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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, there is something lost in translation.

There is always something lost in translation.

From one language to another, there is always something lost in translation.

We may remember, for example, that famous gaffe by President John F. Kennedy.

On June 26, 1963, Kennedy was standing in front of what was at the time West Berlin's city hall.

He was there to make a speech to underline the support of the United States for West Germany during the Cold War.

For you see, 22 months earlier the Soviets had erected the Berlin Wall, dividing the city of Berlin in two.

And during then this very famous speech by Kennedy, where he was declaring the support of the United States...

During this important speech, Kennedy said these words: "Ich bin ein Berliner."

The words translate as "I am a Berliner."

In other words, Kennedy was affirming that he and the United States would stand in solidarity not only with the citizens of West Berlin, but also with West Germany as a whole.

Now, that is all well and good, of course.

The only thing is that there is a second way to translate the phrase, "Ich bin ein Berliner."

You see, "ein Berliner" can also mean "a jelly donut."

So, yes, there is no doubt that the people of Berlin who were listening to the speech that day knew what Kennedy was getting at, that Kennedy was supporting them, even if in the back of their minds that crowd was thinking, “Did the President of the United States just call himself a jelly donut?”

Ich bin ein Berliner.

Yes, there is always, ALWAYS something lost in translation from one language to the next.

PAUSE

There is also the example of the Ford Nova.

Try selling that automobile to a Spanish-speaking person.

Try selling that automobile in a Spanish-speaking country.

Because in Spanish “Nova” translates as “It doesn’t go”. Not a good name for an automobile.

And Kentucky Fried Chicken also made a marketing blunder.

We know the phrase “Finger licking good.”

Well, in Chinese that tagline—“Finger licking good”—came out somewhat cannibalistic as “Eat your fingers off.”

And my personal favorite, as it has a certain resurrection flare to it.

Pepsi’ slogan, “Come alive with the Pepsi generation,” translates in Taiwanese as “Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead.”

I can only imagine the strange séances that were going on in Taiwan, when that Pepsi slogan came out.

People gathered around a table holding hands, in a dimly lit room, Pepsi’s by everyone’s side, as they try to communicate with the dead.

Yes, something is always lost in translation.

Something is always lost in translation from one language to the next.

And it is no different today in our gospel lesson.

For there we read that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin whose name was Mary.

And the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

And we read that Mary pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Now, the "Greetings" part is not so strange, except it probably should be translated differently.

The Greek word here "Xaire" would have been the typical greeting among Greek-speaking persons in the Roman Empire.

"Xaire." "Xaire."

Which is often translated in English bibles as "greetings," but which can also be translated as a command, "Rejoice."

So when Greek-speaking persons in the Roman Empire said, "Xaire" to one another they were really commanding each other, "Rejoice," "Rejoice."

And interestingly enough, when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth on the heels of today's gospel passage, Mary sings the Magnificat, the words of which served as our psalmody for today.

Mary sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit REJOICES in God my Savior."

Mary was commanded in the greeting from the angel Gabriel to rejoice, "Xaire."

And so what does she do? She sings a song in which she says she is rejoicing.

She is following the command of the angel Gabriel, "Rejoice, Favored one."

But there's more, backing up, to when Mary first comes to Elizabeth's house, and before she sings her song...

The gospel says, Mary came to Elizabeth's house and greeted Elizabeth and the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy.

Mary greets Elizabeth no doubt with the same word Xaire, "Rejoice," and what does the child in Elizabeth's womb do?

What does the child, who is John the Baptist, do?

He leaps for joy.

Mary said, Mary commanded, "Rejoice," and John responds by rejoicing.

PAUSE

Now, personally, I don't think these joyful responses from Mary and John are accidental in Luke's Gospel.

No, I am somewhat suspicious that the Gospel writer Luke is actually making commentary here on the greeting Greek-speakers used in the Roman Empire.

In other words, everyday people living in the Roman Empire, under the rule of the emperor...

Everyday people are going around saying, "Xaire," "Xaire."

Everyday people are greeting one another with the command, "Rejoice," "Rejoice."

