made flesh, Jesus. □

Kite Quilts provide comfort for incarcerated

My family received a Kite Quilt from the quilters at Faith Lutheran Church in Hamilton. Our son/brother is incarcerated at the Crossroads Correctional Center in Shelby. The quilters' efforts in sewing this beautiful quilt and the thoughtfulness, love and caring of the congregation and pastor helped ease a difficult passage in our lives.

It's a comfort to be wrapped in a quilt. It is especially comforting when one is sick, cold or in distress. Kite Quilts are intended to enfold fam-

ily members of men and women in prison. In the U.S., more than 2 million men and women are incarcerated. They leave behind spouses, children, grandparents and others who need love and support while waiting for their loved ones to return from prison.

The quilt's kite design—a trademark of Prison Congregations of America—has become a symbol of remembering Christ and those who are in prison. Kite Quilts expand that message to include those affected by having loved ones in prison. The kite



has a dual meaning. Most think of a kite as having a light frame, designed to fly in a steady breeze. In prison terms, it is a communication from an inmate, requesting something from the institution. The kite frame is symbolic since its structure forms a cross. It is attached with a string (as we are to the grace of God) and it needs wind (the Spirit) to lift it into the sky.

Many people are now wearing kite pins (available through PCA) to remember Christ and those in prison. Now Kite Quilts are a way congregations give support to the many family members who suffer grief as loved ones are sent to prison.

The quilt pictured above was designed and made by Kaona Hazlett for PCA. □

Barbara L. Davis

Davis is from Hamilton, Mont. (406-353-3299).

Learning in Christ, Living in Faith

The 2010 Montana Synod Assembly and Theological Conference will be held June 4-6, at the Crowne Plaza in Billings, Mont.

The Synod Council designated the assembly offering to go to the Fund for Leaders in Mission, which provides support to all qualified students preparing for ordained or rostered lay ministry through one of the eight ELCA seminaries.

The Rev. Jessicah Duckworth, ELCA pastor and assistant professor of Christian formation and teaching at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., will be our keynote speaker.

The Lutheran Book Parlor will be our "bookstore" again this year, and we have some great workshops planned.

Contact the Montana Synod office for more information.



By Marjorie Holland

I knew he didn't have a washing machine in his house in Bolivia. And, of course, he wouldn't have a dishwasher or microwave. But I had never anticipated the Rev. Cristóbal Alejo Fernández's reaction as we pulled into my driveway after I'd picked him up from the airport.

When I pressed my garage door opener, he jumped. Startled, he asked something like, "How did that open? Who opened that?" The opener—I use it every day without thinking about it and never considered that it might surprise Alejo, the president of the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

That was just the beginning of the discoveries we experienced when Alejo stayed with my husband, Mike, and me at our home in Great Falls last year.

To be with Alejo and talk with him every day was a profound blessing—and we will be forever thankful. I'd like to share some of the extraordinary impact his visit had on us and on our understanding of other peoples'

Bolivian pastor's visit gives new perspective

lives and views of the world.

First, I'll describe our experience of having a guest from a developing country stay in our home. Then, I hope to explain two more important results of Alejo's visit—his trip to the Rocky Boy Reservation and our learning about his childhood and his life and ministry now.

Alejo stayed with us because I speak Spanish. I also had met him when I traveled with a Montana Synod group to Bolivia and when I participated in a companion synod/companion church consultation.

He doesn't speak English and my husband doesn't speak Spanish. Yet they became friends immediately. Alejo is friendly and enthusiastic and down-to-earth ... and he and Mike were laughing together right away. Mike has said that Alejo is so humble and has such a positive spirit. His spirit is expressive even though he speaks a different language.

The Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church is committed to ministry with the poor and the excluded. When our group visited Bolivia, we didn't go into any homes. We only saw the outsides of tiny homes constructed of structural tiles. Clustered together, they crawled up the sides of hills surrounding La Paz, and we couldn't tell if they had running water.

Among the houses I sometimes saw a small building that said *baño* (bath or bathroom). I remember saying to another traveler how chagrined I would feel if our new Bolivian friends, who were so kind to us, were to see the size and type of house that

I live in. Alejo had never stayed in a North American home, and I thought our three bedrooms and two bathrooms for two occupants would look like a mansion to him. Yet I knew I couldn't apologize for my house. It was an interesting feeling to try to ignore my embarrassment at having a nice house.

