

“Congratulations KJV Thou Art 400!”

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***First Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, PA
II Kings 22:1-10 (KJV)
Hebrews 4:12-13 (KJV)***

This morning, thou truest and devoutest friends, I approach thee with inquiry and the most studied of endeavors. Would that thou allowest your humble servant, to but to reach back into the sorest of memory, and with no small delight – exchangeth, nine barbs, but beauty and delight by such a purest pursuit of said inquiry.

In other words, I have a quiz for you. A biblical quiz to be exact.

Q – How long did Cain hate his brother?

A – As long as he was Able.

Q – At what time of the day did God create Adam?

A – A little before Eve.

Q – Why was the woman in the Bible turned into a pillar of salt?

A – Because she was dissatisfied with her lot.

Now, in addition to being great jokes, what is also afoot is the need for a certain amount of pre understanding about the questions themselves. “Cain? Who is Cain?” “Able? Apparently Cain’s brother? He was really hated?”

“Adam? Did you mean evening?”

A Pillar of Salt? There must be some connection with the idea of lot. (How about her husband?)

It is without question today that Biblical literacy is very low, and probably getting lower. Now this is not just a sectarian concern – for deep within our culture, our very civilization run streams of living water that feed and refresh the roots of who we have been and are. Our worldview, our previous “construal” of reality has been formed primarily through the Biblical texts and their interpretations. And the sine qua non of said book has been for the past 400 years the magnificent, eloquent King James Bible! It is without parallel in its gravitas and spiritual substance for four centuries.

Yes, there have been other good translations, such as the R.S.V. (Revised Standard Version and the NSV.) But the KJ Bible stands alone in the cultural heritage of the West, the English speaking world, and then some.

I can but dip a finger into the great sea of impact that this Bible has had on our cultural and spiritual lives since 1611.

One example of its influence is the variety of words and phrases taken from it and used in literature and everyday conversation, at least in previous generations. (There is a loss. And it is lamentable.)

My guess is most of you will understand when I use the phrase “going the extra mile.” A phrase I’ve used all my life. A phrase I’ve read and heard all my life. I recently asked a group of college students (all above average intelligence, so no slight intended via cognitive abilities) if they knew that phrase, and what does it mean? Not one of the 27 students knew of it.

This is anecdotal I recognize that. But, something is going on in our culture – an emptying of our cultural memory and in turn our roots of meaning and ethics.

You know the phrase is from the Bible (Matthew 5:41) specifically KJ Bible “go the extra mile.” Do more than what is required.

Did you review the several sayings in today’s bulletin from the KJ Bible? Were most of them familiar? These are but a few of the hundreds available.

“A graven image”, “Baptism of fire”, “Beat swords into ploughshares”, “Eat drink and be merry”, “Give up the ghost”, “In the twinkling of an eye”, “Love of money is the root of all evil”, “Red sky at night; Shepherds’ delight”, “Woe is me”, “Let not the sun go down on your wrath”, “You reap what you sow”.

All from the KJ Bible.

Of course there was the 18th century new edition of the KJ Bible, noted mainly for its errors due to drunken printers’ employees. They rendered the “parable of the vineyard” as the “parable of vinegar.” It became know as the “Vinegar Bible.”

We need not remember everything.

The King James Bible is the best selling book of all time. It is the most quoted book in the English language.

It has a fascinating history, including the court intrigue of King James, the Anglican Bishops, and the distained Puritans. (more about all of this at Contemporary Issues)

When Bartletts’ Familiar Quotations extracted sayings from the King James Bible into a book – it ran over 200 pages.

Understand, for over 300 years, the King James Bible was the central frame of reference for the English speaking world. Biblical scholar/Theologian Professor George Lindbeck claims that until recently “Christendom dwelt imaginatively in the biblical world.”

It was the KJ Bible that was the omnipresent force in all cultural spheres; education, religion, family, home, courtroom, political discourse, language and literacy, choral music and hymns, art and literature. For over 200 years children in England and America learned to read by way of the King James Bible. (Wall Street Journal, Leland Ryken, Aug. 26, 2011)

The King James Bible has permeated English and American literature, from Milton's Paradise Lost to Toni Morrison's Paradise.

British literacy scholar T.R. Henn declares of the KJ Bible of 1611 that it; "...achieves as we read a strange authority and power as a work of literature. It becomes one with the Western tradition, because it is its single greatest source."

You enter Harvard University (begun as a school to train ministers) through its gate that reads "open ye the gates that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in" (Isaiah 26:2).

As the two million annually pass the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia they read from the KJ Bible, Lev. 25:10 "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

In addition to being sacred scripture, it is also a literacy masterpiece (what do you expect with such good material?). It shares the apex with Shakespeare, and is a basic source for our American literature. "Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickenson, are its children, and so are William Faulkner, Ernest Hemmingway..." Literacy critic Harold Bloom declares.

Eighty nine percent of U.S. adults own at least one Bible. Two thirds of them own a King James Bible.

Even though we use other translations – the KJ Bible is the building block of our collective heritage. The Bible in its multiple translations must be recognized as foundational and pivotal to our civilization. The KJ Bible is the expression historically and via much of our literature – foundationally in how we are to live!

We need to rediscover this guide, this literature for our future!

I'm reminded of a great rediscovery that took place centuries ago.

Back in the 7th century B.C.E., there reigned a great king over Judah. By this time, the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed. Most all of the southern King's of Judah were immoral and sellouts to the highest political bidders. Along comes a young king, eight-years-old when seated on the throne of Judah. He came on board when the people had lost sight of God's Torah, God's words, God's way of living morally and justly. In Josiah's 18th year, 622, while the great Temple in Jerusalem is being renovated, something marvelous takes place. A book, which had been hidden away many years earlier, is re-discovered. It is the "Book of the Law"! Hilkiah, the high priest, while walking through the Temple as it was being repaired, perhaps peeks into a hole that has been made by the workmen, sees another chamber and within it the wondrous "Torah-book of the Law of God"! The book was probably hidden away to protect it from those enemies of such a writing. There were those of the past who loved, revered, and respected this "book of the Law". They hid it from destruction hoping it would once again be found! And in Josiah's 18th year, this powerful writing, powerful grouping of words is found! Josiah recognized the power of these words! He saw in these words written long before, power to reform his nation, his people!

There is a developing amnesia within us. Ever so faint, gradually the fog has come in, and entered our institutions, our very homes, and we are losing sight of foundational principles that were forged in the fires of the early Judeo/Christian experience. Indeed, these words, concepts are sure, they are true and are sharp – to clear away the brush that clogs our sense of meaning and purpose as created in the image of God!

Literacy scholar Robert Alter recognizes that we no longer live in a culture where the dominant referent is the King James Bible. He goes on to say that the King James Bible though continues to present “a whole world of values with which both writers and readers have to contend – a demanding, often stern morality; a ringing promise of redeemed history in which it seems increasingly hard to give credence; a contrasting vision of the horrors to which life in history is exposed; a penetrating sense of the unfathomability of human nature; the belief in a benevolent, providential deity and a vehement challenge to that very belief.”

This two edged sword needs to bring down the wall that separates the vision of life, with the living of a good life.

I say this with both conviction, and with recognition of nuance and intellectual challenge.

We need to remove the “fly in the ointment”, and realize that “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” That ours is a “Labor of Love.” That we are “a voice crying in the wilderness.” That we need “to see eye to eye” the “signs of the times.” “The writing is on the Wall” for we will go “from strength to strength”!

Thanks be to God for the King James Bible!

KJ Bible – Thou Art 400, and remaineth inspiring!

Amen.