

"The Shepherd's Voice"

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Psalm 23

John 10:22-30

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

Psalm 23:1-2

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for these beautiful words
that still speak to us in our time.

Yet, so much more of your Word is not as familiar – not only to the world,
but even for many of us, your people, too.

Help us to be more open to listen and to take your words of hope to heart.

Amen

Many of us, who grew up in the Church,

very likely know the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd...” –
as well as the Lord’s Prayer, by heart and even recite them.

That is not something that can be assumed anymore
as America has become a ‘post-Christian’ society.

This may sound alarming – and perhaps it is, but it can also be the occasion
to re-examine our traditions and re-interpret them to be heard in new ways.

For those who know Psalm 23, the KJV version is the most familiar, most preferred –
most comforting, ‘politically incorrect language’ notwithstanding.

Though it is written in the English of the later Middle Ages,
the King James Version is a beautiful translation meant to be read aloud.

It is rumored that William Shakespeare was involved in its writing,
and there are many common expressions in modern English
that come from the King James Bible.

We take many of them for granted these days like:

A law unto themselves; A man after his own heart; A stumbling block;

At their wit's end; Eat, drink and be merry; Eye for an eye;

Give up the ghost; Holier than thou; Out of the mouths of babes;

The signs of the times; The skin of my teeth

<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/feb/18/phrases-king-james-bible>

For most if not all conservative, fundamentalist Christians,
the King James Version is the Bible.

Now, the King James Version was written in 1611 – long after other efforts
to translate the Bible into English, which were violently opposed.

Willard, p.2

In the late 14th Century CE, John Wycliffe was condemned as a heretic for reasons that included translating the Bible into English; and the only reason his enemies didn't kill him for this was because he died before they could get him!

Even so, they dug up his body, then burned it, and threw his ashes into a river.

In the 16th Century CE, William Tyndale was condemned for the same reasons, only they did execute him!

Likewise, church authorities wanted to get Martin Luther for starting the Reformation in 1517 when he criticized the corruption of the medieval Catholic Church.

He also translated the Bible into a common language – in his case, German.

He wasn't the first to do so, but his was the best German translation; and he was aided by the invention of the printing press which literally got the Word out to Europe and beyond.

For people to read the Bible in their own language instead of Latin – which only priests and theologians were trained to read, this was revolutionary and fueled the Protestant Reformation.

Luther and Tyndale based their translations on Greek and Hebrew texts which were more original sources than Wycliffe's earlier translation.

Wycliffe translated the Latin Bible into English.

King James of England wanted to get everyone on the same page – so to speak, so he commissioned an official translation that would

- 1) be based on Greek and Hebrew texts,
- 2) re-institute respect for the Church and the monarchy
- 3) serve as the only authorized alternative to the Latin Bible used by the Catholic Church and any the other English translations

Now the Latin Bible used by the Catholic Church since the Roman Empire is ironically called the Vulgate –

which comes from the same root word as 'vulgar', and ironically means 'common'.

The Vulgate – or the Latin Bible, dates back to the 4th Century CE when St. Jerome translated it from Greek and Hebrew sources.

This Latin Bible – like the King James Version to fundamentalists in our time, was the Bible to the medieval Catholics.

The Vulgate was 'common' in the sense of uniformity – and used whenever the Catholic Mass was celebrated.

Though it was cherished - and defended like the King James Version, it was not the most original form of the Bible.

Willard, p.3

The original sources of the Bible are unknown to us, but we have
Greek manuscripts for the “New Testament” writings and
Hebrew manuscripts for the “Old Testament”.

The New Testament was written in Koine Greek – and ‘Koine’ also means ‘common’,
but in the sense of the common speech of everyday people
and not the literary language of highly educated people.

Greek was the language of the world’s commerce in the First Century CE
much like English is used today as a second language
for many people throughout the world.

The Gospel was spread by itinerant working class folk –
it did not start as a religion of the elite.

Hebrew in Jesus’ day was used ceremoniously much like Latin was used
for Catholic worship up until the mid-1960s
rather than as language that was commonly used.

Though there is a reference the Gospels that Jesus could read and speak Hebrew,
he most likely spoke Aramaic – and so did the first disciples as well as
the Judean, Galilean, and Samaritan peoples who listened to them.

Though there are Aramaic – or Syrian, Bibles,
it is believed that even they were based on original texts that were Greek.

Even before they were written down in Greek, or Latin, or English,
the Gospel stories were told in Aramaic
until someone wrote them down in Greek
and with great care to get it right.

So what translation should you use?

What is the truest version of the Gospels from their Greek origins
and of the Torah from its Hebrew origins?

My preference – my ‘King James Version’, my ‘Vulgate’ which I stubbornly prefer,
is the Revised Standard Version –

even though there is a New Revised Standard Version.

Both are good as ‘word for word’ translations which are best for Bible study;

However, modern versions like the Common English Bible
are easier to read and to hear.

In my paraphrased translations of those Bible stories I tell,

which are not authorized and therefore only poetic or creative interpretations,

I strive to bring out the drama and humor that are in those texts.

So, where is the reliable interpretation and translation of the Word of God?

Before I arrived at seminary in 1984, I heard a disturbing report on CBN –
the Christian Broadcasting Network, Pat Robertson’s station on cable TV.

It said that mainline Christian churches were using
an “inclusive language lectionary”.

