

God is Still Speaking

Central Lutheran Church – Dallas, Texas
Genesis 1:1-5 / Psalm 29 / Acts 19:1-7 / Mark 1:4-11
January 7, 2024

Before I came to White Rock Center of Hope, I spent most of my adult life serving local churches. During that time, I was privileged to serve 9 congregations affiliated with 5 denominations (and, yes, the ELCA made my list).

One of the joyful parts of being a pastor in the context of a local community of faith is building relationships with people and listening to their stories.

In seminary they never told me that some of these conversations would include the phrase, "I've never told anyone this, but . . ."

To maintain confidentiality, I won't share the details of the stories that followed. Instead, I'd like you to know that a significant number of these accounts were faith related.

In some cases, people heard from God and regretted failing to take action and wondered how a different response might have changed their life.

In others, people heard from God in such dramatic ways that sharing seemed awkward or even impossible to communicate.

While each of our stories is unique, they all include moments when God speaks.

How exactly does God speak?

A good place to begin answering this question is with this morning's Scripture readings.

In our first reading from Genesis, God is speaking.

In fact, the first reading contains the very first words found in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, "in the beginning." This is directly followed by the first recorded action: God speaking.

God speaks creation into being. Over the course of the first chapter in the Bible, God speaks and creates again and again and again. By the

time God is done speaking the world as we know it has come into being.

Think about all of the new beginnings God has spoken into being – both those God accomplished by speaking with words and by speaking through people.

I wonder what it would have been like to be one of the 5 people who attended this congregation's first service in 1922 at the downtown YMCA when it was known as St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Can you imagine Central before it was known as Central?

I wonder what it would have been like some 30 years later to be a part of the formation of Bethany Lutheran Church. Can you imagine joining a new church during the years of the baby boom and when religion of our sort was growing faster than ever before?

I wonder what it was like just a few years ago when Central and Bethany decided that the future was better together and moved forward with the merger that brings us all here today. If you joined one of these congregations in the years prior to the merger, did you ever imagine the church as it is today?

God speaks clearly through creation, but God's speaking isn't limited to creation.

God also speaks in this morning's Gospel lesson from Mark. His first chapter begins not with Jesus' birth, but with his baptism.

For Mark, the story of Jesus, the one who is God with skin on, the one who is without sin, the one who has arrived to forever change the world begins with an act of obedience as he walks into the water and is baptized by John.

The story unfolds as we might expect and as it had for the hundreds of others who had entered the water ahead of Jesus to be baptized by John until – until God speaks.

God speaks from the heavens calling Jesus "God's Son, the Beloved – the one with whom God is well pleased."

In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus goes from these baptismal waters to 40 days of temptation to calling his first disciples. Later, Jesus goes

from being baptized to inviting all who follow in his Way to be baptized in his name.

Over the last 2,000 plus years baptism has been a central sacrament in the life of the church – an opportunity for people to receive a new identity as a child of God.

Looking around this sacred space I'm curious how each of you experienced baptism. Whether or not the skies opened and an audible voice from heaven was heard, I trust that the experience was life changing for you.

What is your baptismal story? Do you remember feeling the water? Do you remember hearing the pastor call you by name and then say "child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever?"

What is your confirmation story? Do you remember some of the students who were part of your confirmation class or any of the many lessons you learned? Do you recall affirming your baptism?

What is your living wet story? How do you engage in what Martin Luther called "remembering your baptism?" How has it been for you to follow the Way of Jesus in the years since your baptism?

God speaks at the moment of Jesus' baptism and God spoke at your baptism and at mine.

And, God is speaking yet again in this morning's other baptismal account found in the 19th chapter of Acts.

Remember? It was the one in which Paul encountered folks who had been baptized by John and then baptizes them in the name of Jesus. This first part of the story is easy to follow and makes a lovely companion reading to the Gospel lesson.

However, the passage goes on to say that these newly baptized folks responded quite differently than I did to my baptism and, I imagine, differently than you did as well. They started speaking in tongues and prophesying.

To say that Christian experience varies widely is an understatement. What's normal to one group is strange to another.

How strange of us to worship as we do. Have you ever worshipped with Quakers or perhaps with Pentecostals or maybe Baptists? Did you find it a bit strange? This morning we have among us several guests who are not Lutheran. For them perhaps this Lutheran worship experience feels strange.

How strange that we skipped over Epiphany. Some of you showed up this morning expecting this service would focus on Epiphany. Maybe you even expected to receive a star word to guide you for the year ahead in keeping with a tradition Pastor Veronika started last year. On the church calendar Epiphany was yesterday, but Epiphanies can and do happen every day.

How strange to begin a new year with an unfamiliar face serving as your guest preacher. Perhaps I've already made a misstep or done something differently than is the custom here. Or perhaps that dissonance will happen for you later in the service.

In Genesis 1, in Psalm 29, in Mark 1, and in Acts 19 God was speaking.

At the creation of this church and in the new creation of this as a merged congregation, God was speaking.

At Jesus' baptism and at your baptism, God was speaking.

And, as 2024 begins I trust that God is still speaking.

This morning I chose to wear this white stole containing a big red comma because it is a visual reminder of this morning's message: God is still speaking.

Twenty years ago, the United Church of Christ – a denomination that happens to be in full communion with the ELCA – launched the God is still speaking campaign using this red comma. Alongside it they often included a quote attributed to Gracie Allen, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma."

I invite you to focus on hearing and responding to the voice of our Still Speaking God in big, bold, and beautiful ways today and in the year ahead.

Amen.