

## **“GOD IS STILL SPEAKING”**

**Reading: I Kings 19:1-18**

“GOD IS STILL SPEAKING.” That’s been the slogan of the United Church of Christ recently, and it’s also what the prophet Elijah found out in today’s scripture lesson from the Book of First Kings. Having run afoul of the establishment (and having his life threatened by Jezebel), Elijah lit out for the wilderness where he remained for forty days and forty nights. For a while his situation became so desperate that he even thought about killing himself, but eventually he came to a cave on Mount Horeb and spent the night there. It was there that Elijah heard the voice of the Lord speaking out of the whirlwind. It was a voice that told him to quit feeling sorry for himself, to come down off the mountain, and to get involved in the political and social issues of his time.

Yesterday, our denomination, The United Church of Christ celebrated its forty-eighth anniversary. Formed in 1957, The UCC is a merger of what was once two separate religious communities—The Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church. It was a daring experiment at the time and it remains a daring experiment today. Although we are a church with roots stretching back to the Reformation, we are also a church that was “reborn” during the tumultuous decade of the 1960’s. It is a church that has often been misunderstood because it has been at the forefront of so many controversial issues. But in a sense, it is a church that was born out of controversy, and it is a church that has always tried to be at forefront of the religious, moral, and political issues of our time.

Just to cite a few examples, it was our forbears for instance, who led the movement to abolish slavery back in the nineteenth century. It was also our forbears who led the fight to establish a system of public education in this country, and tried to sensitive the country to the plight of Native Americans, an effort that continues through the work of the Council for American Indian Ministries. Our forbears also took significant stands on behalf of child labor laws and woman’s rights, and played an influential role in helping to establish the Nineteenth Amendment which gave women the right to vote.

More recently, the UCC worked to establish the Civil Rights Act, to end the War in Viet Nam, to support the rights of farm workers and to advocate on behalf of Gay Americans. The church of course, was not flawless in its handling of all these issues, but the point is that at least it did

handle them. Whether you agree or disagree with some of the stands taken by the UCC over the years, you have to admit it's a church that isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. It's a church that is a lot less concerned with having a symbol than with *being* a symbol—a symbol of God's love in a world that all too often turns a deaf ear to the cries of the marginalized and the needy.

Not long ago, Laurence Cohen, a writer for the *Hartford Courant* took the UCC to task for trying to be a church that tries so hard to be relevant that it ends up making itself look foolish. Maybe so, but I ask you, what is the alternative to trying to make religion seem relevant? To make it seem irrelevant? Unlike our long-lost cousins, The Unitarian Universalists, the UCC has never abandoned its commitment to the Bible, the Trinity, or the pre-eminence of Christ. But working out of that tradition we have tried to interpret the Word of God in each succeeding generation.

Shortly before the pilgrims set sail for the “new world,” Pastor John Robinson reminded them that, “God hath more light and truth to break forth from his holy Word.” In other words, he tried to remind them that, “God is still speaking.” Because most of us in the UCC believe that God is indeed, “still speaking,” we also believe that no word from God is ever God's last word. Whereas many of our Christian brothers and sisters would say, “Never place a comma where God has placed a period,” we would say just the opposite, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

Believing that life is more like a comma than like a period is what the UCC is all about. Nestorius, one of the early “church fathers” once said, “A born God, a dead God, a buried God I cannot adore.” In a way, the UCC is like that. We want to worship a living God not a dead one. We want our faith to be to make sense for the times in which we live. That is why we're just as concerned with what the Bible means as we are with what it says. That is also why we are not afraid to use science and education in our quest to know the truth because we feel confident that faith can stand the light of truth.

Too many Christians today, however, are not like that. They are like Elijah in today's scripture reading, who tried to hide in the dark recesses of a cave in order to escape the demands that God had thrust upon him. But as Elijah found out it won't do us any good to stick our head in the sand; to pull in our horns and to try and live by the words of the eleventh commandment—“thou shall not go out on a limb (the commandment upon which are “hanged” all the law and the prophets.).

This is not to say there are not times when we need to retreat from the world; when we need to re-gather our spiritual strength in order to meet the duties and demands of a world that continues to grow ever more challenging

and complex. But turning away is not the answer. A ship driven by a storm at sea very often does better by sailing into the wind than it does by sailing away from it. Tempting as it may sometimes be to try and turn back the clock, the direction God moves is always forward. In the end, Elijah found God not in the cave, but on the mountain top. As people of faith we can run but we cannot hide. We cannot hide from our responsibility to serve God and love our neighbor in this present generation.

So as people from around the country gather this weekend in Atlanta to celebrate the twenty-fifth General Synod of the United Church of Christ, it should come as no surprise to learn that the theme of this year's gathering is: "Come Listen, Go Serve. God is Still Speaking." And no matter what you may think and no matter what you may hear, either about our church or about the Church in general, God is indeed, "still speaking." God is speaking in us, and through us, and yes, even in spite of us. And what is it that God is saying?

