

## Imperfect Words

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Good morning and welcome again to Hyde Park Presbyterian Church.

Before I begin with my sermon, I want to take a moment to talk about the horrific events unfolding in Israel and Palestine. Our community is directly impacted by the war, through friends and relatives of our neighbors in Tampa. They are grateful for our support, for our prayers, and of course for donations to help humanitarian aid in the areas most impacted. I would like to read to you a few paragraphs from Bronwen Boswell, the Acting Stated Clerk for the Presbyterian Church:

“Deuteronomy 5:17 “You shall not kill.”

“The devastation and loss of life in both Israel and the Gaza Strip in the last few days has been horrific. No words can describe the anguish and suffering of the people directly impacted by and caught up in the violence of these attacks. As we watch the recently declared war unfold, our hearts break for all whose loved ones have died, are wounded, missing, displaced, or taken hostage.

Horrible actions committed by Hamas and the violent response by Israel have exacerbated deep wounds, inflicting physical and emotional pain and suffering. We acknowledge that the people of Palestine and Israel are not one in the same, and we stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and Israel who seek peace. Hamas does not. We condemn the violence that has taken place in recent days, and we grieve the decades of oppression that have led to this violence.”

I prepared this sermon before the events transpired, but it serves as an important lesson in our own history.

Last time I had the opportunity to speak to you from the pulpit for a sermon I spoke about my faith journey and the challenges I encountered along the way. Today, I will talk about biblical history and where the English language can get in the way of our understanding. In the readings today we went back to the beginning, to Genesis and a confounding passage in the English translation of the Bible. The words we read are imperfect. Not because God’s meaning is imperfect, but because we as humans are imperfect, and often what we hear and read is not entirely what the passage means.

To begin, I want to talk about the absurdity of the English language and some funny examples. I am a big fan of comedians who can look at the world and describe human interactions with a slant that I had not considered before. My first example will be from George Carlin, a man likely not quoted in many sermons, though he too was raised Catholic! Carlin described colloquialisms as phrases we use, but never question. For example, “selling like hotcakes” – is this truly the fastest thing you can think of? What about beer at the Bucs game this afternoon – probably faster! Or, “undisputed heavyweight champion” ... well if it’s undisputed, then what’s all the fighting about? Worst of all, “in your own words” ... does anyone in here have their own words? Certainly I don’t in this sermon – I’m using the same one everyone else

does! Or how about Gallagher, our favorite watermelon smashing comedian? “Why do they call them coy bows when cows are girls and bulls are boys, they should be bull boys and cowgirls. Why do they call them buildings when they're already done? They ought to call them built! Why should I be serious about the language if the language isn't serious enough to make sense?”

Let's consider an example of how language changes over time from modern history. What do you do at the end of a phone call? You “hang up”, right? Do you think my daughter understands the phrase “hang up the phone”? Do you think her children will? And this is why understanding the Bible is difficult. Hanging up the phone is a term that lasted 100 years... the Bible has been around a lot longer than that. Which is why it takes serious study and an understanding of culture, context, and most of all the people in power, when it comes to interpreting the Bible.

You should first know that I have known no other translation and have limited exposure to other languages. However, as I mentioned during my last sermon, Renee and I once were blessed to be led by Dr. David Pierce, a former Catholic who went on to become a licensed and trained Psychologist, and finally a Presbyterian minister for us at Hodges Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville Florida. David was an amazing man who had a thirst for knowledge, culture, history, as well as the human condition. He faced many challenges and tragedies in his life, yet his faith endured, and he used his gifts to enlighten his congregation about why culture, context, and the words in the Bible were so important to his spirituality.

