

Devotion Fourth Week After Pentecost 2021

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

I recently bought a book titled “70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know” by Matthew Schlimm. He’s a Professor of Old Testament at Dubuque Theological Seminary, and he loves Hebrew. The opening words of his book are: “English isn’t God’s first language. The Bible’s native tongue is Hebrew. Three quarters of the Bible was originally written in that language.”

The sad fact is that whenever we try to translate from one language to another, we lose something. I’ve been reminded of that as I have dealt with English to Spanish translations in the workplace over the years. Things just get lost in that process. We lose the use of word sounds that contribute to meaning, or puns and wordplays (the Bible is full of them!) when those words are translated. So I’ll be spending some time looking at translations in the next weeks where we’ve lost Hebrew sounds, meaning, multiple meanings, practices, and cultural values, as well as words we actually lack in English.

This week I want to start with sound. Genesis 2:7 in English says this: “The Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land.” OK. God created the human from the soil. But if we pay attention to the Hebrew words for human and fertile land, it is much clearer. The word for human is “*adam*” and the word for fertile land is “*adamah*.” These two Hebrew words appear all over the place in the Bible – “*adam*” 550 times, and “*adamah*” 230 times. There is a message here – humanity is intimately connected with the soil. This is what we call the “second creation story,” when God creates Adam and Eve and places them in the garden of Eden to tend it, until of course they disobey and are expelled from it, where they will have to work hard to tend the land from now on. The two words are also related to “*adom*,” or ruddy, which describes both the brownish red soil of the country and the skin color of the early Israelites.

There are other wordplays in Genesis 2-4:

The Hebrew word for stream or mist is “*ed*.” This sounds like a shortened form of “*eden*,” the name of the garden. The “*ed*” gives life to the “*eden*.”

The Hebrew word for naked is “*arom*,” and the word for crafty is “*arum*.” The “*arom*” man and woman are taken in by the “*arum*” serpent.

Cain is called a vagrant and a wanderer. The Hebrew word for vagrant is “*na*” and the word for wanderer is “*nad*.” These words are close to the Hebrew word for the land where Cain settles – “*Nod*.” Cain is a “*na*” and “*nad*” exiled to the land of “*Nod*.”

I hope you’ll go reread the Genesis 2-4 story, keeping in mind the sound of these words and the double meanings inferred from using them in the stories. They enrich my understanding of the Old Testament stories, and I hope they will enrich your experience with God’s holy word as well.

Jeanne