Sermon, November 17, 2024
"The Voice of the Living God"
26th Sunday after Pentecost
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

(Note this is a longer written version of the sermon actually preached on Nov. 17).

An egomaniacal, xenophobic and misogynistic tyrant rose to the highest office in the world's most powerful country. . . . . The country was . . . . England, the time the beginning of the 16th century, his name - Henry VIII. In 1533 Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer as the Archbishop of Canterbury which made him chief spiritual advisor to the king. Now what ensued between these two men over the next eight years until Henry's death is the subject of many historical novels, movies and TV shows and you may choose to take them in for your afternoon's entertainment. Suffice it to say these were not easy times for Archbishop Thomas trying to navigate between Henry and the Vatican. He sought wisdom and guidance in the Holy Scriptures and wanted all the people of England to read the holy Scriptures, which is why he hired Myles Coverdale to publish the first English Bible authorized for public use, which was called the "Great Bible." This "Great Bible" was distributed to every church in England so that everyone could finally hear the Bible in their mother tongue. Until then copies of the Bible were only in Greek or Latin and not accessible to the common person.

All this is a lead in to today's Collect, perhaps the most famous in all of Anglicanism, which was written by Thomas Cranmer himself who published it in the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 which included this prayer, reminding us all that we need to ***hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest*** the Holy Scriptures. For my sermon this morning, I'm going to forsake discussing the four fine excerpts from Scripture we just heard and discuss the role of the Bible in our personal lives, our Church lives, and its use in society being guided by the five verbs of Thomas Cranmer.

First we have to ***hear*** the Scriptures. In Cranmer's time most couldn't read so their interaction with Scripture was to hear it read in Church. I'm guessing that's where most of us encounter it also. Right here when every Sunday we are given four excerpts from the Bible. Usually first one from the Old Testament, then usually a psalm or occasionally like today a more poetic canticle, next something from one of the epistles of the New Testament and finally something from one of the four gospels. And that verb hear is important. I could just invite us all to sit quietly and read these lessons but there

is power in the Word being proclaimed by the lector or the priest and there is a hope that the Word will sink deeper into our marrow when we hear it.

But of course we go on from hearing to **reading**, for the translation of the Bible into English was the single greatest spur to the growth of literacy in the English-speaking world. Some denominations of Christianity have strongly encouraged independent Bible reading and have included Bibles in the pews while others like Roman Catholicism discouraged reading by the faithful without interpretation by trained clergy. In the Episcopal Church we do encourage daily Scripture reading, see pages 934 to 1000 of the BCP but we need to encourage this more.

But we cannot rest with reading, we must learn to **mark** which here means more than simply 'pay attention'. It means to make a mark, not only in the outward sense of marking up or underlining, but inwardly to mark, to let the scriptures themselves underscore in us those passages which are marked out by God to make their particular mark in us. What are the most important Scriptures in your life, when you have been struck by the two-edged sword of God's Word.

But then we get to **learning** and this is where the rubber meets the road. How do we understand what we have heard or read? Over the course of time, there have developed two ways of interpreting Scripture. One is known as the literal interpretation, otherwise known as "hey the words mean what they say, right". The other is the historical/critical method which explores the context of the words in front of us. There is no greater divide in Christianity than how different denominations interpret the scriptures. It is almost impossible to have a conversation with someone who interprets the Bible differently than you.

So what's the problem with the literal method? First of all the Bible was originally written in three different languages: Hebrew which was most of the Old Testament, Greek which was most of the New Testament and a little of the old, though some of the New Testament was taken from Aramaic (the language in Palestine at the time of Jesus). Some 300 years after Jesus, it was translated into Latin. Then in the 16th century, the scriptures were translated into modern languages. Today there are over 100 English translations. So if you read the Bible literally, the question is whose words or translation are you going to use and how do you understand them?

A rather humorous account of the problems with biblical literalism are described in a scene from the old tv show, "The West Wing".

