

Sermon for Sunday, January 19, 2020 - "Translation"

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

I'm drawn to the layers of translation in the story we just heard from the Gospel of John.

The text gives us these helps, these translation notes, pieces I'm used to seeing in margins or footnotes of study Bibles more often than right in the text itself:

Rabbi, which translated means, "teacher.";

Messiah, which translated means, "anointed";

and Cephas, which is translated, "Peter."

Suddenly, I find myself aware of the many layers of translating going on in the Bible,

On a much more conscious level than I usually am when I'm reading it.

Because when a text is in front of me, and it's in English, I read it,

And it feels like a fairly uncomplicated task.

When I read *this* text though, the fact of translation is unavoidable.

I can't forget about it.

And it helps me slow down and wonder at all of the steps,

all of the layers of translating,

the many languages and cultures and authors and editors and scholars

and councils and theologians,

this text passed through to get to you and me this morning.

As we peel back all those layers,

We get to a Gospel writer, an Evangelist,

Who knew this Good News was so important

That it needed to be shared,

And it needed to be shared with the whole world,

Across cultures, and languages and distance and time.

It needed to be translated.

Another layer: the content of the text itself is full of people with

A deep desire to communicate:

John pointing to Jesus: "Look, Here is the lamb of God!"

Jesus calling his first disciples saying, "Come and see!"

Andrew telling the soon-to-be-renamed Peter: "We have found the Messiah."

There is urgency, here, because of another layer:

We peel *it* back

And we find the Good News motivating this translation

Is itself an act of translation:

God has come to live with us.

God is revealed and made known, incarnate as Jesus Christ.

There is still so much about God that is beyond human understanding,

But, from the beginning, Scripture reveals God as so deeply committed

To God's relationship with creation,

That God translates Godself, again and again,

Through covenants, through prophets, through angels and messengers,

And through this embodied act of translation that is Jesus Christ.

What I love about this text,

And the way it calls attention to the layers of translation in Scripture

The translating work of sharing the Good News,

And the translating incarnational work of God,
Is that embedded in the act of translation is some profound motivation:
This message—God With Us--is important. It is *urgent*.
This relationship is important.
There is a deep desire to connect and communicate,
Even across significant barriers or differences.
But here's where it gets tricky, for us humans, anyway.
When you think about translation,
Times when you've needed to translate something
or had something translated for you,
How many of you can call up a memory of a time that's gone wrong?
I can. Here's just one:
My year of pastoral internship was in Slovakia,
And I had an incredible experience learning, working
and living in Bratislava for a year.
When we first arrived, we started to learn a little Slovak, and I was
Especially excited to learn the word *prepáčte*, which means, I'm sorry.
I knew I'd be making many mistakes as I learned a new language, a new culture,
A new city ... I wanted to be ready to politely apologize.
My first stage of learning how to say *prepáčte* was to use it the way
I would in the US; that is, all the time.
I apologize to inanimate objects when I bump into them,
I apologize to people who have bumped into me,
I apologize when situations are mildly awkward and I don't know what to say.
I probably apologize too much, even in the US, but in Slovakia this was magnified,
Because my second stage of learning how to say *prepáčte* was to
Learn NOT to say it all the time.

My Slovak colleagues in the religion department at the bilingual high school
Helped me with this and other areas where I was getting stuck on the
Cultural aspects of translation.

They told me that overuse of the word comes across as fake and insincere:
prepáňte is reserved for when you have done something seriously wrong,
are repenting and genuinely asking forgiveness.

“Is there another word for I’m sorry?” I asked, “One that’s less formal and more casual for
everyday use?”

“This is what we’re telling you,” they said. “we don’t casually apologize, here! We take it
seriously.”

It took some work, but I adapted and got much better at translating
Not only to the new words, but to the new cultural context.

One day I was on a very crowded bus to work and I accidentally stepped on the foot
Of a woman next to me.

I made eye contact with her and, with genuine sincerity, said, “Prepáňte.”

She scowled at me, which I figured was appropriate; I’d just stepped on her foot.

When I got to the office I said,

“I think I finally used it correctly” and recounted the story.