Some of you may have been brought up in other biblical traditions, but most Christians think of the Bible as the “word of God” and if you grew up in the American South, you probably learned about biblical inerrancy. The notion that everything written in the Bible is literally true. There are no faults, there are no conflicts, therefore there are no issues with the Scriptures. Any perceived conflicts or errors cannot be changed and should not be questioned. There is the notion that God “breathed His Word” and the leading scholars and philosophers of the time heard His call. And thus, the Word was written. Let me ask you a question about a word I just used – Scriptures. Is the Bible the same as the Scriptures? When you hear the word “Scripture” being used in the Bible, is it talking about itself? No! In this context the Bible is talking about the Jewish books of the time – generally speaking, works from what we know as the Old Testament and other Jewish books, including the Talmud. We'll get back to the Talmud later.

First, let's discuss oral history. It is often assumed by most scholars that oral traditions among early Israelites is where the contents of the Bible originated. Obviously, this cannot be proved, but we know in Jesus's time they were aware of events from Moses and therefore had to have heard them. The oldest known manuscript of biblical text dates to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and read, in Hebrew, “May Yahweh bless you and keep you; May Yahweh cause his face to Shine upon you and grant you Peace.” – similar to what we read in Numbers 6:24-26, “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” The earliest copies of parts of the Hebrew Bible are from the Dead Sea Scrolls, manuscripts that date back between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. These scrolls were nearly identical to texts that were produced in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE and are still used in synagogues today. The fact that these are nearly identical says a lot about how well the early Jewish people remembered and recounted their oral history.

I mentioned earlier the Talmud, one of the Jewish sacred texts. It's important to talk about the Jewish tradition because that tradition impacts our own. Jesus was a Jew. Jesus's followers

were all Jewish. Jesus was even born in occupied territory. The Scriptures they knew are the same Scriptures our Jewish friends use today. Yet in their texts women are treated differently. The Talmud tells us that the life of the woman is paramount and yet today, that life is under attack. My daughter may come to live in a time in this country where she has less rights over her own body than her mother did. We can tie the Presbyterian views, at least those of PCUSA, on women in leadership positions and that of abortion healthcare directly back to early Jewish scriptures. We live in a time when people are taking pieces of text from Leviticus and using it to describe their reasons for being against homosexuality. For torturing, maiming, and killing in the name of a God that I cannot comprehend. Because of words on a page. Words that are imperfect in nature, because man's understanding of those words is flawed. Because we are flawed. We must seek to understand our history, and the history of the written Word, to tackle some of these tough topics.

The first known Bible translation is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures. It was created for Greek speaking Jews and included books that Jews eventually decided were not authoritative. However, Christians at the time accepted those books and here is where some of the first splintering of traditions come along. These books are known as the Apocrypha, or "in private" in Greek. These books were meant to be read yourself, and not during official church services. These books are not considered Scripture for Protestants, and in fact the word apocrypha was used in our past to mean "false", or "questionable" during the Reformation.

The New Testament is a little easier to trace since the letters and narratives were better preserved by early Christians. It is generally accepted that the New Testament was written between 50 and 125 CE, however it was not until the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE that the first unified collection of New Testament books came into being. Many believed that happened at the First Council of Nicea – where we eventually find the Nicene Creed – but that is not the case. Up until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, different churches used different Scriptures, which led to confusion and inconsistency in messages. Most of the earliest known written records of the New Testament come from ancient Greek and it was not until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the Latin Vulgate Bible was written by Saint Jerome. This was the first complete Latin version of the entire Old and New Testaments, as well as the Apocrypha, for use in Latin speaking churches. Different versions of the Vulgate have existed throughout history, including the Gutenberg Bible, which was published in the 1450s. It wasn't until the 1530's until we see the first ever complete translation of the Bible in English. Though here is where things get interesting. Some of the early Bibles written in English were directly translated from the Vulgate, or Latin, and not from the original Hebrew or Greek. While all modern English translations are now based on the Hebrew and Greek texts, the influence remains.

As a brief aside, John Wycliffe was the one who began the translation into English in defiance of the Church. 31 years after his death, the Council of Constance charged him with more than 260 counts of heresy and 44 years after his death, church officials dug up his bones out of consecrated grounds, burned them, then scattered the ashes on the river Swift as a punishment for his works. Not exactly what I would call support for the use of English in the Bible. From oral traditions, through Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English – the history of the Bible is complex.

