“Unfolding Words”

Psalm 119:129-135 Luke 6:46-49 1 Peter 1:22-25

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And Christ came to earth, the Word made flesh – he dwelt among us, taught us, challenged us, died for us, and lived for us again in the resurrection. The early church was then filled with evangelism: the Holy Spirit spreading the good news of Jesus Christ near and far. The apostles and disciples and new converts went out into all the world. They were oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, killed – and yet they continued on. When the eyewitnesses to Christ’s life and death died out, the Church started setting down and canonizing a new set of scriptures so that the miracles and mystery would not be lost from generation to generation.

In those early days, scriptures were freely translated into Syriac Aramaic and Latin. In the Catholic church, the Latin translation dominated for so many years that it came to be the standard – the only translation studied and proclaimed. But in the 400s, there was a boom of Christianity spreading to people who not only didn’t speak Latin, they didn’t have a written language whatsoever. Some translations were made, but by and large, the Bible got further from the average Christian. Sure, those that could read could read Latin. But how many people was that really – maybe 5%, 10% of the population? More and more, the Bible was opened to the priests and monks, the wealthy landowners – and less to the average person.[[1]](#endnote-1) This is not to say that the Catholic church had some kind of vendetta against people reading for themselves. Translation was long, complicated, and expensive work. On top of that, the resources needed to make a Bible were immense. For example, one Bible copied out in the 7th century in Northumbria required the skins of approximately 1,600 calves. 1,600![[2]](#endnote-2)

Sometimes the Catholic church did tacitly approve of translation efforts on a small scale. But, in the 12th and 13th centuries, groups like the Waldensians arose: Christians who wanted a Bible they could understand, but also challenged Catholic teachings. They didn’t believe relics had value or that holy water was different from regular water or that they should be required to fast on certain days.[[3]](#endnote-3) Literacy was on the rise and these groups were gaining some power locally. And so they were called heretics, excommunicated, and persecuted nearly to extinction. They were burned to death and even had a crusade organized against them in 1487.[[4]](#endnote-4)

While there was no official ban on making a translation, well, you did so at your own peril. In the 16th century, Martin Luther was a priest, monk, and professor. He had the privilege of reading the Bible for himself and he had a crisis of conscience. At first, he was looking to reform the Catholic church from within: surely anyone could see that selling indulgences was a corrupt and corrupting practice and that priests with barely any education who were openly sinning was a bad thing. But as he read and studied, he came to see that he was having a distinct revelation of God: we are saved through faith alone by grace alone in Christ alone and that we live for God’s glory alone. On top of that, he held firm to the idea of scripture alone[[5]](#endnote-5) – we don’t submit to both the traditions of the Church as well as what we find in the Bible. People err, in the past and now, so we need to listen for the Spirit speaking in and through the Bible. And, if the scripture is this important, this central to our faith, then it needs to belong to everyone.

So in the early 1520s, he went back to the original languages, the Hebrew and Greek, and he made a translation for everyone. He was so concerned with creating a translation that anyone could relate to, that he would regularly go out into towns and marketplaces so he could listen to how regular people spoke. He wouldn’t let the Bible he worked on be just an ivory tower exercise. With the help of other translators, the full Bible was published in 1534, but Luther kept refining and fine tuning this Bible translation until he died in 1546.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Luther once said, “a simple layman armed with scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it.”[[7]](#endnote-7) And the people wanted this Bible. With the help of Gutenberg’s printing press, one Bible printer made over 100,000 copies of Luther’s Bible translation between 1534 and 1574. This meant that almost every Protestant had a Bible at home – that they could read any time they wanted![[8]](#endnote-8)

One Johann Cochlaeus complained at the time:

“Luther’s New Testament was so much multiplied and spread by printers that even tailors and shoemakers, yea, even women and ignorant persons who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel, and could read a little German, studied it with the greatest avidity as the fountain of all truth. Some committed it to memory, and carried it about in their bosom. In a few months such people deemed themselves so learned that they were not ashamed to dispute about faith and the gospel not only with Catholic laymen, but even with priests and monks and doctors of divinity.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

People read and learned to read because they had the Bible. Protestant reformers set up schools and lifted up public education in the hope that an educated public could grow in character and faith and move forward together in holy purposes.

