

“Thus Says The Lord”
Vermont Conference Annual Meeting, UCC
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“For Thus Says the Lord.”

I have always been skeptical when someone attributes a direct quotation to God. It makes me nervous. I suspect I'm not alone.

Whenever a friend tells me, out of the blue, that God sent word that he should get his teeth cleaned, or that God told Aunt Clara to look under the love seat to find her missing pearl earring, I get uneasy.

I'm pretty sure why. It's because I've never had an experience like that – where, I felt, God told me to seek immediate dental care or look under the love seat for anything.

I am a believer. But, for whatever reason, I do not receive this kind of audible direction from God. I never hear choirs of angels or booming instructions on how to work miracles.

I have never glimpsed the image of Christ in a bar of soap, or a piece of toast, or seen a vision of Jesus in my rearview mirror. It could happen, and perhaps things like this do happen. Just not to me.

I guess it's fair to say that the "still, small voice of God" -- at least as far as I am concerned -- is still very small -- and very quiet.

Please don't misunderstand. I place no limits on God's ability to get my attention. I am sure that, if need be, God will use whatever means necessary to get the point across.

But, for now, it seems that God delights in using the subtle approach. I think God is still wondering if I am capable of standing in awe of all those ordinary run-of-the-mill sorts of miracles. You know, those supernatural events that take place every day and everywhere, and so many of us pass them by without as much as a second glance.

It's sort of strange, when you really think about it, that it is even possible to walk past a tulip in the Vermont springtime and not get swept up in the miracle of it all. A squirrel runs over a tight wire, while clutching onto his evening meal, and we pay it no mind. A big orange blazing sun hides itself behind the hillside as two intellectuals sit in a posh café and swap stories about the silly religious beliefs of their youth.

Airplanes of steel fly over our heads, and tiny cordless telephones ring in our cars, and

far-flung satellites beam 740 channels into our living rooms -- and we yawn and look at one another and say, "You feel like going to Wal-Mart?"

I'd say we overlook far more of God's communiqués than we would like to acknowledge. To be sure, one person's boredom is another's epiphany.

Two friends see the same movie: one falls asleep while the other can't purchase a wink of sleep that night. For her, everything seems different with newly gained insights swirling around in her head. Secret promises are made, the kind we can only make to ourselves: "Tomorrow I will live my life differently." All because of a movie?

God is not only fire and earthquake. God does not always resort to shaking our beds and rattling our cages in order to get our attention.

No, God is, most often, so perfectly obvious that we miss God's presence altogether -- much like the set of keys you hold in your hand as you scurry about your apartment looking for them. Or, the bright yellow spine of the big thick book you are trying to locate on a library shelf -- so clearly visible that your searching eye refuses to cooperate.

God is still speaking, thus says the Lord, but the language of God is radically ordinary, so common that it is possible to let it go unheard altogether.

It is the language of the ordinary miracles, when -- despite all the reasons they should do otherwise -- people build houses and live in them; plant gardens and find the delight in what they and the good earth have produced together; Fall in love and have children; and care deeply for the far-flung places where life has carried them. This is the extraordinary language of God.

Malcolm Muggeridge, a self-professed "religious maniac without a religion" who became a Roman Catholic late in his life, put it this way: "Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message."

When we listen to God, it is not only the new thing that we try to hear, but we train our ears -- and our hearts -- to listen for the old thing that we have never stopped to hear before.

In Luke's version of the Gospel, he tells that haunting story about the rich man who dies and goes to a place of torment, while a poor man dies and enters into paradise. In his agony, the rich man begs Father Abraham -- the God-figure in the story -- to send someone back from the grave to warn his living brothers about the terrible fate that awaits them unless they change their greedy ways.

Father Abraham tells the rich man, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Or, in other words, if they will not pay attention to what God has already done for them, they will not be convinced even if something out of the ordinary, or strange, or miraculous happens.

Perhaps by design or not, this lesser-known parable immediately follows one of Luke's most famous stories. Many of us call it the "Parable of the Prodigal Son."

Maybe Luke decided to order these stories in such a way as to underscore the meaning of it all: God speaks to us everyday through the common and ordinary miracles of life -- the relationships that give us strength and grounding, those that challenge us, the ever flowing stream of forgiveness that washes away our past mistakes, and the extravagant welcome at Christ's table where all are received with open arms -- no matter who we are or what we have done.

If we are unable to locate the miracle in a love like this, then how can we expect to notice it anywhere else? If what God has already given you is not enough, then nothing in my message tonight will ever be able to persuade you.

This work of redirecting people's distracted attention, this is the work of the church. This is what has God has asked us to do.

That's why it's necessary, perhaps at an annual meeting, or more often if you're lucky, to remind yourself of the difference -- the impact -- that our churches DO MAKE in the lives of people, everyday and everywhere.

To step back from our worm picking to get the hawk's eye view again, high above the scene, of how lives are being changed, how strangers are being welcomed and how "Thus Says The Lord" doesn't always have to be followed with talk of abomination, but of life-redeeming grace.

"Pastor, your sermon really touched me this morning. It's just the reminder I needed. I'll be thinking on that all week." Now I know that nine out of 10 of your people say that cause they don't know what else to say ... but for that one ... it made an impact.