And the Gospel writer Luke may very well be thinking, "Who is actually commanding the people to rejoice?"

I mean here have this command being exchanged by people all over the Roman Empire.

But who is making the command? Certainly not the emperor.

And why should people rejoice anyway?

And so what does Luke do, but he says that the angel of the Lord Gabriel comes announcing the command from God, "Rejoice."

And why should Mary rejoice? Why should John the Baptist rejoice? Why should any of us rejoice?

Because the baby Jesus, the Savior of the World, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah of God, is soon to be born.

Yes, Mary, the Gospel writer Luke says, pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Which is Luke's way of saying that all Greek-speaking persons in the Roman Empire should be pausing to consider what kind of greeting it is that they are sharing when they say "Xaire" to one another.

Indeed, Luke is saying to his audience, to the Christian community for whom he writes his gospel...

Luke is saying, "Hey, Folks, you know why people in the Roman Empire are greeting each other with the command 'Rejoice,' because whether they realize it or not, God has given all people the command to REJOICE, because the Son of God will soon be born."

PAUSE

When we think about what Luke is doing here in this gospel passage, we can help be amazed.

Luke co-opts the greeting used in the Roman Empire.

Luke claims the greeting used in the Roman Empire.

Luke claims the greeting for the Christian Church.

Ordinary people are going about the everyday lives saying "Xaire" to each other, not knowing exactly why; while Luke is explaining to his Christian audience you now know what's what.

You now know why people command each other to rejoice, it is because God is telling all people to rejoice.

Rejoice for the Son of God is soon to be born.

PAUSE

It is not unlike the word "alleluia."

That word is all over the place at Christmas time and during the Easter season.

Have you ever wondered what that word means?

Many in society unfortunately, have not the faintest idea, and yet we use this word quite a bit.

Handel even wrote the Alleluia chorus, and “alleluias” punctuate that choral piece.

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Al-le-lu-ia.

Now, the word actually means “Praise God.”

Another way to say, “Rejoice.”

Yes, alleluia means “Praise God.”

And so Handel’s Alleluia Chorus says over and over and over and over again, “Praise God, praise God, praise God, praise God.”

Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Al-le-lu-ia.

Yes, we use the word, “Alleluia,” but we are unaware that we are praising God, just like people were unaware in the ancient Roman Empire that they were telling each other to rejoice because the Son of God was born.

Still, another example of the human family giving praise to God and not realizing it has to do with the very name of the God.

In the Old Testament, God’s holy name is given as Yahweh.

And many theologians believe that the ancient Jews may have understood God’s name as the sound of our breathing.

YAH-WEH, YAH-WEH, YAH-WEH.

So, every breath of every human being, and every breath of every creature, is an utterance of God’s name.

And it is only when a person or animal can’t speak God’s name anymore, can’t breathe anymore, that they then die.

Yes, right now, whether you realize it or not, with each breath you take, you are speaking God’s name.

PAUSE

All of this is by way of saying, that there is something gets lost in translation.

Today, we read that the angel Gabriel came to Mary and said to her, “Greetings,” when in truth the angel Gabriel came to Mary and said to her, “Rejoice.”

Indeed the angel commanded her and commands all of us to rejoice, for the Son of God is soon to be born.

And so we rejoice, and we rejoice because only, ONLY with God is nothing lost in translation.

You see, God translates himself, the other definition of that term.

You see, God translates himself, from one place to another, from heaven above to earth below.

God translates himself and in God's case, nothing is lost in translation.

The baby Jesus is God incarnate.

The baby Jesus is Emmanuel.

The baby Jesus is God with us.

And what we observe in Christ's ministry on earth...

What we observe in Christ, his suffering and death, is nothing short of the Almighty God's expression of love for the human family and for all of creation.

Nothing is lost in the divine language of love.

Jesus is God's translation of his love for all people.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas.

This is why we rejoice, why we sing alleluia, why we praise God.

Jesus is the perfect translation.

He is God's love for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

There is always something lost in translation, except, EXCEPT when God is doing the translating.