One of my colleagues shook his head. “Ohhhhh, Anitčka.

Did you just beg forgiveness from a stranger for walking on a crowded bus?”

“Yes!” I said, “And I’m not going to apologize for it!”

We had a good laugh and decided I would keep trying,

And maybe also try harder not to step on people’s feet.

So, that’s a situation where the people involved have good intentions

Know that there’s a communication barrier and

are trying their best to communicate across it with respect and care.

There are many times when we enter into the work of translating,

The work of communicating, really,

Without that care, without that respect for each other,
And sometimes without good intentions.

There are plenty of examples in history of translation being
used to manipulate or harm.

There are everyday examples of people talking to each other
But not communicating and not connecting,

And language barrier or significant cultural difference isn't even necessary for this
Failure of translation to occur.

Where is God in this?

How does God enter into the very real messiness of the way we try,
And often fail, to communicate with and be in relationship with each other?

The prophet Isaiah speaks to this with honesty and hope
In the passage we heard this morning.

Isaiah's relationship with God is depicted as a dialogue:

Isaiah can share everything with God,
including his feelings of inadequacy and frustration,
And know that God is actively listening and will respond.

Isaiah writes about his strong sense of call:

He knows he was called to be a prophet,
And even has a sense that God was forming the gift he'd need to communicate
With kings and leaders from before he was born.

God gave him a tongue that's sharp as a sword,
Which makes those kings and leaders angry.

Facing that anger makes Isaiah

Wonder if all his work is for nothing,
if he's actually making a difference and getting through to anyone.

God responds that he is, and that moreover, he needs to widen his audience.

I always laugh a little bit when I read the line, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel,”

Like, maybe God has a wicked sense of humor,

Or maybe that’s Isaiah adding a sarcastic twist to the message as he translates,

But clearly the work Isaiah’s been doing as a prophet up to this point has not been

A light or easy thing.

And now Isaiah is charged with bringing the message to the nations—to outsiders.

“Listen to me, O coastlands,” he says, “Pay attention, you peoples from far away!”

To me, this is a miracle:

That through layers and layers of translation,

Through languages, cultures, distance and time,

We can hear God saying, “Listen up!!”

This is important!

You, both you individually and all y’all, are important to me!

Our relationship is so important that I will

Cross every barrier,

I will translate myself and my love for creation

Through all these means and even into human form

To connect with and communicate with you, with y’all.”

Isaiah speaks truth to power, it is *not* too light a thing, but God is with him.

John the Baptist points to Jesus, both literally and metaphorically, saying

“Here is the Lamb of God.” Jesus’ first disciples hear this and

connect with the image, the message and the promise they’ve been waiting for.

The writer of the Gospel of John translates not only the words

Rabbi, Messiah, and Cephas, but everything we read in this account

of the Good News: the writer had an audience in mind,

And we’re ... not it, and yet here we are, hearing and seeing and tasting

That Good News: it *has* been translated. It is *being* translated, still.

God hasn't stopped communicating with creation.

God is truly present and communicating with us through

Holy Communion and Baptism,

Through the layers of translation we hear in Scripture and the Word proclaimed,

Preached and sung,

And when we pray, like Isaiah prayed in his dialogues with God,

God is there, too, actively listening and responding.

In my experience, the responses aren't always clear,

But I find assurance in God's motivation of connection

Based on deep and abiding love.

It is a point of assurance and hope, too, that God chose to be translated

And revealed in Jesus Christ and actively and continually

Chooses to enter into relationship and communication

with all of us and all of creation,

Even though communication and relationship with humans and among humans

Is messy and difficult.

Human metaphors and human experience may be limiting when we speak of God,

But helpful, too:

A good translator is in communion with the content, with language and culture,

And with the audience, both as individuals and as a large and diverse group.

A good translation conveys truth and beauty beyond the limits of the word

itself or the limits of language.

God gives us all many different vocations,

But one of the callings we all share is this one:

To connect with each other,

Across all our differences,

Knowing that we are all made in the Image of God.

It is not too light a thing.

It is really quite difficult.

But even so ... Immanuel.

Translated, that means: God is *with* us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.