Additional Biblical texts have been discovered over the last 200 years, including the Gospel of Mary – part of the Berlin Gnostic Codex found in Egypt in 1896. Or the Book of

Judas, found in Egypt in the 1970s, or the Gospel of Philip, which implies a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, also found in Egypt in 1945. Is this starting to sound like the DaVinci Code to any of you? These were never accepted as Biblical canon but likely stem from early Christian traditions and are considered alternative views of the same stories we hear in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and show the early diversity of Christianity.

Beyond all of those translations, beyond all of that history, lies an even more complex, and violent, background. For no book in history has caused more killing than the Bible, and that is a history we must comprehend. “History is written by the winners” is a common quote – and Biblical history may be no different. There’s also one thing missing from this history: women. Women play an integral part of the New Testament, yet women were shunned from early Christendom – as many are still shunned today.

The Bible is no strange place to difficult language. We have odd examples where language is used, but thankfully not followed. From Exodus, chapter 31 verse 15: “On six days work may be done, but the seventh day shall be sacred to you as the sabbath of complete rest to the Lord. Anyone who does work on that day shall be put to death.” Is it my responsibility to kill you, or do I leave that up to someone else?

I point all of these things out because believing is hard, especially for a literal person. I spoke last time about my struggle and why finding my faith took a long time. People like me took things at face value when learning about God and were never given any other information. We were not told how to research, or how to investigate, and my questions were certainly not welcome. So, with some of this history in mind, let’s talk about one of the most controversial words from our reading today. Anyone want to guess what it is? ... Day. That’s right, day. There are groups of Christians in this world that take this literally. That God created everything in 7 days. And since Genesis speaks of Adam and Eve – that must mean that the Earth, is about 6,000 years old. Despite all the scientific research, despite fossils, despite Neanderthals and skeletal remains. And part of the cause of this misunderstanding? Language!

You see sometimes the English language is not very precise and I can help prove it to you. Let me ask you another question... how long does one day last? 24 hours, right? Yet I can prove that that’s not quite accurate... ever heard the saying, “back in the day”? Something likely your parents said, or your grandparents. “Back in my day, we had to walk to school in the snow! Uphill! Both ways!” So... how long does that day last? Are we talking about 24 hours or are we talking about a longer period of time?

This is where ancient Greek saves us – if we only knew it. In ancient Greek there are multiple ways to reflect on “day”. There is the closed meaning of day, 24 hours – called Chronos, and there is the open meaning of day, reflecting an experience in time – kind of like our phrase, “back in the day” – called Kairos. Ancient scholars understood Greek, not English, and used both of these words throughout the Bible, but when it comes to “day” we are misled. The chronology of Genesis is not important, the hierarchy of creation is. We are not talking about “Chronos” moments in Genesis – we are talking about “Kairos” moments. It is used to show us that God created everything, with the crowning jewel being the creation of humankind. This passage is used for remembrance and tying it to the 7-day cycle allows us as humans to place importance on His days.

Let's face it, words are powerful and can be used for both good, and evil, reasons. We exist in a world today where people are taking words from the Bible and abusing them for personal gain. Who here has ever used the phrase "actions speak louder than words"? Read the Bible again and look at the actions of Jesus. Look again at who he chose to spend time with, who he considered sacred: sinners. Sinners like you and me. Sinners that deserve love, that deserve God's love and grace. Not because of our actions but because of His love for us. We are in a new covenant. One that can be used for both good and evil, but it's up to us to decide which way to go.

This is why we must be strong in our words. Why we must research, and pray, and remain steadfast in our love for one another. And why we must not stay silent when our brothers and sisters are under attack. I hope today that you will consider my words and come away with new questions. Questions about the type of Christian you want to be. And about the words you can use to help this congregation now and into the future.