

Easter 4 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 25, 2021

Psalm 23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

When we talk about of the mission of Christianity, we can easily overlook the crucial ministry of universal literacy and of Bible translation. It would be quite easy to argue that Martin Luther's single greatest impact on the Western world was universal literacy. Everyone needs to be able to read. Lutherans and others talk about the importance of translating the Bible into the languages that people actually speak. Martin Luther famously translated the Bible into German, exerting an enormous influence on the German language. We can speak of many early Christian Reformers, notably John Wycliffe and the Lollards, for those of us who speak English, who lost their lives over this issue, because the medieval church hierarchy opposed any language other than Latin, which is NOT the original language of the Bible either. *Translating* the Bible into common language is one thing. Giving people the power to read is another thing. And I daresay that Christianity, and in particular Protestantism, was a driving force in achieving high levels of literacy in the modern age.

Our psalm this morning is one of the great triumphs of translation. The 23rd psalm is monumental. It is an astonishing accomplishment of writing, of translation, and of reading. It defies categorization. It is sacred scripture, divinely inspired, to be sure. But it has a status like no other part of the Bible.

You should consider, first of all, that it claims to be by David. And although we cannot prove that fact, there is no compelling reason to doubt it. David began his reign as king around 1000 BC. One thousand years before Christ. It's easy to remember. It's important because David and Jerusalem and the kingdom of Israel and Judah were at their pinnacle under King David and his son King Solomon. The high water mark, in some ways, for the entire Old Testament. At 1000 BC. So this psalm is, first of all, three thousand years old. And it's intimately associated with a king who was literally a shepherd in his youth. And who became a king, which was considered to be a kind of shepherd in the ancient world. David was a shepherd's shepherd. And yet in this remarkable psalm, he claims to be under the direction and authority and love of a higher shepherd. Yahweh, the Lord, in small capital letters, to indicate that we are talking about the sacred name that must never be taken in vain. And this psalm connects us to this long ago far away man, this believer, this profoundly spiritual man, this profoundly charismatic leader, this profoundly flawed husband and father. At the highest moments of Jesus' life and ministry, the crowds and the disciples and complete strangers would refer to him as "Son of David." So this psalm opens a portal between you and this David.

And it does so with compelling language. And it has been catapulted into your consciousness and mine by translators. In particular by that sophisticated and erudite committee of scholars who created the King James Version of the Bible. Bible translations fall into two categories. The literal translations, such as the King James Version and the one which we normally use, the New Revised Standard Version. The literal translations strive to get each word right. The other category of translations are designed to convey meaning. Even at the expense of literal word-for-word accuracy. So they are easier to understand, but less precise. The Good News Translation and the Message Bible are examples of a meaning-based translation. Instead of “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies,” for example, The Message Bible says, “You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies.” Not so literal, but it gets the meaning across. So you can think of some Bible translations as being literal word-for-word, which I think generally require more attention and study, and some Bible translations as focused on understanding, even when word-for-word translation is less accurate.

However, when it comes to the psalms, a third factor comes into play. Because the psalms are originally poems and songs, then the translation may be trying to capture the emotions or the beauty or the rhythm of the syllables, which is very hard to do, and may result in compromising *BOTH* the literalness of the poem AND the understandability of the poem. And so translating a psalm to be recited or sung or memorized is a different task than translating it for literal accuracy. Psalm 46, according to the King James Version, goes like this: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.* When translated for singing, one translator whose name you may know came up with this: *A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.*

The first numbered hymn in our worship book is number 151. It’s a 1987 *Kyrie* by Dinah Reindorf. The numbers start at 151 because the first 150 hymns are the psalms. The entire book of psalms, the psalter. And those 150 psalms in our worship book are translated with an eye on worship, and chanting, and singing. And they vary from the translation you’ll find in your actual Bible. We just chanted psalm 23 from the front part of our hymnal. You may have found it disappointing because it is not perfectly aligned with the King James Version, which you surely know best.

The King James Version, however, which was put together by a committee— a great committee of geniuses— the King James Version borrows most of its Psalm 23 from Myles Coverdale, whose translation of the psalms was mostly used in the Book of Common Prayer, a worship book created decades before the King James Version. In other words, the King James Version of Psalm 23, which most of us love, and many of us can recite from memory, depends upon the 16th century worship book and Myles Coverdale. Which was even more important in 16th century England, because in their Reformation, they could only sing psalms. Not hymns like you and I sing, such as “Amazing Grace” and “Silent Night, Holy Night,” but *only* biblical psalms. For a couple of centuries in many Protestant lands, that was a restriction. Our hymn of the day, which follows this sermon, is one such psalm translation, made by Isaac Watts to be sung as a hymn. Many of our favorite hymns and hymn tunes harken back to a time when Protestants only sang

psalms. (Not Lutherans. We were wide open with our songs from the beginning.) But most other Protestants only sang psalms for the first couple of hundred years. Which led to great depth and creativity and care in the translating of psalms. Including, ultimately, the 23rd psalm. And you and I are the beneficiaries of all of this.

When I study this psalm as scripture, when I read it and study it in the same way that I read and study Genesis or the Gospel According to Mark or the book of Revelation, I find it refreshing and stimulating. John Wycliffe himself, who translated the Bible a century before the printing press, translated verse one as “The Lord governeth me, and nothing shall fail to me.” He leaves out the word shepherd entirely. The Lord governeth me. It’s about the relationship with God. God is guiding me, protecting me, providing for me, accompanying me. He governeth me. For people like me who seldom see sheep, much less shepherds, the essence of the psalm is that God does the stuff that shepherds do. Coming from John Wycliffe in the 14th century, we get a surprisingly fresh and modern take on the psalm. It’s a psalm about an intimate relationship with God.

When I pivot to one of the most modern translations, the Common English Bible of 2011, that translation dares to use the word “pursue” in the last verse. *Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life.* The verb in Hebrew is not follow. It’s not that goodness and mercy will follow me. It’s a verb used with enemies, with predators and prey. Pursue. God’s goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life. That’s a much accurate translation than what we are accustomed to. We’re not being followed by God like a cocker spaniel. We’re being pursued by God like a lion. Pursued by his goodness and faithful love. Amen to that.

So let’s not take it for granted. Let’s not be oblivious to the 23rd psalm, allowing it to become wallpaper that we do not see or admire. From one thousand years before Christ, we have a text. A text that brings us close to the heart of David. And it is David’s testimony about his closeness to the heart of God. And this text still brings people close to the heart of God. Due to translators. Due to universal literacy. Due to worship books. Due to hymn writers. Due to printing presses. Due, in short, to the church of which you are a part. Due, in short, to the work of the Holy Spirit that has been part of you and me since the day we were baptized.

And it’s a text that can still surprise us with the determined, pursuing goodness and faithful love of the God of David. The goodness and love of the Son of David, our good shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.