

Sermon for Zion, October 28, 2018 – Reformation Sunday

Hymns: 299 – Holy, Holy, Holy; 303- Holy Holy Holy (My Heart Adores You)
290 – Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise; 315 – A Mighty Fortress

Scripture: John 20:30-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Sermon Title: “Why and How Should I Read the Bible?”

John 20:30-31 - *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

2 Timothy 3:14-17 - *You must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. You have been taught the Holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*

The parts of the Bible we call “The Old Testament,” the oldest parts of which were written as long as 1200 years before the birth of Jesus, were written in Hebrew, the language spoken by – you guessed it – the Hebrew people. Not all parts of the Old Testament, though – some of the later bits were written in Aramaic. The country had been conquered by Aramaic speakers, and Hebrew was beginning to decline. So the language of the Bible shifted to what folks themselves used and could understand.

Then Alexander the Great rolled through the area, and imposed the Greek language upon the conquered people. Koine, or “Common” Greek, was soon the international language, much like English is today. Wherever you went in the ancient Mediterranean world, no matter your home country, if you could speak Greek, you could get along. As a result, Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament into Greek, which became known as the Septuagint.

By the time of Jesus, Jews would have spoken Aramaic at home, Greek in the marketplace, and prayed in Hebrew in the Temple. When the Gospels were written, it appears Matthew was written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek; Mark, Luke and John were largely Greek from the word “Go,” as was most of the remainder of the New Testament. It’s the language most people could read and understand, and so could be most widely distributed, to countries near and far. And it was.

Other countries, receiving these Greek Gospels and letters, often translated them into their own local dialects too – some of the oldest New Testament fragments we have are in Coptic, Syriac, even Ethiopian. Then, as Greek began to be replaced by Latin in the Western part of the Roman Empire, a monk named Jerome took upon himself the task of translating the whole Bible into the common Latin of the home and street. It was a monumental task, which he undertook while living in Bethlehem. His office was right next to the Grotto of the Nativity – it actually shared the same cave complex. He writes letters, complaining about the crowds of tourists visiting the manger. Monks make the same complaints today, in the same place, 1600 years later. Jerome’s final product was called The Vulgate – Vulgate simply means, “Common.” The “Common Language Bible.” The Bible in the language most people spoke.

The Vulgate was more or less the one Bible in the Western world for over 1000 years. Unfortunately, the early years of translating the Bible into everyday language had come to an end. Latin had died out as a common language, but the Church, desiring control, demanded that only Latin Bibles be used, believing the contents to be too holy for common words and common people – thereby missing the whole point of the Bible. There was a fear, too, that if the people in the pew and the street could read and understand the Scriptures, they might see a disconnect between what was being taught and practiced, and what Jesus actually said.

But the Word of God could not be forever controlled or suppressed. Courageous Godly men like John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and William Tyndale, often at the cost of their lives, once again translated the Bible into the languages of the local people. Their translations were brutally suppressed. But 500 years ago, when Martin Luther undertook the task, he had an ally – the printing press. His German Bibles were printed in such numbers that even the fiercest opposition of the Roman Church of his day couldn’t quench the flow. The Reformation, which we celebrate this Reformation Sunday, had begun, and the central pillar of the Reformation, the Scriptures in the hands and the language of the people, stands tall to this day.

The most famous English Bible, known as the King James Version, sought to provide an authorized translation of the Scriptures to be used throughout the churches of England and beyond. King James wanted a popular translation, insisting that it be readable in the natural language of the day. Borrowing heavily from Tyndale’s work and others, the fifty member translation team proved to possess both scholarship and a poetic ear. Despite the passage of centuries, we still think in King James English when we recite familiar passages, such as “The Lord’s My Shepherd.”

In the preface to the King James Bible, the translators tell us their purpose in their own words:

The Scriptures... make us wise unto salvation. If we be ignorant, they will instruct us; if out of order, they will reform us; if in heaviness, comfort us; if dull, quicken us; if cold, inflame us; if out of the way, they will bring us home.

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water... Indeed, without translation into the common tongue, the unlearned are but like children at a deep well without a bucket.

Now what can be more available thereto than to deliver God's book unto God's people in a tongue which they understand? ...we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, that it may be understood even of the most common of persons.

“The most common of persons” – that’s you and me. The King James Translation Team produced a timeless work, but they never intended the Bible to be frozen in the language of 1611 England. Their express purpose mirrors the fact that the Scriptures were always written in and translated into the common language of the day, so that the Word of God could be readily understood by all – that the Scriptures be accessible, and most of all, that the Scriptures be read. But do we? Do we read the Bible?

We live in an unprecedented time of Biblical translation and availability. There are over 450 English language translations of the Bible, the 50 most common of which can be accessed on any computer through websites such as Bible Gateway, and for free! A good, modern translation in clear, reasonably sized print can be purchased for the cost of a Starbucks Pumpkin Spice Latte and a scone. Nevertheless, people read the Bible far less now than a generation or two ago. Not only people; I’ve come to believe that Christians – that we - read the Bible far less now than a generation or two ago.

Perhaps familiarity has bred disuse. Perhaps the wide availability of the Bible has decreased its value in our eyes. Perhaps our attention spans have been so damaged by TV that our capacity to read and to pay attention to what we read has been impaired. Perhaps there are so many entertaining distractions filling the non-working hours of our day that the Bible has simply been squeezed out. And for many of us, that has meant that a crucial part of our faith has been squeezed out with it.

Because the Bible is food to our faith. The experiences of people who have encountered God, who have entered into relationship with God, whose lives have been impacted and transformed by God, are our ancestors in the faith. The ones who

followed Jesus, were taught by Jesus, witnessed the miracles of Jesus, recorded the words of Jesus, are our predecessors in the faith. The faithful ones who saw him die, and who saw him rise from the dead, are the eyewitness guarantors of our faith. And it is their stories – their lives – which the Bible tells.

