

“Still Speaking”
Sermon preached at Congregational UCC
Sunday, January 14, 2018
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Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51

Sometimes the people and places we might easily dismiss or overlook become precisely the way God speaks to us.

A young boy sleeps in the tiny side room of the temple in the city of Shiloh. His parents are good and simple people from the hill country outside the city in another town. His mother Hannah had longed for a child and had endured torment from others because she was childless. When Samuel was born she did what devoted, faithful parents sometimes did: she dedicated him to God’s service in the temple.

So there is Samuel, just a boy, an outsider to the ruling family of Shiloh, there he is, asleep when he is startled awake by a voice he does not know. Assuming it must be the priest Eli, the only other one there, he runs to the older man’s room but Eli dismisses him. It happens again. Eli doesn’t catch on at first who is speaking to Samuel. Eli has become so set in his ways he has stopped listening for that voice, has forgotten the sound of it.

Finally Eli comprehends and tells him to respond saying, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” Samuel, who scholars guess was between 8 and 12 years old, hears the word, and with fear and trembling, speaks the truth to the priest, relaying God’s charge of blasphemy against his family. A side note: blasphemy here doesn’t mean Eli’s family swore at God or that they stole money from the offering plate. It means they took food beyond what was rightfully theirs from the sacrificial offering. They mistreated those in need, they created more need. There was other misconduct involved as well that we don’t usually talk about in church. God speaks and Samuel speaks and Eli hears. And the course of history for the people of Israel is changed forever.

We’re told the word of God was rare in those days. We may suspect that the word of God is rare today but I wonder . . .

Sometimes we assume the only way God speaks is through the prophets past and present. Maybe somewhere along the way, like Eli we quit letting God surprise us. But God has never just used spoken word. Burning bushes, flashes of light, doves, angels, rainbow, a whale and a donkey, dreams, infants in manglers, 100-year-olds who see visions – all these and more are vessels.

God seems to love surprises and breaking precedent, and defying stereotypes. Every now and then God uses someone in power, someone with influence or wealth or charisma. But more often than not God seems to lean toward ordinary people, not particularly holy or especially gifted people, sometimes even those who have no faith whatsoever.

In the gospel reading, God also speaks through human connections, the relationships present. I had never noticed before how often the words “found” and “find” are used in this passage. John the Baptist finds Andrew who finds his

brother Simon Peter; Andrew tells him they'd found the Messiah, Jesus goes to Galilee and finds Philip, who then finds Nathanael who discovers Jesus had found him first. This intricate web of relationships becomes the conduit for the Spirit's voice.

Of course when it came to the connection with Nathanael it almost didn't happen at all. Because Nathanael was ready to walk away, all ready to make fun of Philip for seeing something in this rabbi, maybe use a meme on facebook to mock the notion of a Messiah from *Nazareth* of all places! I wonder if there were other potential followers that day who walked away because they knew for a fact nothing good could come from that backwater hole . . . I wonder if others missed the chance to follow Jesus because they knew beyond any doubt that those people in Nazareth should just stay in Nazareth! Go back where they came from! We don't need any more people from there!

In 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, a group of local ministers met at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to figure out a way to stop the forced segregation on city buses. Rosa Parks had recently been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white person. Much discussion ensued but no clear plan took shape. Until this young pastor, a man in his 20's, new in town and not well known speaks up. A boycott followed that would help change the history of a nation, led by Martin Luther King Jr, whose ancestors came from Africa in chains.

Sometimes the very places and people we would dismiss or overlook become the vessel, the way God speaks to us.

Can anything good come from the hill country? Can anything good come from Nazareth? Can anything good come from a place like Haiti, or Congo? Mexico or El Salvador? They're only trouble! Criminals! Keep them out!!

Tell that to Wilmot Collins, newly elected mayor of Helena Montana, a refugee from Liberia, active in his Methodist church. Tell that to Alix Idrache who arrived in the US from Haiti in 2009, unable to speak English, but who seven years later graduated from Westpoint determined to serve his adopted country. Tell that to 800,000 DACA recipients, 91% of whom are employed, pay taxes and contribute to social security. Tell that to the millions of refugees and immigrants who own businesses, teach and farm and build and practice medicine, strengthen communities and raise families. Tell that to the men, women and children who are simply trying to survive and keep their families together. Tell that to the communities that depend on their labor, their leadership, their presence.

There is a powerful poem entitled "Home" by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, too lengthy to quote here, so I share just a part of it:

*no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you . . .
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.
no one leaves home unless home chases you*

*fire under feet . . .
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land*

Source: <https://genius.com/Warsan-shire-home-annotated>

God is speaking through the lives of immigrants and refugees, through native born and homeless, through the human connections we struggle to make with each other, through our finding one another. Faith communities that welcome and befriend and walk alongside those who come fleeing poverty and violence are learning this every day.

We learned this in our journey with Minerva – that God had something wonderful and hopeful to say through her and her children, through those rich and loving connections we all made.

If we shut out those connections in fear, if we welcome only those who look like the majority of us or those of means, if we dismiss an individual, a group, a nation merely out of bigotry and fear we do so at our own peril. Friends, I am less concerned about the president's choice of words than I am about the racist belief system reflected in them. Do we need safe borders? Of course. But if our government and our people make people of color the enemy then we are morally and spiritually bankrupt. Because God does not respect our borders and is very likely speaking across them. And God through all generations has made it abundantly clear we are to welcome the stranger.

God is still speaking through us as well. God has called us into sanctuary ministry and we have said, "here we are, use us." And God is speaking through the family we are about to welcome into our lives. We have found each other and together we will try to set this right.

I have no doubt whatsoever that whatever else happens, God will be speaking to us through their witness among us.

Here and now, in this season of Epiphany, the season of God's revealing God's own self, revealing light and love for all, in this very season, God is speaking still.