

“How God Speaks”  
I Kings 19:9-12; Matthew 18:18-20  
January 19, 2020

This is the second Sunday after Epiphany, the season in which the Church has spoken of the manners in which God reveals Himself to us. Scripture lessons for this season have traditionally included the visits of the Wise Men to Bethlehem, when the gift of Christ was shown to be not just for one chosen people, but for the whole world. Other scripture lessons speak of Christ’s baptism at the hands of John, with a heavenly Dove descending and an other-worldly voice proclaiming, “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased - hear Him!” Last Sunday we heard Jesus identifying Himself with the liberator described in Isaiah’s prophecies. And now this morning we have heard of God being revealed not in earthquake, wind, or fire, but in the silence of eternity.

Of course, when God reveals Himself, we are called upon to make a response. To do that, we need to open our ears to hear God in the first place. How does God speak? There are all kinds of pious, theologically correct answers to that question. And I’m not going to give them to you right now, maybe because I’m not all that pious, or maybe I’m not always theologically correct! Instead, I’d like to recall a little story. A wee lad, as they say in Scotland, was wandering home from Sunday School, dawdling on his way. He scuffed his shoes into the grass; he found a caterpillar; he picked a milkweed pod and blew out all the fluffy white stuff from inside. A bird’s nest in the tree overhead caught his eye, as the sound of a babbling brook tickled his ear as a warm breeze touched his face.

A neighbor watched the boy’s zig-zag course and asked our laddie what he was up to. “Oh, I’ve been to Sunday School” came the youngster’s reply, given in an off-hand kind of way since the boy was more interested in the snail he had just uncovered from under a rock. “I’ve learned a lot about God,” the boy went on.

The neighbor, suitably impressed, offered to pay a bright silver coin if our lad could tell him where God is. Quick as a flash, the answer came: "I'll give you twice as much money, Mister, if you can tell me where God AIN'T."

Smart boy! And if you will take a little leap with me now, I am going to suggest that a God who is everywhere present, as our Scottish Sunday Schooler discovered, probably speaks to every situation in which we, as God's creatures, find ourselves. If we are willing to listen, we will find that God is eternally speaking, to anyone who has ears to hear.

For example, Believers can affirm that God spoke through the Prophets. That's an easy one, because the Bible says so. In fact, we say that God speaks through the Bible, because the Bible is God's Word. No surprises there! What may come as a little more of a surprise is that despite the fact that I'm a Congregationalist, I suspect God is able - and willing - to speak through Pope Francis, through bishops, through synods and presbyteries and kings and all sorts of people that we, as Congregationalists, congratulate ourselves for not having to deal with on a regular basis.

Now as I said, I'm not going to give all the theologically correct answers right now as to how God speaks. In fact, that is not the real question we need to be asking. God speaks. That is a "given" for us. What we need to be asking is, How and where does God speak with Finality, and with Authority?

Now "authority" is a tough word - not just for the average American, but for Congregationalists in particular. We don't like to hear about authority, and we don't like to talk about it. But God speaks through all sorts of communities who have a different idea of what authority is, and where authority lies. God speaks through the Eastern Orthodox with all their patriarchs; God speaks through Presbyterians with their synods and sessions; God speaks through Unitarian-Universalists - and all sorts of people we may feel vaguely uncomfortable about. All those traditions, like ours, affirm that God speaks in a multitude of ways, but we as followers of the New England Way differ as to

how God speaks with Finality, and with Authority. And the difference lies in this: It is as Congregationalists that we affirm that God speaks authoritatively, and with finality, through His people - the gathered Church - the local congregation. It is not that God is silent elsewhere. We should be ready to hear God speaking in all manner of places, just as our young Sunday School laddie found evidence of God's presence under rocks, and in plants, and in the breeze of a lazy Sunday afternoon. The problem comes with trying to unambiguously discern God's presence, filtering out all that is ungodly, but which may be masquerading in righteous garb.

When God is present - and God is present everywhere - what is our response? And how do we, as Congregationalists, believe that God is speaking to us, and through us? How in the world do we come to such a belief? Is there any validity to what we say - or are we just deluding ourselves?

We all know the proof texts of modern Congregationalism. Matthew's gospel gives us one, just heard this morning: "Wherever two or three are gathered together, I am there." No need for a priest, or for the stamp of approval from a national Church, or of even just a denomination. But we risk isolating ourselves, resting ourselves on too narrow a reed, if we can find ourselves in scripture only in one verse here or another verse there. There's got to be more to us than a verse from Matthew 18.

Well then, when we look at the Bible, as we read through its pages, where are we found therein? Where is Congregationalism? If scripture is a mirror in which we are reflected, we find that the Bible seems to be very much oriented towards God acting through select individuals in order to rescue the wayward masses from desperate situations. It seems that all too often the people collectively - the congregation - have to be saved from themselves; rarely are they seen as authoritative instruments of God's saving grace. We readily see that God acted through the great individuals of scripture: father Abraham as founder of a great nation - and Moses the deliverer - and Joshua the commander - and even through that pagan monarch Cyrus, Emperor of Persia. Scripture

calls Cyrus “God’s anointed,” or Messiah. In addition, God acted through some not-so-obviously-great individuals: through Habakkuk and Malachi and Haggai and so many others whom scripture characterizes as “minor.”

But these were all individuals. What about the congregation?

Well, if we stand back a moment, and check out the forest rather than the trees, we will find that underlying just about everything that happens in the Bible is the notion that the point of the great drama of salvation is that God speaks to, and through, Israel - the community, the people of God. Israel is chosen - why? To be a light, a witness, to the whole world. Israel is freed from Pharaoh - why? Because God has heard the groanings of an entire people. And what happens when the field of dry bones hears the word of the Lord in the time of Ezekiel? The dry bones respond by coming to life. And that is what we are about. We are to respond as well - as a people - as a congregation - through which, to which, God has spoken, and continues to speak. It’s not that we have to pick and choose to find where we are, as Congregationalists, in the Bible. Rather, the entire Bible is all about us.

So when we gather together next week in our annual meeting, let us remember that we do so as a community that is responding to God’s call. In the coming year, let us seek to do God’s will as we listen to God’s voice as spoken through officers, deacons, boards, and committees. In addition, let us also listen for God’s voice as we speak and hear one another in open discussion. And in this season of Epiphany, may the Lord show Himself to us through our demeanor, our commitment, and in our love, one for another.

Let us pray: