

Words in our bones

By [Mary Schertz](#)

November 15, 2010

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Schertz's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

[Reflecting on the Benedictus](#) gives us an opportunity to reflect on the place of memorization and repetition in our formation as people who read the Bible as if our lives depended on it. Ellen Davis calls reading the Bible as if our lives depended on it confessional reading. She does not mean reading the Bible in light of a denominational confession. She means reading the Bible as an "indispensable word."

Reading the Bible as if and until it gives us life can happen many ways. Certainly there is no one size fits all when it comes to a person's or a congregation's relationship with the word. As with all relationships, all interactions, there are many methodological, theological and practical variations.

There are, however, unique benefits to repetition and memorization. To that end, the varieties of church life have much to learn from each other. Free church traditions, in which I have been formed, have much to learn from more liturgical traditions, where the words that we hear over and over in worship get into our bones and stay there. We may not attend well to every worship service. Some mornings we may only sense dimly what we are saying. Nevertheless, through the vagaries of human attention and inattention, the important words are sinking deeper and deeper into our being.

Liturgical traditions, however, have something to learn from the evangelical traditions that have, for the most part, placed more emphasis on memorizing scripture. Rote learning is no substitute for understanding, of course, but if the words are embedded in our being, understanding and practice

will come. Memorization is another way to get the important words into our bones.

In the last analysis, what we all want is for the account of our lives to have profound meaning--a concept that Paul J. Griffiths explores in *Religious Reading*. Reading, reciting and memorizing the words important to our Christian account is essential to the meaning of our lives and our witness. Some of us are in that stage of life where we are accompanying loved members of the generation ahead of us into their final years. As we watch them dying, we may envy the inner resources they have in the important words that have seeped into their bones. It is not too late to shore up our own inner landscapes and to encourage our children.