

# **A Voice from Heaven**

II Peter 1:16-21

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First Central Congregational UCC

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There are many avid readers in this congregation. A year ago I flew up here to meet with the Search Committee. And even that weekend Cheryl Roche gave me a book to pass along to my mother, whom she had never met, and Deb Kirwan loaned me a book. I always wondered how I would have sent that back to her had we never met again. My next visit to town was during the Super Sale when the gymnasium was filled with books. It looked as expansive as most public library book sales I've been too. And to learn we do it twice a year!

In my short time here it has already become a habit to loan books and be loaned them. To give and receive them. And to have in-depth conversations with many of you about the books you are reading. And at least a few of you have near dangerous amounts of books in your homes.

This culture of reading fits a long-standing Protestant tradition that values the written word. In fact, the rise of the publishing industry and the rise of reform movements went hand in hand. Today, in North Africa and the Near East, we see further evidence of how new forms of communication can facilitate popular movements. This time it is on-line social networking sites and mobile devices.

It is not just the written word Protestants value. We value the spoken word, particularly preaching. And the sung word, particularly congregational hymns. Reading, writing, preaching, and singing hymns were all essential elements of our reformation movement a half-millennium ago.

And in the English language that tradition is best represented by the King James Version of the bible, which was published 400 years ago this year. We have already recognized this anniversary earlier this year in our First Forum. In those two classes Fred Nielsen went into the history behind the King James Version, how it came to be, and its abiding influence on our language and our culture. The class also engaged in a lively conversation about the nature of biblical authority.

Today is the final Sunday in the season of Epiphany – a season of light and revelation. Our theme this year has been “Let It Shine!” This particular day is Transfiguration, a celebration of a mystical experience of the disciples as they saw Jesus radiant with divine glory and heard a voice from heaven. It seemed a fitting Sunday for our worship to honor this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary, particularly with an epistle reading such as today's that talks specifically about revelation, mystical experiences, witness, prophecy, scripture, interpretation, and authority.

Now, in the time allotted between the glorious readings you have just listened to and the service of communion, I cannot fully tackle the topics of biblical revelation, interpretation, and authority, but I do want to throw out a few ideas for you to mull over.

One commentator I read this week encouraged us preachers to approach this II Peter text with “dry humor” because it is “deeply ironic.” What did he mean? The authorship of II Peter is unknown. Even in the early church, this letter was controversial – significant figures, including the historian Eusebius, doubted its authorship. No historical record of the letter exists before the year 220; this may be the very latest text in the New Testament. Which would mean that the author is someone using a pseudonym, pretending to be Peter. Now, this is not unusual in the ancient world, of course. The irony is that he is writing about the value of eyewitness testimony and specifically references Peter’s mystical experience at the Transfiguration as support for the claims of biblical authority. Isn’t that ironic?

Revelation, reading, interpreting – these are tricky things.

David Jasper, Professor in Literature and Theology (what a great title) at the University of Glasgow, has a great little book entitled *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* in which he discusses the history of reading and interpretation, particularly of scripture. How we read does actually have a history. And as much as we might think of it as a private activity we do alone, it is not. It is part of a much larger cultural web. Jasper writes, “we must think for ourselves, but at the same time we cannot just make up the rules as we go along, regardless of other people, tradition, or, indeed, the conventional claims of language and its grammatical rules.” Our words mean something because of the larger community in which we live and function.

Words also have power. George Orwell made that clear in his novels, essays, and journalism. He wrote that decline of a language has political and economic causes and effects. We are more likely to be ruled by an authoritarian government if we can no longer think and express ourselves well. And we can no longer think well when our language has declined.

In 1946 he wrote, “Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way.” And that was 1946, in England. May be you are a stickler? A fan of Strunk and White or Lynn Truss’ *Eat, Shoots, and Leaves*? If you are at all concerned about the current state of our language and its impact upon us and our ability to care and think and act, then I encourage you to join our Wednesday night Lenten study which will begin on March 16. We’ll be reading and discussing Marilyn Chandler McEntyre’s provactively titled *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*.

Many of us enjoy the King James because it is the bible we grew up on. Its words, phrases, and images, are deeply embedded in our psyche. We resonate with its beauty, even at times in the archaic and obscure passages. I believe it has an ability to lift us into moments of sublime and sacred worship.

But, on the other hand, it can be difficult to understand. And if the Protestant tradition was to make religious understanding and the reading of scripture available to the masses, then we must have translations that people can understand. And those based upon the best ancient manuscripts available to us.

Also, because language is so powerful and political, we know that the King James has other problems. It is very pro-monarchical and non-egalitarian. In fact, it was not the translation that our Pilgrim and Puritan founders used, partially for that reason.

It also uses language that is very exclusive of women, often in ways not present in the Hebrew and the Greek.

All of this reminds us how tricky it is to read and interpret any text, but particularly the

bible. And, of course, it should be this way. We are talking about transcendent things. About divinity. About great mysteries. It should be no surprise that our human language might actually be too limiting to discuss such things. Our language might even obscure the truth.

The great early twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, wrote:

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical. . . . [And] What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.

On Transfiguration Sunday, when we are remembering a mystical experience of the disciples, it is good to reflect on Wittgenstein's words. How could the eyewitness experiences of those who lived with Jesus ever be put into words that convey the truth and the full scope of reality? You know, that's true of any relationship. Could you ever adequately describe the relationship with your spouse in a way that another person who did not have the experiences you had shared could fully grasp the relationship? Of course not. How much more so when we are talking about transcendent experiences.

But there is something else Wittgenstein said that I want to latch onto and connect it with - a Thomas Aquinas quote I came across this week. Wittgenstein wrote that these things beyond words, "make themselves manifest." The Aquinas quote is "Creatures can be called God's words."

So, that got me to thinking, maybe the real words of God are not these texts that we read . . . but are our very lives. If so, then we can all be eyewitnesses to the majesty of God, because we can see the honour and glory of God in ourselves, in each other, in everything around us.

What really concerns us, then, is not the beautiful, powerful language of this 400 year old great work of literature. What concerns us is how the word of God becomes manifest in us. Now, that is a legacy to celebrate, because it has an exciting future. And, as Peter Gomes, who died this week, once said, "We are people of the future, because that is where we will meet God."