While no one can ever read the mind of God perfectly, I think we can say with at least a degree of certainty that whatever else God may say in the future it will continue to be a word of unity. The motto of the United Church of Christ, taken from the Gospel according to John (John 17:11) is, "That they may all be one." That is a good motto especially for the age in which we live.

A few years ago, when I was visiting our partner church in Korea, I attended a worship service in a congregation that had a large, cracked globe hanging from the ceiling. That globe symbolized the broken and divided world in which we live. We live in a world that is divided by nationality, religion, race and income. The smaller the world becomes the further we seem to move apart.

The goal of the United Church of Christ is not only to be a "united church," but also to be a "uniting one." God is still speaking and God is calling us to create a world where all are welcome and none are excluded. Although we may not all belong to the same church, we all belong to the same God. God, through Christ, is calling us to build bridges between peoples and nations; between cultures and religions. Our task is to "break down the dividing walls of hostility between us" (Ephesians 2:14) and to reconcile peoples and nations to the "still speaking God" who calls us not only to lives of "obedience and praise," but also to be "servants in the service of others."

But if God is still speaking a word of unity to the churches, God is also still speaking a word of justice as well. Pope John XXIII said it best when he remarked, "If you want peace, work for justice." To borrow a

phrase from my friend, The Rev Dr. Alvan Johnson, Pastor of Bethel AME Church in Bloomfield, we are called to be “justice warriors” in the times in which we live. It’s no longer enough for people of faith just to pray for peace; we also have to work for justice for without justice there will be no peace.

Mark Twain once humorously quipped, “Remember the poor. It will cost you nothing.” But who remembers the poor these days? Who is looking out for the downtrodden and the disadvantaged in our midst? In the city of Hartford, the same city where Twain lived and wrote some of his most famous books, there is almost one killing every week. Last week, a twenty-one year-old mother was gunned down in the street as she went out to find milk for her one-year-old baby. Antonio Artis, one of dozens of people who turned out to pay his respects, said that young men in the North End would gladly give up a life of drug dealing and hustling on the streets if the city could provide meaningful job and educational opportunities.

“Most of us have a criminal record,” he said, “which means no one’s gonna hire us. What are we supposed to do? We have to eat.” According to an article that appeared in last week’s *Courant*, Artis said he recently returned from Florida where he tried to improve his job prospects by taking courses in carpentry and other manual skills. Still, when he returned to Hartford, he could not find work. “It’s tough up here,” he said. “Everybody has a gun, it seems like, and everybody is willing to use it” (*Hartford Courant*, June 23, 2005, p.A6).

Thomas Jefferson once remarked that, “Hungry people do not die peacefully,” and that is just as true in the city of Hartford as it is in the city of Baghdad. God is still speaking but God is trying to remind us that in order to create the kind of climate where peace prevails, we first have to create the kind of climate where justice flourishes.

But God not only continues to speak a word about unity and justice, God also continues to speak a word about hope. Emily Dickinson once described hope as

“The thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all.”

She was right. If there is one thing we can’t stop doing it’s hoping. It’s been said, “Where there is life there is hope.” But in fact, just the opposite is true—“where there is hope there is life.” Hope like love, is one thing we can never get enough of.

The Reverend William Sloan Coffin tells a story about the time he received a letter from his son at camp. His son wasn't sure how to sign the letter. "Love," sounded too mushy. "Fondly," sounded too formal. Finally, he simply signed it, "Lots of Hope."

That's a great way for people of faith to sign their letters. For hope is a sign of the unending presence of the "still speaking God." The God who not only calls us to listen for his "still, small voice," but also calls us to be the voice for the world's voiceless. God calls us to speak truth to power and to be purveyors of hope in a time when hope seems to be in increasingly short supply.

The Letter to the Hebrews said it best, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith can't always produce miracles, but it can always dispense hope, which is one of the most indispensable gifts that God has ever given us.

Last week, two of my colleagues, Allie Perry and Toni Smith (both UCC ministers) appeared on a local radio talk show. They had a different perspective on a lot of issues from those of our more conservative Christian brothers and sisters and I was really proud of them. The United Church of Christ is a church that cares. We are a church that believes. Neither we nor any of our partner churches have anything to apologize for.

Now is not the time to rest. It's not the time to withdraw like Elijah, into the cave of orthodoxy or into a hole of self-pity. By the grace of God, we are who we are; a church that has been called,

"...to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be God's servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory."

God is indeed, still speaking my friends. But are we listening? This weekend as we celebrate the forty-eighth birthday of this courageous church, let us hope that we are.

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June 26, 2005

