

**November 19, 2017**

**TEXT: John 1:1–5**

**TITLE: The Words of Life**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

It usually starts with a question: Why do bad things happen to good people? What is the meaning of life? Why shouldn't I give up hope? In response, we choose our words carefully. But in that hesitancy, the questioner senses that we are unsure and grows impatient with us; or we feel like our words are inadequate so we lose confidence in ourselves. In the end, we don't feel like we've said what needed to be said, so questions persist, lingering in the air unanswered.

Communication has always been hard. Words can be both precise and flexible. That's why we can describe people who said one thing but meant another; or why we complain that someone twisted, bent, or distorted what we said to make it mean something else. Communication is hard, yet what we say matters. That is why we choose our words carefully—preachers and poets and parents alike and anyone who has ever been asked: What is life all about?

I start thinking about this after reading an article about Emily Wilson, the first woman to publish a translation of Homer's epic poem, The Odyssey.<sup>1</sup> In the very first words of The Odyssey there is an adjective describing the hero of the poem Odysseus. Was he a good man or a schemer, a strong protagonist or a weak pawn at the mercy of the gods? The Greek adjective for him was the word *polytropos*—"poly" means "many"; "tropos" literally means "to turn." To say Odysseus was a "many turning" man doesn't make much sense in English. So translators through the years have used a host of words to describe what kind of man this "polytropos" Odysseus was: a man of many a turn, shifty, cunning, restless, clever, skilled in all ways, tossed to and fro. In the end, Wilson came up with an English word that communicates this complexity perfectly: she said, "Odysseus was a complicated man." We know just what she means.

Translators working on ancient Homer aren't the only ones who struggle with finding the right words. Consider those who translated our bible from Hebrew and Greek. Consider the King James Version of Genesis 1:1—*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters*. For hundreds of years, translators have struggled with the precise meaning of the Hebrew words. Was there nothing in the universe and then God wondrously created everything in a flash—in a divine Big Bang? Or was there something out there already—the canvas of space was not entirely blank when God began to create the heavens and the earth as part of this eternally-existing universe? Both translations are possible from the ancient Hebrew.

Go a step further: read about the Spirit of God moving over the waters. The Hebrew word for "spirit" is "ruach" which means spirit, breath, wind. Did creation come about because of a wind?—that feels too impersonal—a breath?—that feels a bit too anthropomorphic—or was it God's Spirit literally moving over the new creation? In the end, Genesis is more poetic than scientific. To some that is a criticism; but ultimately the

ambiguity is important to what we hope to communicate. Creation is God-directed in ways we can never fully grasp or pin down. Creation is *polytropos*—it's complicated. And that's a good thing.

Go now to the New Testament, to John 3. The Jewish leader Nicodemus comes by night to visit Jesus, the upstart rabbi. Early in their conversation Jesus says “no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born *anōthen*.” The Greek word *anōthen* means “born again” and “born from above.” To be saved and enter the kingdom of God, does it require a type of earthly regeneration—like being “born again”—or a spiritual regeneration—like being “newly made, born from above”? Billy Graham and revival preachers have long preferred the former option: You must be born again! Modern bible translators tend to select the latter option: *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit; therefore you must be born from above* (John 3:6) In the end, Jesus insists both are needed—grace-infused new life and earthly incarnations of new faith. Salvation is *polytropos*—it's complicated. And that's a good thing.

