

Lectionary 23 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 5, 2021

James 2:1-17

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

Dear Friends:

In today's sermon, I am going to speak with you about Martin Luther and the Bible. And the occasion for this sermon is the fact that we are reading from the letter of James. I'm not preaching on *what* James says today. Although what he says today is highly persuasive for many Christians. But I want to talk to you instead about the Bible as we have it. And James is the occasion for me to talk about this because Martin Luther was famously dismissive of the letter of James because James insists in various ways that works are more important than faith. Which is the reverse of the Lutheran Reformation. And the letter of James has become an unwitting and unwilling symbol of the theological disputes of the Lutheran Reformation. Which is unfair to James. And is actually unfair to Martin Luther.

Martin Luther actually critiqued James in the German Bible that he, Martin Luther, was translating and publishing for the people of Germany. Luther translated the entire Bible from its original languages into the German language. That's a huge piece of work for anyone. But Luther also did it exceptionally well. Apart from anything else he said or did.

As Luther translated the Bible and published it, he wrote brief introductions to the various parts of the Bible. Very much like my study Bible, which has an article before each book of the Bible. And an article introducing each section of the Bible. In my study Bible, the articles strive to be objective, scholarly, nearly scientific in their presentation of the facts. But Luther, when he wrote his articles on the various books and pieces of the Bible, was opinionated, and not scientific. The important thing for him was to put the Bible into the hands of clergy and lay people. In their own language. And so even when he is expressing a negative opinion about the letter of James, he is placing it in *your* hands and letting *you* decide for yourself. He translated it, he published it. He told us what he thinks. But he said, "You decide."

In the service folder, I've printed two charts. One is the books of the Old Testament. One is the books of the New Testament. A few of the books are highlighted in red. The books highlighted in red are books that Luther took out of their usual sequence, and printed separately and after all the books that are in green. If you look at the Old Testament chart, in red you will see books like Tobit, Sirach, and Maccabees. And Luther took those books out of their place in the traditional Bible. And he put them in a separate place, a kind of appendix to the Old Testament. And there are solid reasons for his decision. Objective, linguistic and historical reasons for his decision. The vast majority of Protestant Bibles eliminate these books altogether. Not Luther. He translates

them, he publishes them, he transmits them. But he also segregates them. If you go to a Catholic church, these books will be interspersed among the other Old Testament books, as I show in the chart. But if you go to most Protestant churches, these books will be omitted altogether. Luther included them, but in a second section. And this is still the practice of most major, ecumenical, scholarly editions of the Bible.

When we turn to the New Testament, Catholics and Protestants have the same list. But, Luther, with less objective justification than was the case with the Old Testament, Luther took Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation out of sequence and put them in a separate place, a kind of appendix to the New Testament. He translates them, he publishes them, he transmits them. But he also segregates them. And in his version of the Bible in German today, it is still printed in that manner. Although it is not done that way anywhere else.

Now in the service folder, in addition to those two lists of books, I've included a comment by Luther on the book of Revelation. In which he basically says that it does not speak to his spirit. But if it speaks to your spirit, great, go ahead. Either way, he's putting it in your hands. He translates. You decide.

Now many Christians are just shocked to learn this. We were told the Bible is the Word of God. So how can you pick and choose? I find the book of Revelation to be unsettling. But the way I was raised, when you don't see eye-to-eye with the Bible, then *you* need to change course. The Bible is the lighthouse, and you are the boat. *It* stands. *You* change course. That's how I learned it. But here's Martin Luther, Mister Bible himself, saying "Maybe Revelation touches you, but it doesn't do any good for me." And Christians of all kinds who learn this about Luther get freaked out. The letter of James is on a list that includes Jude and Hebrews and Revelation. Luther is not impressed. But he translates them. He publishes them. He transmits them. So you can make up your own mind.

