If you ask most people which was the first Bible printed in English – well, most people who wouldn’t just stare at your blankly or scratch their heads in response such an question – they’re likely to say The King James Version. Authorized in 1604 and published in 1611, it represents a beautiful and poetic collaboration of then leading scholars and remains a much beloved text today in the English-speaking world. But it was not the first. In the early years of the 14th century, well before the Protestant Reformation swept Europe, the followers of John Wycliffe undertook a translation of the Latin Vulgate. This effort pre-dated the printing press, meaning all the manuscripts were written by hand, and while it was officially banned by 1409, copies of the text were, nevertheless, quite widely circulated. Some 250 survive to this day.

It wasn’t until 1525 that the feat was attempted again, this time by William Tyndale, who, inspired by reading Martin Luther’s German translation of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, decided to return to the ancient languages as well.¹ For the next ten years, Tyndale toiled tirelessly at his task, first undertaking a translation of the Greek New Testament and then turning his attention to the Hebrew Scriptures. It is estimated that up to 90% of the translations completed by Tyndale were used in the King James Version, meaning his sense of the original Greek and Hebrew, his interpretation of their nuance and poetry, and his care for the cadence of the English version he crafted have vastly influenced our experience of the Bible ever since.

And for the offering of all this time and talent, Tyndale was arrested in 1535 for heresy. Later that year, Miles Coverdale gathered Tyndale’s works and supplemented them with his own to complete the tome, which was published – the first printed English bible - as Tyndale sat in a cell outside of Brussels. In 1536, just a year later, he was strangled and burned at the stake for his crimes, this man who gave us phrases like, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and saw that “charity” and “love” were one.

Tyndale, like Luther, wanted to offer the English-speaking world a text they could read. His highest priority was not beauty but accessibility. In a Church where Latin had long since

¹ In all fairness to the followers of Wycliffe, the Greek New Testament was unavailable in England until Erasmus collected copies of it following the fall of Constantinople in 1493.
been the norm, this idea was radical. Dangerous. And, ultimately, transformative. When he talked about his style, Tyndale quite openly said that he wrote in the language of the plowman. His translations may seem to us so rarefied and nuanced, but that is simply because English has changed in the last six hundred years. His words were, in 1535, explicitly plain; his language, common. Which makes the tragedy of our occasional attachment to ancient words and ways of saying thing not only ironic but kind of sad. Tyndale, like Thomas Cranmer, who translated the first *Book of Common Prayer* after the English Church broke with Rome, would likely be horrified to know that those who followed him have so often lifted up their versions as ideals at the expense of continuing to translate the text, to make it as common and plain and comprehensible as possible for each generation. These can seem like academic questions – which texts are authorized for which uses? which translation best meets our many and varied needs as a Church? – but translations shape our understanding. They change how we think and what we believe.

A wonderful example of this is at the heart of our observance of Good Friday. Much of the New Testament, and particularly Paul’s letters, focus on exploring and explaining precisely what happened on the Cross. The early community which gathered around Jesus was shaken and shattered by his untimely arrest and execution, and while the resurrection was their hope they still had to wrestle with the dark shadow of death. When Tyndale came upon the Greek word describing what God accomplished in the crucifixion, he found there was no good English equivalent. Jesus’ death on the cross had something to do with reuniting God with God’s people. With repairing the breach between us. It had something to do with drawing near to the holy. It harkened back to the Hebrew concept of Kippur – as in Yom Kippur - which referred to a place of mercy or a particular sacrifice that set right certain kinds of sins. It was about God reconciling all people and all creation into God’s own self. But how to express that?

Tyndale found no word waiting in the wings, so he made one up. The cross, he understood, was about God desiring to be one with us, accomplishing that oneness, revealing that oneness, somehow, through the death of this one Jesus of Nazareth. It was about at one-ment. At-one-ment. Atonement. Now we may have all sorts of associations with this word, but what it was intended to communicate is just how much God longs to be at one with us. How absolutely nothing – not even death on a cross or burning at the stake, not our great evil in putting good men to death, not our struggle to read and receive God’s word, written in a book or proclaimed
from the lips of Jesus or plain as day in the created world around us or whispered in the quiet of our hearts – nothing! - can get in the way of that.

