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John 1:1-14

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....

"The B-I-B-L-E, Yes, That's The Book For Us!"

As a child, I learned this song - "The B-i-b-l-e, yes that's the book for me, I stand alone on the word of God, the B-i-b-l-e."

Each Sunday, at the end of our reading from the Bible, we say: **"For the Word of God in Scripture, For the Word of God among us, For the Word of God within us, We give thanks to God."**

The writer of John's Gospel begins with these beautiful, poetic words: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...."**

Yet, how many of us have ever given pause to reflect on what we mean when we say the Bible as our book is the Word of God?

Actually, how many of us have even read all 774,746 words in the Bible? Or if you want a breakdown, the 593,493 words in the Old Testament and 181,253 words in the New Testament?

Of course, this depends on the translation you read which could be the King James Version or any of the other 670 versions of the Bible.

We tend to read from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) which came after its predecessor the Revised Standard Version (RSV). However, there are times we will read from the late Rev. Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible called "The Message".

The difference between these two we use is important for us to note. The NRSV is a scholarly translation of the Bible from the earliest texts in Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek known to us.

None of these scholarly translations are from the original texts, as those do not exist. So all scholarly translations are really edited translations from translations from translations of the earliest known documents that have been discovered.

Some of the 774,746 words that someone counted out in the Bible actually were words that had no English word for the Hebrew, Greek or Arabic word or phrase translated. Scholars had to make their best guess as to what might be the best English word or phrase to insert, then again the same is true for those scholars who are translating from the original language into the over 1,521 other languages spoken in our world today.

*(The International Bible Association says: "According to Ethnologue, there are currently 7,099 living languages in the world. At least one portion of Scripture has been translated for 3,312 of these languages. The New Testament is available in 1,521 languages, with portions in 1,121. (<https://www.biblica.com/resources/bible-faqs/how-many-different-languages-has-the-bible-been-translated-into/>)*

Biblical language scholars who worked together on the NRSV translation “consisted of thirty men and women. They come from Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic church, and the Greek Orthodox Church. The committee also includes a Jewish scholar.”

These scholars are always studying old biblical languages that are no longer spoken, learning about them and then based on new understandings of those “old” languages, revise their work. Thus the Revised Standard Version became the New Revised Standard Version.

***“The NRSV stands out among the many translations because it is ‘as literal as possible’ in adhering to the ancient texts and only ‘as free as necessary’ to make the meaning clear in graceful, understandable English. It draws on newly available sources that increase our understanding of many previously obscure biblical passages. These sources include new-found manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls, other texts, inscriptions, and archaeological finds from the ancient Near East, and new understandings of Greek and Hebrew grammar.”*** (<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-NRSV-Bible/>)

However, Eugene Peterson’s “**The Message**” is not a scholarly translation taken from the original Biblical languages. Peterson wrote what is referred to as a modern “paraphrase” of the Bible. He read the Bible, studying our modern English language and based on his understanding and interpretation, wrote a creative version. The same is true of the Good News for Modern Man, The Way, The Blue Jean Bible and many other modern catchy titled Bible.

Then again, we have to also take into account the Hebrew Scriptures (Torah) which was the version Jesus knew. There was no actual Bible in Jesus’ time. They had loose scrolls that they unrolled to read from. The earliest versions of the Hebrew Scripture were written without vowels or accents. A group of Jewish scribes (500-700 CE) wrote the earliest known Hebrew Scriptures using traditional sounds of words. This is referred to as the Masoretic biblical texts. (Bible Odyssey website)

The Bible Odyssey website says: **“Until the last few decades, most biblical scholars believed that the Masoretic biblical texts were, with some exceptions, the best witnesses to the most ancient Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians sometimes call the Old Testament). Recent discoveries from the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, suggest that there were several different versions of many biblical books in the Second Temple period. Some of these versions differed only slightly from each other, but some versions were very different.”**

Then there is the old Greek language version of the Hebrew texts called the “Septuagint.”

Scholars believe Jesus and many other Palestinian people of that time would have known not only Hebrew, but also Arabic and Greek. We have Alexander the Great to thank for this! The Romans would have introduced the Latin language as well.