Willard, p.4

The report characterized it as a “loose-leaf Bible” where offensive or difficult parts of scripture were being taken out. I was pretty conservative about the Bible back then – and still am, though I now have a much broader understanding of scripture than I did then. So you can imagine my shock to hear that Lancaster Theological Seminary – my seminary, actually had a pamphlet printed up detailing its support for ‘inclusive language’.

As it turns out the “loose leaf Bible” was only a lectionary or a collection of texts used as scripture readings for each Sunday – and happened to be in a three ring binder.

Lectionaries are selective and do tend to avoid really controversial stories. The real difference was ‘inclusive language’ which favors a feminist theological perspective that challenges the patriarchal bias of Biblical language whenever possible.

At Lancaster Theological Seminary, the RSV was our principle Biblical reference – which for its bare bones, word for word translation still maintains a readable and dramatic rhythm.

Yet, the sturdy RSV was woefully patriarchal and ‘politically incorrect’. Even now, there is no satisfactory Bible translation that effectively balances inclusivity with the drama and humor that can be found in scripture.

As students we were advised that, when using scripture for public reading, we could make our own amendments to the text to become more inclusive. We could change ‘men’ to ‘people’, ‘he’ to ‘they’, and when ‘he’ referred to ‘God’ we could just say, ‘God’ – again and again.

Furthermore, we could make such changes with the assurance that we would not go to hell for it.

Of course, I am kidding, but certainly there was a time when well-meaning people viewed tampering with scripture with the gravest severity.

You have only to witness the elaborate ritual process our friends from Temple Shalom demonstrate during their Shabbat services, to realize how important just reading the Torah is to them.

As members of the UCC, we have the freedom and the obligation to re-interpret our sacred texts to be more just, more true, more correct.

However, what do you do when you get a text like our Gospel lesson this morning where every other word that Jesus said was ‘Father’.

Not that ‘Father’ is a bad word, but to exclusively refer to God as ‘Father’ can be an obstacle for those who had poor relationships with their earthly ‘fathers’, preventing them from hearing what the rest of the text is saying.

Willard, p.5

Certainly when 'Father' is used to refer to 'God', we are to understand God to be the ideal by which all fathers are to be measured.

I have heard that 'Abba' – which is an intimate endearment like, 'Daddy', may be used as an acceptable alternative.

What we are talking about today is listening for that voice of 'the shepherd' that is still speaking down through the generations and through the many translations of the Bible.

Using imagery of a 'shepherd' – which most modern people may never have seen, is to take a chance that it won't be understood.

We need the context of knowing that shepherds in Jesus' day were often ne'er-do-well riffraff, for us to understand the significance when Jesus spoke of a *good* shepherd as the kind who would even risk their life for their sheep and whose voice the sheep trusted and listened for amidst the distractions of life.

Inclusive language has been a very important step toward a more just society that is more and not less 'politically correct' for the sake of those who would otherwise be ignored and despised.

I found that inclusive language is not simply about substituting 'she' for 'he', but is a challenge to become more eloquent and honest.

Two thousand years of persecution that culminated with the unspeakable atrocities of the Holocaust demand that we see Jesus' opponents as the 'Judeans' of that time and place, and not all Jewish people.

Inclusive language goes beyond gender-specific stereotypes to span cultural chasms that help us even to see beyond the superficial.

As we open ourselves to new ways of seeing truth buried in our scriptures, we affirm that God truly is still speaking in our time – even expanding on what it means to be ONA, 'open & affirming' as something that includes all of us, even God's Kingdom of Heaven, on Earth as a Beloved Community.

Then we can go back to those time-honored texts with their 'politically incorrect' references to God as 'Our Father' and as that 'LORD' who is our 'shepherd', to listen past old prejudices and really hear in what new ways that God is still speaking...

Amen

*Our lesson today from the King James Version is Psalm 23 –
a familiar passage that many people have memorized.
Its time honored message is that God is a God who cares for us...*

- ¹The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
- ²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- ³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
- ⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
- ⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Let us be guided and challenged by these words...

John 10:22-30

²² It was the feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem;

²³ it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple,
in the portico of Solomon.

²⁴ So the [Judeans] gathered round him and said to him,

“How long will you keep us in suspense?
If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

²⁵ Jesus answered them,

“I told you, and you do not believe.

The works that I do in my [Abba] Father’s name, they bear witness to me;

²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me;

²⁸ and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish,
and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.

²⁹ My [Abba] Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all,

and no one is able to snatch them out of the [Abba] Father’s hand.

³⁰ I and the [Abba] Father are one.”

³¹ The [Judeans] took up stones again to stone him.

³² Jesus answered them,

“I have shown you many good works from the [Abba] Father;
for which of these do you stone me?”

³³ The Jews answered him,

“It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy;
because you, being a [human], make yourself God.”

³⁴ Jesus answered them,

“Is it not written in your law,
‘I said, you are gods’?

³⁵ If he called them gods to whom the word of God came
(and scripture cannot be broken),

³⁶ do you say of him whom the [Abba] Father consecrated
and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’
because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?

³⁷ If I am not doing the works of [my Abba] my Father, then do not believe me;

³⁸ but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works,
that you may know and understand that

the [Abba] Father is in me and I am in the [Abba] Father.”

³⁹ Again they tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.