Good Friday is about at-one-ment, not our desperate longing to know God but God’s great and glorious longing to know us. God’s willingness to go to any length to show us this love. And God’s persistence in the face of our stubbornness, our ignorance and our misunderstanding, even when those things lead to our running from God, abandoning God, crucifying God. We have always needed people to translate this love to us, because it is just so incomprehensible. So beyond what we can grasp. And so we have tended to make it smaller, and smaller, and smaller. We have come up with theories to explain what God was doing on the cross - to explain atonement - many making God out to be either a monster or a petty parent. God was ransoming our salvation, like some feudal Lord. God was atoning for our sins, like the ancient Great High Priests. God was standing in our place, executed and executioner, to set right what we had long ago broken. Do we find God’s love so offensive? So discomforting? That we cannot simply let it be?

Artists have always been fascinated by Good Friday, eagerly taking up the task of translation. From early illuminated manuscripts to Giotto; El Greco to Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ; the poetry of John Donne to the poetry of Mary Oliver; Bach’s Arias to Harry Potter. One of the most beloved and enduring examples of this comes from the end of C.S. Lewis’ classic The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, when the Great Lion Aslan, saves the child Edmund from the hands of the White Witch. Edmund had fallen under the witch’s influence and betrayed his brothers and sisters for the promise of becoming a prince. He is guilty, and Aslan pinnacle of innocence. Upon his rescue, Edmund realizes the error of his ways, the terror of his treachery, and he repents of it, but the Deep Magic of the land required that a traitor be put to death for their crimes, otherwise the delicate balance of reality would be jeopardized and all Narnia would “perish in fire and water.”

So, unbeknownst to the children and the people, Aslan offers himself as a substitute to be put to death on the Stone Table, an ancient and powerful place, instead of Edmund. The innocent dying in place of the guilt. And there he is murdered, the victim of Edmund’s wrongdoing, a sacrifice for another’s sin, while the sisters Susan and Lucy look on in grief and horror. The Great Lion dies – such a bitter injustice – and the forces of darkness celebrate throughout the dark night. But in the morning something unexpected, something incredible, happens. The Stone
Table cracks - like the temple curtain torn in two - and Aslan, like the Christ he represents, returns from the dead: resurrected, restored, triumphant. He appeases the Dark Magic with this act of incredible, self-giving love, and breaks not only the table but death itself.

It is an allegory, of course, for the events we recount in these most of Holy of Days, and while I love Lewis’ writing and can barely read this story without crying, he, like every artist, takes liberties with the tale. What Lewis quite powerfully communicates in this story is the theory of substitutionary atonement – one theory of approximately twenty-eight well-established explanations for what Jesus’ death on the cross means; for how it is that this gruesome and tragic loss somehow opens the way for eternal life.

This particular theory has become increasingly popular with the rise of evangelicalism, but there are a lot of problems with it, all quite apparent in the Narnia story. For example, it sets God up as less powerful than the Dark Magic that rules the land. (I mean, where did the land come from if not from God?) And it makes it seem as though God could come up with no better idea for fixing the problem of Dark Magic than murder. (The God who breathed life into dust and scattered the stars. That God had no other options?) And, most problematic of all, it puts the weight of Jesus’ death on God’s shoulders, as though God wants vengeance more than mercy, punishment more than restoration, and as though Jesus himself was not also God’s own self.

The truth is, we aren’t saved by our theories. We are saved by God’s grace, God’s desire for at one ment, somehow revealed, accomplished, disclosed on the cross. And the incredible mystery of this thing which is so hard to explain, to understand, to describe, is that it is not at all hard to experience. We don’t necessarily understand how God changed the world through Jesus’ death, but we don’t need to, any more than we need to understand healing in order to be healed or blessing in order to be blessed. We can stand in baffled awe and grief before the cross, and still God is drawing us into God’s own self, an eternal embrace, the God who is willing to go to all lengths to know us, and to love us, and to be at one with us.

For just a moment, just a day, forget the theories. Forget the translations. Forget your attempts to understand and make sense of it all. They are all fingers pointing to the moon, not the moon themselves. Let them go. Instead, remember that it is because of today that we know God is no stranger to our suffering, our pain, and our grief. Remember that it is because of today that even the worst betrayal, the cruelest abuse, and the most bitter loss can and will be redeemed. Remember that it is because of today that there is nothing we can do to keep God from drawing
near to us in love. And come – your heart open, your head clear – to experience the mystery of a love that persists, a love that goes to all lengths, a love that fills all things, in order to make all things one. Amen.