Which is simply another way of saying, it is our story. Our story. The Bible is the book of God, of God's love for us and our world, of the coming of the Saviour for us; it is the story of God bringing us home. To not know the story is to not know God. To not know the story is to not know ourselves. For we are "People of the Book."

In the preface to his translation of the Bible, "The Message," Eugene Peterson puts it this way. He says:

Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible. As we read we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. We soon realize that we are included in the conversation. We didn't expect this. But this is precisely what generation after generation of Bible readers do find: The Bible is not only written about us but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us...

And so just reading the Bible, and listening to what we read, is the first thing. There will be time enough for study later on. But first, it is important simply to read, leisurely and thoughtfully. We need to get a feel for the way these stories and songs, these prayers and conversations, these sermons and visions, invite us into this large, large world in which the invisible God is behind and involved in everything visible, and illuminates what it is to live here - really live, not just get across the street.

As we read, and the longer we read, we begin to "get it" - we are in conversation with God. We find ourselves listening and answering in matters that most concern us: who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what makes us tick, the texture of the world and the communities we live in and - most of all - the incredible love of God among us, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Through reading the Bible, we see that there is far more to the world, more to us, more to what we see and more to what we don't see - more to everything! - than we ever dreamed, and that this "more" has to do with God... the Bible is given to us in the first place simply to invite us to make ourselves at home in the world of God, and become familiar with the way God speaks and the ways in which we answer him with our lives.

My job as Minister of Word and Sacrament is to convey to you that story, to awaken you to it, to inspire you, to comfort you, to challenge you with it. But I'm not up to the task. In the short time we spend together, there's no way I can give you enough. Even for those who supplement Sunday Morning worship with Wednesday Evening Bible Study, let alone our Alpha and other groups, what you get from me is nowhere near enough. The prayers I pray in a Sunday service are not enough to nourish your Spirit. The sermons I preach are not enough to feed your soul. Each of us, on our own, need to be in communication, in relationship with God. We need, on our own, to spend time with God, with our attention upon God. That's what prayer is. That's what reading the Bible does.

My invitation last week to you was to pray – to use the Lord's Prayer as a framework to help us in our prayers, morning and evening. I hope some of you – well, to be honest, I hope all of you – have taken me up on that 30 day challenge. I hope and pray that many of you will continue long after the thirty days have come to an end.

This week, I have an additional invitation. I invite you to begin a regular schedule of reading the Bible; to set aside time each day, each week, to allow God to speak to you through its words. To become familiar with the story of how God has reached out to us with incredible patience, determination, and love.

Maybe you've done so in the past, starting in Genesis, and trying to work your way through, only to get bogged down in the "rules and regulations" section which kicks in halfway through Exodus. Maybe you've tried before, and have gotten lost in the intricacies of King James English, blinded by the small print, baffled by the double columns of text and mysterious numbers and footnotes sprinkled throughout.

Well, fair enough. It might help to remember that the Bible isn't a single book, but a collection of 66 books. It's a library. And when you go to the library – if anyone actually goes to the library anymore – you don't start at one end of the shelf, and work your way through, book by book. No, you look for what interests you. You graze. Then something catches your attention, engages your interest, and suddenly you can't put it down. You can make use of the Bible in the very same way.

Let me recommend that you pick and choose, that you begin your Bible journey with the Gospel of Luke – a clearcut, comprehensive account of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. You'll like Luke. You'll find familiar stories there, such as Mary and Joseph and the Manger, and the Good Samaritan, and the Prodigal Son.

The “Acts of the Apostles,” or “The Book of Acts,” continues where the Gospel of Luke left off, telling us what happens after the Resurrection, and of how the faith spread. From there, read Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and the Philippians, for solid Christian teaching, and an inside look on the earliest communities of faith, of which our own congregation is a descendent – of which you are a part.

Now you’ve got momentum. Time to go back to the very beginning, to the Genesis stories of Creation, to the ancient accounts of Noah and the Ark, of the Tower of Babel. You’ll meet Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, you’ll read the real story of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat. You’ll wander the sands of Egypt, labour on the pyramids, and join Moses and the Hebrew people as they are freed from slavery, crossing the Red Sea into freedom and the Promised Land. It’s all there. And it is your story. You are a part of it, and a part of it is you.

If you want to tackle reading the whole Bible story, there’s an insert in your bulletins, which will help you do so in 31 weeks – in far less than an hour per week of reading. It’s adapted from “The Story,” a Bible Study program developed by the Zondervan publishing company. We did this as a sermon and Bible Study series a few years ago. While not including all the Bible chapters, this method avoids repetition, many genealogical lists, and the more obscure ancient societal and ritual codes which tend to bog folks down.

I always encourage people, in the spirit of the King James translators, to use a modern version such as the New International or New Living Bible, making sure the print is large enough for you to comfortably read. You may also choose to pick up a copy of “The Story,” (see the minister!) which includes all these passages, plus notes giving a bit of introduction and background to them.

But most importantly, start a regular program of reading your Bible. After all, it was written for you. It is a gift, a gift from the hand of God and from the people of God, people who lived these stories, experienced God through these stories, and wrote these stories down. For you. For you to read. For you to experience. For these words – God’s Word – to become a part of who you are.

The Scriptures... make us wise unto salvation. If we be ignorant, they will instruct us; if out of order, they will reform us; if in heaviness, comfort us; if dull, quicken us; if cold, inflame us; if out of the way, they will bring us home.

Or, as is so beautifully summed up in the Gospel of John: *These words are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:21). Amen.*