Hard questions always come up: Why do bad things happen? Why shouldn't I give up hope? In answering these questions, we need to be more open to poetry than prose—more open to multiple meanings versus narrow precision—because that is at the heart of all faith language. Someone is in pain: Do you read to them from the detailed language of Leviticus or from the poetry of the psalms? Would they rather hear about goat offerings or these words: *Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me: your rod and your staff they comfort me.*

In today's hurting world, we are ill-served by the legalistic language of lawyers when we need the soul-stirring words of poets and prophets. Too often after another mass shooting in America, any call to restrict the ownership of assault weapons is deflected by NRA wordsmiths who argue that that term (“assault weapons”) is too vague and is wrongly applied to common rifles used for hunting that have been modified to hold extra ammunition or fire more rapidly. As poets of faith, we must argue back and say, “Fine. If not “assault weapons,” then what is needed are bans of “weapons of assault” that kill schoolchildren in Sandy Hook, churchgoers in Sutherland Springs, and concert attendees at the Pulse nightclub and in Las Vegas. And why? Because our faith tells us that is how we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Or when issues of harassment come up and legal defenses are couched in language arguing that sexual advances were misconstrued, that flirtations were simply taken the wrong way, and besides the women appeared to go to the hotel room meetings willingly, then the poets of faith must insist that harassment is about the misuse of power—of male privilege imposing itself on women who for generations have been blocked from advancement in misogynist business or cultural arenas. And why do we push back? Because the poetry of faith tells us that we are called to relationships that are not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude, that do not insist on its own way, rejoicing not in wrongdoing but in the truth.

Or when charges of racism are raised and people try to dissect the act into permissible free speech or whether an intent to harm was present, then we forget the larger truth—that, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “racism is not merely a simplistic hatred. It is more often broad sympathy toward some and broader skepticism toward others.”<sup>2</sup> In the words of the religious poets, racism isn’t about broken contracts; it’s about broken covenants—the promise that in Christ, there is to be no privilege or prioritization between God’s children: no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, black nor white. It is not about legalities under the law where justice is miserly doled out in teaspoons, but about biblical standards of letting justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Words matter. And the poetry of faith can speak far clearer than the prose of self-serving human reason. Included in your bulletin is an insert that contains a sampling of scriptural poetry. Take it home. Put it on your fridge or on your desk or by your bed. Get familiar with these words; perhaps memorize them. In times of need, when hard questions arise, more often than not, these words will say what needs to be said far better than anything else you might hear spoken.

Words matter. The rich poetry of faith matters. That has always been true. When the writer of John’s gospel struggled to capture the wonder of God’s eternal plan of salvation for humankind, he looked first at the poetry of Genesis 1 and then expanded upon it in John 1: *In the beginning was the Word*. Not a single word, not a precise noun or narrow adjective—but a capital “w” Word. In Greek it’s the word *logos*. It refers to the way we communicate, the way we order life, the way we understand—and this Word was with God and was God. All things came into being through the Word, which is simply a poet’s way of speaking about God’s son, Jesus. Our brains and philosophy may stumble to grasp this concept, but our hearts immediately sense the deep truth of this poetry of faith.

When we are confronted by hard questions, let us turn to poetry. Sometimes it is poetry put on the lips of angels: *Be not afraid, for unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*. Sometimes it is poetry recited from a mountaintop: *Blessed are the meek and pure in heart, for they will see God*. In the end, the poetry tells us precisely what we need to know: *What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people*. The Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the human face of a divine God, the light of the world. In him is life, even life eternal. Saying that, understanding that, and living that is the work of Christian poets like you and me.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Wyatt Mason, “The First Woman to Translate the ‘Odyssey’ into English,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 2017. (Her opening line is actually, “Tell me about a complicated man, O muse.”)

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Young, review of Ta-Nehisi Coates book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, *New York Times Book Review*, November 5, 2017, p. 14.

## **GENESIS 1:1-5**

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

## **RUTH 1:16-17**

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

## **SONG OF SOLOMON 8:6-7**

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

## **MICAH 6:8**

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

## **JOHN 1:1-5**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

# **POETRY IN SCRIPTURE**

## **PSALM 23**

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

## **PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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### **JOHN 14:1-6, 27**

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

### **ROMANS 8:35, 37-39**

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8**

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.

### **MATTHEW 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you  
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### **I CORINTHIANS 13:1-7, 13**

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.