I was told that the Bible is the Word of God. The constitution of our congregation says that the Bible is the Word of God. But neither our constitution, nor any Lutheran constitution, can tell you whether Tobit and Judith are part of the Bible. Or for that matter whether James and Revelation are part of the Bible. Because Lutherans never ruled on that. In fact, nobody ever ruled on that until after the death of Martin Luther. And Lutherans never did so. 1500 hundred years after the birth of Jesus, there was no Christian church that could tell you definitively which books were in. And which were out. As a matter of fact, two weeks from today we have a choice of readings between Jeremiah— everybody knows who he is. He was a bullfrog. A choice between Jeremiah and the Wisdom of Solomon. Well, the Wisdom of Solomon is in the Catholic Bible. And it may not be in your Bible. But it IS in Martin Luther's Bible. But Lutherans never voted on that or decided on that. So when we say the Bible is the Word of God, we haven't actually said what belongs in the Bible or not.

And I'm fine with that. Luther is fine with that. That's how it was with the church fathers. We have an extremely well documented explanation of the books of the Bible at the time of the fourth

century. It's called the Ecclesiastical History (the Church History), by a man named Eusebius. Published around 315 or 320, give or take. And he lists all of the books that they were still arguing about 300 years after Christ. And James was on that list. And so was Revelation. And so was Second Peter. It's not like God wrote a book, and we all have to obey the book. Books didn't even exist in the time of Jesus. There were just scrolls. Scrolls by various people. And we say that those writings are inspired by the Holy Spirit. But we can't say that God wrote a book. Because he didn't. And they knew that in the 300s, and they knew that in the 1500s.

In the local quote that I gave you about Revelation, Luther uses a special word in a special way. He uses the word "apostolic." Now to most of the Christian world, apostolic means that the apostles wrote it. For example, the gospel according to Matthew is said to be written by the apostle Matthew, one of the twelve apostles. "Apostolic," for most Christians, refers to authorship. But Luther considers an apostle to be anyone who is sent with the Christian message about Jesus. Who Jesus is, why Jesus came, what Jesus did, what Jesus taught, and what that means to human beings. That's what Christianity is. It's about Jesus. And the Christian message is who Jesus is, why Jesus came, what Jesus did, what Jesus taught, and what that means to human beings. And that basic Christian message is not in James. Or in Jude. Or in Revelation. So therefore, no matter how good the book may be, Luther does not think it is heart of the Christian message, and is therefore not indispensable. Luke's Gospel, for example, or Paul's letter to the Romans, do attempt to explain why it is that Jesus is decisive for human beings. And therefore, those writings *are* indispensable. That's Luther's take on it. Luther has a Christ-centered approach. Which I think is appropriate for the *Christian* religion.

The view of most scholars today is that James is wisdom literature. The Old Testament has wisdom writings in Proverbs and in Ecclesiastes, on the green list. And Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon, on the red list. There is Old Testament wisdom writing. But in James we have the only example of New Testament wisdom literature. Wisdom is about character and living a good life. And typically it contrasts good living with foolish or hypocritical living. For example, our second reading today contrasts poor people and rich people. It contrasts people who show favoritism with people who do not. In that sense, James is wisdom literature. If James is really written by one of the apostles, then James would also be apostolic by authorship, even if it is not apostolic in its content, as Luther asserts. And apostolic authorship would merit its inclusion in the Bible according to the traditional view. The anointing of the sick with oil is a Christian practice whose only scriptural foundation is in James, in a selection that we will read in worship three weeks from now.

The point of this sermon, however, was not to preach on James. But to use James as an occasion to talk about Martin Luther and the Bible. It is clear that Martin Luther had a much more fluid view of the Bible in the sixteenth century than most Lutherans and other Christians would have in the 20th and 21st centuries. That is worth knowing. It's also worth knowing that the Bible is what Luther called the swaddling clothes of Jesus. In other words, it is the wrapping that contains the baby. The wrapping is not more important than the baby. The Bible is said to be the written word of God. But the actual Word of God— well: *In the beginning was the Word, and*

the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The written word itself says that Jesus is the true Word. That is worth knowing. Especially in a world where a lot of people talk about the Bible without actually reading it or understanding it. Most importantly, whatever Luther thought about any part of the Bible, he transmitted it and put it into your hands. So you can encounter it and find out for your own self what it says to you and what it means to you. Amen.