

Our UCC Faith: We Listen for a Still Speaking God
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Psalm 46, Hebrews 4:12

There are people in every generation of the Christian faith who wonder whether God is still speaking in their time and place. **Some believe that God has already said everything that we ever need to know** in scripture, or through some church figurehead, or in some church document, and that all we need to do is to read and embrace it.

Personally, I don't believe that God was done speaking at Pentecost, or that God was done speaking when the Council of Chalcedon finished the Apostle's Creed, or when the Reformers closed the Biblical canon. That's why I feel right at home in the United Church of Christ.

In 1620, when our spiritual forebears prepared to leave Europe for the New World, their pastor, John Robinson, sent them off with this historic commission: "**God has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word.**"

In this powerful sentence, Robinson explained that God's revelation could not be confined to scripture, to a creed, or to a catechism, neither could it be attributed exclusively to a pope, a religious body, or to a unique event or period in history.

The word of God, Robinson argued, was more expansive than all of these.

"Yet more light and truth...." Robinson's assertion continues to be the hallmark of United Church of Christ beliefs. That is why in our tradition we read the Bible, we study ancient creeds and look to the wisdom and guidance of individuals and faith communities throughout history and across cultures.

But it is also why we never let ourselves believe that we have read or heard all that God has to say, or all that God may be calling us to be and do.

Yes, God is still speaking...and has been, from the beginning of time. Scripture tells us that God spoke, and creation came into being. After the flood, God spoke again, making covenant with all people and creatures of earth. Later, a new covenant is given to Abraham, promising numerous descendants. Later still, God speaks again, this time putting it in writing in

the Ten Commandments. God speaks through prophets like Jeremiah, Hosea, Isaiah and the words are written on their hearts.

One way to understand the Bible is to see it as a collection of stories and wisdom about God's responses to Israel's maturation as a faithful people. Just as parents' covenants with their children adapt to the natural maturing process, so does God adapt to ours.

The flood story is about the need for a covenant between God and human beings—so human beings will know what to do (and what NOT to do) in the future. Abraham's story is about human beings learning to trust the covenant God has made; that's why God has to make the covenant with old Abe four times...that we know of. The story of the Ten Commandments is about our need to have the terms of our relationship with God "in writing," that is, to make the relationship more formal—to form an organized religion.

Now, God could be changing things because the other rules just weren't working—the people kept breaking them. I like to think, though, that the people weren't recalcitrant; they were just maturing. Maybe the people kept breaking the old covenant because they were ready for a new kind of relationship.

Think about it. What happens when you try to enforce a 12-year-old's rules on your 17-year-old? Is the 17-year-old likely to abide by them?

I rest my case.

Those of you who have recently been through (or are about to go through) the process of sending your children off to live away from home for the first time... What was that like? Did you send them off with a set of rules? Did you write up a contract about what behaviors would be tolerated and which wouldn't be? Did you remind them of their curfew? Did you have every expectation they'd keep it?

If you didn't write up a contract, how did you send your children off? What words did you say?

Do you remember the words that were said to you when you left home the first time?

Some of you have entered the stage of life when you're beginning to set rules for aging parents. Strange, isn't it, the roles begin reversing? Anxieties shift as adult children go to bed at night praying God keeps their parent's safe.

As relationships with our loved ones evolve, as the rules change, God's words remind us: ***What's real, what's deepest, what's best is not what we write down or chisel into stone. What's real and deepest and best is what the prophet Jeremiah says is "written on our hearts".***

Think back over your life. How has God spoken to you? Were there incidents that seemed like more than coincidence? Times where you felt led to do something and it was definitely NOT because you wanted to do it? Where you felt a nudge to help someone or say something or be something?

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr said he heard God speak to him in a quiet moment at his kitchen table, promising to be with him for the journey ahead with the Montgomery bus boycotts. In fact, the actor who portrayed King in the recent biopic "Selma" says that he heard God calling him to the role seven years before it happened, so he began preparing for his audition seven years before it happened.

God's voice has power. God's voice is important. But it is hard to truly follow God unless we hear God and we cannot hear God unless we begin to consider how God speaks to us. If God is still speaking, how do we hear?

Pope Francis said in a recent homily that one of the greatest impediments to hearing God is a self-centered heart. We cannot only go to God about us or when we need something. We cannot only listen for God's voice when it benefits something in our lives.

But it's hard because our culture encourages us to be self-centered---to be strong individuals, look out for ourselves, prove ourselves, BE ourselves. So much about self. So many conflicting messages. It's not easy. We may be longing to hear from God, but be frustrated that nothing seems to be happening.

Writer and pastor Tony Kurz interviewed hundreds of people about how God felt present to them while writing his book: "Aloof: Figuring out Life with a God who Hides." The resounding answer he got was one of ambivalence. People felt like maybe, kinda, sorta God spoke to them, but were not sure.

And he warns that church life can reinforce myths about God's presence that are harmful to us: the myth that God shows up all the time. So we are consistently disappointed when faith doesn't work like that.

Maybe we picked up the idea from the Bible, where God seems to be talking left and right. Calling Abraham, calling Moses, calling Samuel, sending the Holy Spirit for this and that.

We tend to gloss over the parts of the Bible when the people are waiting to hear God; especially in the Psalms. There are entire generations when God seems silent and the people seem adrift. So when we feel adrift, maybe it's a comfort to remember that.

In the life of faith, God's presence is one of those things that may take practice to recognize, because it tends to come to us through ordinary, everyday life – moments that are not anything like a burning bush. The laugh of a baby, a piece of music that moves us, the vastness of the ocean, the intricacy of a flower.

C.S. Lewis says "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains." When we are struggling or when we feel lost, those are the times to really stop and listen even though they are often the hardest times to do so.

Those are the times when God's voice might be really trying to push through, trying to win over messages of depression, anxiety, bitterness, vengeance, jealousy or hate.

THOSE messages are readily available to us. They are in the news. They are in commercials. They are in the road rage on the highway. They are in hurt that drives people to inflict pain on others. Those messages boom on repeat through a megaphone again and again.

In the midst of all the negativity, hurt and pain we see around us, I believe God's voice is still speaking, still trying to get our attention, still calling us to be our best and most loving selves. Can you hear it?

No matter how much our lives change, no matter how many times we re-visit the parameters and boundaries of our human relationships, one thing is certain and never changes—the love that has claimed us as God's own, symbolized in the waters of baptism sprinkled on baby Gabriela's forehead today.

God says we are each intimately known right down to the numbers of hairs on our heads and we all have a place here. A big part of our work together as a community of faith, is working out all the details of that. Yes, God's love is really that big. Can you see it? Can you hear it? God is still speaking...

Amen.