At an event at the White House, the presidential character comes across a "Christian" talk radio personality. The subject of human sexuality comes up and she quotes to him from the Scriptures, chapter and verse. To which he responds with this set of questions:

I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, and always clears the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff insists on working on the Sabbath, Exodus 35:2, clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important, 'cause we've got a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes us unclean, Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother, John, for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?

It is a funny scene, and the point is to highlight the inconsistency in taking certain portions of Scripture literally when it comes to sexuality, or the role of women, but not a vast number of other portions of the Scriptures.

It is part of the strangeness of American religion that we have been deeply affected by the rhetoric of fundamentalism which says that the Bible is literally true and its meaning is obvious; that the Scriptures say what they mean, and there is no contradiction, no complexity of interpretation to them; that what matters is how I understand the Scriptures. I like to think of this as the approach which I have heard spoken which says "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it." Here's one more contemporary example of this issue. Part of white Christian Nationalism wants to put the Ten Commandments in public classrooms. But whose translation are you going to use? For instance the fifth commandment varies from "Thou shalt not kill" to "Thou shalt not murder" – that's a big difference. And who's going to interpret what those commandments mean. Would you like to be the first grade teacher explaining adultery?

If you want to do a deeper dive into the dangers of biblical literalism, check out the book, "The Year of Living Biblically" by humor writer, AJ Jacobs. Let me be perfectly clear, the Episcopal Church does not encourage biblical literalism. It is the tool of white Christian nationalists, as we will discuss downstairs, and is used as a horrendous tool to

persecute racial minorities, refugees, it condones a subjugation of women, and is used as an excuse for homophobia and persecution of the transgendered. It is not our way of understanding Scripture.

But on the opposite end, there is another danger which is to too easily dismiss the Scripture or explain it away as a product of its time, the cultural literature, poetry and myths of some ancient tribes. There is less at stake here, when I don't have to be open to the Scriptures reading me back, questioning me back, about my relationship with money, about God's judgment, about my own personal holiness, and about our holiness as a community of faith. And therein lies the problem with the modern ways of reading the Scriptures.They are not really reading the Scriptures at all, they are not really open to the Scriptures; they aren't reading the Scriptures in any way which allows the Scriptures to read back into us.

And so we get to the final verb of our Collect, to **inwardly digest** the Scriptures. We are to ingest, to ruminate, to chew the cud of the Scriptures in a bovine manner for hours, days, years, even our lifetimes. And notice that the collect is couched in the language of the people of God reading and wrestling with the Scriptures together, as a body. This is not something that I do on my own.

The Episcopal Church has a wonderful history of doing this at its meetings of the faithful: national Conventions, diocesan Conventions, parish meetings and bible studies. It did this in the early 20th century when US involvement in two world wars was questioned. Later it faced issues of school desegregation and the Civil Rights movement. In the late 1970s there was debate over women's ordination which deeply tried to understand the Scriptures in question. And then in the early 2000s we debated seriously the acceptability of a married gay man to be a bishop of the Church and later we debated whether marriage should be extended to all people and not just a man and a woman. This was a lot of inwardly digesting. Some of you here are old enough and experienced enough to remember those days. They weren't easy; some people left the Episcopal Church over them but all these examples illustrated the inwardly digesting of Scripture – taking the passages of the Bible and applying them to contemporary issues facing the Church. This inwardly digesting can also work for conflicting issues in our own lives, coming to grips with some moral issue affecting us or someone we love.

For one thing is certain. Whether we like the Scriptures or not, or are comfortable with them or not (generally I think we are not if we dare to take them at all seriously), out of

the Scriptures come our common life, our practice, and our hope. Out of the Scriptures, however distant or complex, however hard or convoluted, comes to us the voice of the Living God, speaking into our world, our hearts and minds, our very beings. It has been so for untold years, that those who gather together to worship and praise the living God have in their reflection and rumination on the Scriptures, heard the rumor of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.