So when we say we stand alone on the Word of God, the Bible, which translation or version of the Bible are we standing alone on?

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible we read from contains sixty-six books. Thirty-nine make up the Hebrew Scripture or Old Testament and twenty-seven the New Testament.

However, the official version used by the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestant churches include seven additional books, a third section known as the “Apocrypha”. These

seven books were written in old Greek before the books of the New Testament, and after the Hebrew Texts.

So here we have our sacred scriptures, the B-i-b-l-e, our book.

Some people claim that the Bible is the infallible word of God. It literally happened and is a history of the beginning when God created in just seven days. Genesis 1 does have those seven days listed. However, if you read Genesis 2, you get a whole different creation story in a completely different order. Which one is literally true? There are many other things we could question in a similar way if we tried to read the Bible as a literal, factual history of humankind. But we do not believe it is the literal "word", spoken by God, written down by human hands nor do we read it as such.

What we as Presbyterians believe is the Bible is our sacred faith story, told down through the centuries by people living in more primitive times and very different cultures. They began to give shape and meaning to their lives and the tribes (communities) they lived in through an oral tradition of story telling which included myths about how all the earth, animals, stars, planets and people came into being. These stories were told over and over through multiple generations, not as factual history, but as a faith history telling about God as they understood Yahweh, Jehovah, God in their community then. Communal story tellers passed these sacred tales on, editing them, developing their own take on them, under new experiences and for the needs of their people at those times.

Eventually, they were written down, passed on, edited again. Our sacred faith writings we call the Bible are made up of myths, prose and poetry, primitive communal health regulations for the sake of a developing community of people, prophetic words when kings and rulers abused their leadership positions acting unjustly towards the most vulnerable among them, and lifting up hopeful, healing apocalyptic visions during dark and troubling times.

We have four Gospels that made the official canon cut back in fifth century, with the 1547 Council of Trent finalizing things. However, there are many other Gospels written by Judas, Thomas, and Mary Magdalene, just to name a few. We do not have any of the original writings, only copies that were discovered decades and centuries later.

So how are we to hear, read and interpret our sacred faith story? Read it as a book, yes. And also do so understanding the larger context in which that particular text was written and to who it was written and when. What were they trying to understand about God in that particular time and place. What message did the writer want to communicate to his or her audience? Why?

As one Biblical scholar said: **"if we are really to hear the Word of God for us today, we cannot be individualistic in our reading of Scripture. We need to remain in dialogue with the whole church past, present, and future."**

We read this "living" Word through the lens of God's love revealed in Christ.

As followers of Christ, we read the Bible to hear our sacred faith story told over the many centuries through different voices.

As noted by one Bible scholar: **"For Christianity, the litmus test should always be: Is this Christlike? Imagine all of the times were read, see, and hear the term 'biblical' used. Now practice changing the wording to 'Christlike': Would you rather your church be biblical or Christlike? Would you rather a political policy be biblical or Christlike? Would you rather someone's actions be biblical or**

**Christlike? Would you rather have your beliefs be the most biblical or the most Christlike? Would you prefer a life that is biblical or Christlike?"**

The Bible is our book for sure. But the Word of God is not limited to what we read in its pages. God's Word is still speaking among us in our world today and within us.

Our sacred faith story is constantly being written in and through our ministry here within these walls. It is also being written and interpreted out in the larger world. It is being written and interpreted in and through our lives and the lives of others whether they attend a church or believe like us.

The Living, breathing Word of God is present daily in our schools, our places of work, in the places we shop, on sports fields, in movies and television shows, in the music we listen to and the songs we sing. It is present in urban areas, suburbs, small towns, rural areas. It is being written and interpreted in the lives of all the human race.

The living, breathing Word of God will not allow the walls of a church building or a countries border to define or limit it.

The question is how is it being read and interpreted through our own hearing and understanding of the books we call the Bible, and more importantly, how it is being read and interpreted in our lives and interactions with the current events of this world?

In the beginning was the Word...and right now is the Word...and the Word was God...and still is God...who is still speaking that sacred Word in us, around us, among us, and within all people . And what a story it is we are telling!

Amen.