

God is Still Speaking

“God is Still Speaking.”

That’s one of the slogans of the United Church of Christ, our denomination. What we mean by this is that our faith is not static, set in stone never to evolve or change. Rather it’s alive and vibrant...wild like God’s spirit. Each generation interprets the faith and makes it their own – a line in the UCC constitution by the way. To claim that God is still speaking is to say that God is always up to something new in our world, in our churches, and in our lives, and the question for us is really, “Are we listening?”

That question is not as straightforward as it seems because I don’t know about you, but I’ve never heard the voice of God speak directly to me in a way where I had absolute clarity that it was actually God speaking. And that can be frustrating because we have so many stories from our faith tradition where it seems like that’s exactly how God works.

In our Scriptures, we have the story of God speaking directly to Moses, to Elijah, to Jesus. And we have our story today where God speaks directly to the boy Samuel. And there are some Christian traditions who believe that every word of the Bible is the literal, inerrant word of God. But what we mean in the UCC, especially when we say, “God is still speaking,” is that the Bible is inspired by God but it is not the literal word of God nor is it the finite word of God. God speaks to us through Scripture but also through a myriad of other ways that sometimes call us to re-interpret the Bible. But even more than that, the biblical writers themselves didn’t believe they were writing the literal word of God but instead were telling a story of God’s work creating, loving, and saving the world. And they were master storytellers and like any good storyteller they understood that truth is larger than fact.

Think about it like this. Think about someone you love – maybe a spouse or a partner, a child or a parent, a best friend. If someone asks you about that person, you’re probably not going to give a factual answer – well, there about 5 feet 4 inches, brown hair, got their degree from ... No, you’re not going to tell the facts about who that person is, you’re going to tell what they mean to you.

“They’re the coolest person on the world. The most beautiful person ever. The smartest, most loving, most kind person you could imagine.”

You haven’t done an objective study to make sure what you’re saying is factually accurate. Instead, you’re telling your truth, you’re telling what that person means to you.

That’s how so much of the Bible is – it’s telling a truth about the writer’s experience of God and to get at the depths of that truth, the writer uses metaphor and symbol and exaggeration and story.

In our story today, the point is not that the child Samuel literally heard God’s voice. Rather, it’s that God’s voice can come to us in surprising and unlikely ways. In this case, it came not through the priest Eli but through the child Samuel, a child who the Scripture says didn’t yet know the

Lord. Think about that for a minute, God spoke not through the priest, the man who had spent a lifetime trying to speak the word of God to others but rather through a child who didn't even know who God was. The point of the story is that God's voice can come to us in surprising and unexpected ways and through unlikely people. And especially, through young people.

My last church I served was in downtown Birmingham and it was pretty common for homeless people to sleep in our church courtyard. One man who regularly slept there was named Warren and he battled schizophrenia. Because of that, he believed that the land where the church sat actually belonged to him and that we had stolen it. So he would yell all sorts of obscenities at us because he believed we had taken what was his. But when he wasn't yelling at us, or sometimes even when he was, he would also want me to take him to the restaurant across the street and get him something to eat. I did a few times but, y'all, I got to be honest. Warren was a pain to deal with and most days, I just wanted to avoid him.

But I made a big mistake – I took Nina with me to work a whole lot back then.

At the time, she was around 5 years old and as she walked through the courtyard, she'd see Warren. She understood enough to know that he was sick and that he was homeless and that he was hungry. So she would say, "Daddy, we need to go get him something to eat." I'd say, "Nina I don't have time right now. Maybe later." And she would give me this stare of just immense disappointment.

Have you ever told your kids that your disappointed in them? That's how it's supposed to go, right. But let me tell you, there's no worse feeling than your kid being disappointed in you, especially when you know they're right. So Warren started getting a free meal a whole lot more often.

Now was God speaking to me through Nina? I don't know. But what I do know is this:

Not avoiding a mentally ill homeless person just because he's difficult is in line with my faith.

Giving food to someone who is hungry is in line with my faith.

Whether or not God literally sent Nina to tell me to give Warren food, Nina helped me hear the voice of God in the sense that she helped me better live the life that I believe God wants me to live.

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And lest you think God only speaks to me through my eldest daughter, let me tell you about Julian – though God speaks much louder through her than through Nina.

I'm guessing like many of you, I found the 2020 election to be extremely stressful. On the afternoon of election day, I had taken Julian to a park, but I was not fully present. I was scrolling twitter looking for any information that might give me a clue how the election would turn out even though I knew there was no way to know until the votes were all counted.

Julian became increasingly frustrated with me and finally, she crossed her arms, stomped her foot, and yelled, “Daddy! Put your phone down and play with me!”

Now was God speaking through Julian? I don’t know, but what I do know is this:

God would much rather I spend quality time with my kid than endlessly scroll through twitter looking for election results.

I know that I would be far happier playing with my kid than I would scrolling and worrying.

Whether or not God literally sent Julian to tell me to put my phone away, Julian helped me hear the voice of God to remind me what’s really important and what’s really life-giving.

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But there’s one more aspect to the story of God speaking to Samuel that we have to wrestle with:

What if the voice of God as heard by the next generation is something we’d rather not hear? God’s message to Samuel was that Eli and his sons were no longer fit to lead the people as priests. The old way of doing the work of the temple was no longer the way God had in mind. It was time for new leadership, new ideas, new ventures.

This is why our slogan, “God is still speaking,” is both so refreshing and, at the same time, so hard. It’s refreshing because I want a faith that is vibrant and renewing. It’s hard because it means that it is very likely that the next generation will challenge us in ways that make us uncomfortable...and yet, if we pay attention to the arc of our faith story, that’s exactly how it’s supposed to be.

The best any of us can hope to have is a glimpse of part of God’s truth that helps us live out our faith in our time. But none of us have The Truth because God can never be contained by any specific religious belief or teaching. And so perhaps what it means to listen for the voice of God is to be open to being stretched, to be open to being uncomfortable, to be open to considering that the way things have been is not necessarily the way things always need to be.

That was the message that God had for Samuel, the message that the child Samuel had to find the courage to tell Eli, the message that Eli had to find the humility and grace to accept. And friends, that’s exactly how this story ends.

Samuel shared with Eli the message God gave him, and Eli accepted it, as hard as it must have been, as a word from God.

Friends, God is still speaking.

God speaks words of hope and comfort.

And God speaks words of challenge and discomfort.

God speaks to us in ways we expect.

And God speaks to us in ways that surprise us.

Sometimes uses us to speak to others.

And sometimes God uses others to speak to us.

But through it all and for all time, we place our hope and our faith in this singular truth, "God is still speaking." May we have the courage and the humility to listen. Amen.