For me, good religion redirects all our institution-serving energy into helping us see and name the ordinary as sacred. It's about breaking bread and raising a glass with bawdy laughter. It's about seeing each other through those moments when it feels like laughter will never return. It's about making all of life a sacrament: an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible reality.

It has been said that every preacher has one sermon. If so, I'm pretty sure what mine is: "Pay attention. Life is short." It's the ethic of good living that I see most consistently in Jesus, the one who saw delight and promise in uncomely things: seeds and soil, widows and children, the meek and merciful, peacemakers and outcasts.

Oh I know.... It's really easy to locate all the ways and places where it feels like God is NOT speaking.

I hear all the talk of numerical decline, staff cuts, and budget dis-ease, and I can feel my weary soul climbing onto the proverbial ledge of organizational dis-location.

And then I hear someone casually mention, with far-less urgency, that the UCC has started or received nearly 200 new congregations in the past five years – more than any other five-year period in the past 40 years. Well, thus says the Lord!

I hear understandable anxiety that, in New Orleans, for example, where the UCC once had 13 congregations, a strong college connection and was at the heart of the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University ... that we are now, post-Katrina, but a shadow of our former selves.

And then I read buried in some obscure staff report that more than 7,000 UCC volunteers have participated in rebuilding efforts along the Gulf Coast since 2005. That translates into 168,100 volunteer hours and more than \$3.6 million in donated labor. Maybe the shadow we are casting is not shrinking ... but changing. God IS still speaking.

I'll admit that sometimes when I'm in worship, it feels as if I'm just going through the motions, my mind starts to wander and I glance at my watch wondering how long until we reach the final hymn so I can get on about all the "important" tasks on my to-do list.

But other times it feels as if the sacred and the secular are so woven together that I can't tell the difference.

One of my good friends, Frankie, is a bartender. He sort of lives on the edge. My partner, Jim, and I, know that Frankie loves those Keebler peanut butter chocolate-chip cookies and one day, while at the grocery, we spotted them for something like five packages for \$10, so we purchased them for Frankie. We took them with us to the bar, expecting that he would put them aside and take them home.

But to our surprise, Frankie opened not one but all five packages, placing them before his customers. He even walked around the bar, making sure that all knew the cookies were theirs for the taking.

There, with all these diverse people, mostly strangers, sipping on draft beer or martinis, or Vodka somethings – and eating those same silly Keebler cookies – I saw something more than what was actually there. I saw a Eucharistic feast. Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, and even dwellers of Mesopotamia were there, sharing elements of community and friendship.

And it was the church that trained my eyes – and my heart – to see it.

I, like you, have concerns about the future, how we must change, what and where we will be and look like in say, 5, 10 or 20 years.

But when I gather with others at play and in worship, in advocacy and service, in litany, song and prayer, I sense a shared recognition in the room that's bigger than all that -- a trajectory that seeks to overcome all sadness, loneliness, heartache and injustice.

I feel would-be strangers pulling for one another as friends, a common will to make things right no matter how complex or impossible our hopes -- or wishes -- may be.

For me, this art of paying attention makes God real. Some don't need religion to do that. But, in my case, it is the language of common wonder -- across cultures and the ages -- that connects my eagerness to pay attention with others attempting to do the same.

As Christians, we are called to witness to the abundant reality that Resurrection is a constant force in life. God is always at work -- redeeming injured lives, overcoming injustice, breaking down walls of separation, uniting the human family, and bringing forth signs of abundant life. God is still speaking.

If you have ever heard a beginners violin class -- with something like a hundred small children playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star," supposedly in unison, on their tiny Suzuki stringed instruments — then you may know something of this Resurrection power of which I speak.

Or, maybe you have lain perfectly still on your living room carpet and allowed a couple of newborn puppies to frolic about your head and whisper their sweet wet kisses into your covered ears. If so, you get it.

Or, one time when you really needed it, a stranger offered a cup of cold water, or a can of diet coke, or a bottle of beer. If their simple kindness seemed pretty special at the time, then maybe you know a thing or two about the meaning of it all.

Or, perhaps you have attended a commitment ceremony for a couple of love birds who are each approaching their 87th birthday. (They met in the east wing of the nursing home where they both live.) If you have ever known an occasion like that, then maybe you have glimpsed the bigger picture: *God is still speaking*.

The God who spoke and the whole universe came into being... The God who created order out of chaos with a single word... The God who was lonely and said, "I think I'll make myself a world"... That wildly imaginative and creative God is creating still.

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One day, while out looking for honey, Winnie-the-Pooh meets up with his good friend Piglet who is busy scribbling on a pad of paper. "My, oh my," says Pooh. "What you are doing Piglet?"

Piglet responds: "I'm writing a story about a pig and a bear that live together in the woods."

"Oh bother," says Pooh. "I'll never understand where writers get all of their good ideas."

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The next time you find yourself wishing that God would pull you aside and whisper a lullaby in your ear...The next time you are looking for something clever, something different, something unique that lets you alone know for sure... The next time you need an audible, clear signal that all is right with the world and God is in control...

Then stop and take your own pulse. Pause and listen to whatever sounds your eardrum can detect. Feel the solid ground beneath your feet and consider the infinite worlds and possibilities beyond. Remember that God's single word gave life to it all.

And because, in that moment, you have the capability and the wherewithal to say "thanks"... then, you will know it is true: Thus says the Lord.

Already, you have been given evidence enough. AMEN.