Alejo scrubs his clothes by hand in his house. One night he and I loaded his clothes into my washing machine, and he was amazed when he took his clean clothes out—he exclaimed that he had washed his clothes in 45 minutes and hadn't done anything! (How true ... and we do laundry that way whenever we want.)

Picking up a piece of wet clothing, he looked out the window. It was dark, and he asked how he was going to dry his clothes since he couldn't put them out in the sun to dry. I had started putting his clothes in the dryer, not realizing he didn't know about them. I'd just assumed that he would know about washers *and* dryers. After some confusion, he asked something similar to, "Is this thing going to dry my clothes?"

Later, we took the dry clothes out. He could scarcely believe it. Shaking his head, he kept saying, "*¡Asombrante! ¡Asombrante!*" (amazing). He declared, "I have to remember I'm in the *first* world now."

That jolted me, because I remembered saying to myself in Bolivia: "I have to remember I'm in the Third World now."

Around the synod

The members of the Bolivian Evan-

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gical Lutheran Church are almost entirely indigenous people. Alejo is Aymara.

Since he and the church members are indigenous, he visited Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on the Rocky Boy's Reservation. He was invited to speak to the nine-member tribal council, which is remarkably notable. Even more significant was the kinship he immediately developed with the Chippewa-Cree leaders. I felt deeply honored and blessed to be present and to translate at the council meeting.

Alejo spoke about how indigenous peoples have been part of and in harmony with "*La Pachamama*" (Mother Earth), including the mountains, animals, trees, plants. He said the culture and understanding of original peoples is of symbols and that there are things white people can never comprehend.

The tribal council members nodded and voiced their agreement, and invited him for a longer visit when he returns to Montana. He closed with a prayer in Aymara.

Our bishop, Jessica Crist, suggested that the pastor might like to tour some schools in Great Falls. I was privileged to go with him, and through his conversations with children and teens I learned the moving story of his childhood.

Alejo lived in a small, rural community where there were only three grades of school. At age 8, he and his 5-year-old brother left the village and went to the very big city of La Paz to go to school. They rented a closet-sized room in a family's home, but they were *not* part of that family. They had to buy and prepare their own food and take care of themselves — at ages 8 and 5.

At night they slept in the same

bed. For three years, their parents helped with school and living costs.

After that, Alejo worked as a shoeshine boy and bagged groceries to continue to go to school. He graduated from high school and went to college to study sociology and later to a seminary in Costa Rica. While he was in school, the Lutheran church in La Paz was important in his life and supported him, although not financially.

His brother is now a doctor in an area where La Paz's poorest people live.

Humility & compassion

My husband truly admired Alejo's humility and compassion for his people, as well as his total dedication to helping them.

When we asked about his work, he told us that he divides his week between a few days in the church office and a few days traveling to rural communities. He matter-of-factly explained that he travels in his own car, generally with another pastor, sleeping in the car overnight and parking near a river where they can wash.

I'm sure that as he travels and works in La Paz, he brings the love of Christ to people and constantly strives to give them hope and to find ways for them to increase their skills, care for their families, and improve their health and nutrition.

He is devoted to his wife and two daughters, but when he travels he must leave them at home.

To close, I wish to emphasize that I have only shared *our* impressions. If you were also blessed to meet Alejo, I believe that you, too, felt his energy, his caring and his faith. You may have been reminded that we are all, indeed, sisters and brothers. □

More about Alejo and Bolivia

From the end of May until our synod assembly, the Rev. Cristóbal Alejo Fernández visited Montana. He has been president of the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church for two years and will hold the position another two years.

The Bolivian church is a companion synod to the Montana Synod. It has an estimated 22,000 members and was established in 1938. The primary leaders of the churches are indigenous lay men and women.

Alejo said, "One difference between the Bolivian Lutheran Church and the Montana Synod is that our churches are very poor and it is difficult for us to acquire subsistence. One issue important to me is for the church to not discriminate against women. Last year some [Bolivian Lutheran] women were ordained."

Alejo visited Bozeman, attended a service at Hope Lutheran Church, and visited the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation. He also gave a speech about the rights of indigenous people.

"We are very grateful for all brothers and sisters in faith who support us," he said. □

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for the Montana Synod.*

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