There wasn’t any kind of formal ban on other translations in the Catholic church until after Luther’s Bible spread and lit a fire in so many. After the Council of Trent from 1545-1563, the Catholics formally denounced many Protestant teachings and affirmed that a Latin translation of the Bible to be *the* authoritative text of the Bible.[[10]](#endnote-10) Each side had drawn a line in the sand and there followed years of bloodshed and chaos. All for the right to speak from the Bible.

In our time and place, we are blessed to read and study without fear. Yet, sometimes we forget the sense of awe and mystery in approaching the scriptures. Our Psalm this morning reminds us of the holy beauty and passion that scripture can inspire. Again and again we see in this psalm– almost a love song to the revelation of God, to God speaking to humanity, guiding us with teachings and commandments, and giving us these words to cherish in our hearts forever. The psalmist marvels, “with open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments.” The poetry practical beams: “the unfolding of your words gives light – it imparts understanding to the simple.” The word of God: in all the ways it comes to us, through all the generations who literally gave their lives to record and preserve and protect these words – that is a holy gift. We must never forget that. The psalmist continues, “redeem me from human oppression, that I may keep your precepts.” Whatever oppression and violence and uncertainty, the psalmist isn’t concerned for personal safety, comfort, or fortune – just the opportunity to faithfully serve and worship God.

We look for the unfolding of God’s words in our past, in these days, and in the days to come. In our reading from 1 Peter, we hear how we are reborn through the living and enduring word of God – that the word of the Lord abides forever. God’s word in all of its forms is as ancient as God, Christ, and Spirit. It touches all of eternity. Yet, it is also living, breathing, moving, working. The word that we heard yesterday may not be the word that we hear today – not because the word is changing, but because we are. God offers us fresh revelations all the time, fresh opportunities, fresh courses to take. Yet this newness is the same ancient truth and this ancientness becomes new again.

So, “now that we have purified our souls by our obedience to the truth so that we have genuine mutual love, let us love one another deeply from the heart.” This isn’t saying our souls were dirty and now we enter the world without flaw or fault. It’s not about our immortal souls. It’s about our individual sparks of self. In our walk of faith, we cleanse our, well, our thoughts, our choices, our impulses, the worst sides of our personalities. And we do this again and again so that we can listen, learn, and follow the truth. We learn this from the Spirit speaking in scripture; we learn this from each other’s example; we learn this from acting in faith. And every time we return to that well, we learn that that truth is love: loving deeply, loving with our whole selves – from the heart, mind, and will. Love each other; love the Lord; Love even ourselves.

“That word is the good news that was announced to you.” Jesus asks us, “why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I tell you?” Hearing his words and doing them is like building a house with a solid foundation – one built on a rock that withstands the wind and storm and flood. What is that rock? How do we dig down and secure ourselves upon it? It is love and the source of that love. It is Christ and the Bible which points us to abundant wisdom, hope, joy, and truth. How awesome it is to be surrounded by such love. Look in this room: the Bible right before us, in arms reach; holy symbols of our faith all around us, reaching out and teaching us; our sisters and brothers in Christ, caught up in Jesus’s boundless love for us all and sharing that love, too. God’s words are ever unfolding – may we feel the blessing of that light in each day’s reformation of love. Amen.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations_in_the_Middle_Ages> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations_in_the_Middle_Ages> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldensians> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldensians#Catholic_response> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/the-five-solas-of-the-protestant-reformation.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luther_Bible> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_scriptura> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luther_Bible> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luther_Bible> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Trent> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)