

“Still Speaking”

Acts 16

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What if someone came up to you and said that God had spoken to them – a vision, a voice...what would your response be? I suppose it might make some difference whether you knew the person or not...or if you did know the person, WHAT you know about that person – but in some general sense, what would your reaction be? Supportive, skeptical, curious, suspicious? What if you told someone that God had spoken to you – how do you think that would be received? Depends I suppose on whether you walk up and tell a stranger that, or confide in a trusted friend – but still, in general, do you think others would be... supportive, skeptical, curious, suspicious?

Perhaps you're clear about that in yourself, how you would respond to that – someone else, or you, hearing from God – clear about your receptivity or skepticism; or perhaps not clear at all...but mostly I just want you to think about that idea and your reaction as I summarize some events in the Acts. Because in the Book of Acts, people hear God talking a lot – I've been noticing that in the readings through this Easter season, and noticed it again in the reading today, so I thought we would track the different occasions/circumstances of people hearing from God in Acts:

* it starts in Acts 8 with Stephen – he's the 1st follower of Jesus to be martyred; he has a vision of God – not a voice – but the furor over that vision leads to him being stoned to death

* Acts 9 – Saul, who has been persecuting followers of Jesus, is encountered with a vision and the voice of Jesus; he is converted and now he is Paul

* Again in Acts 9 – Ananias, a follower of Jesus, is told in a vision to go and meet the new convert Paul

* Acts 10 – Cornelius, a Gentile - and Peter, Jewish follower of Jesus – they simultaneously have visions and voices from God that bring them together and that bring the Good News to the Gentiles

* Acts 12 – Peter is imprisoned, and an angel of God leads him to freedom

* then we have the story we read today from Acts 16 – we'll get to that

* and later in Acts 23 as Paul is on trial, God speaks to him a word of encouragement

Those are the stories about visions and voices I found in Acts – it's a consistent occurrence. Differing circumstances and reasons for these revelations, but always a clear sense of God's voice, God's guidance, God's presence. And so I wonder as you hear those stories – does that sort of thing still happen today? Did it happen at all even then? Does God speak to others, to you? It seems a kind of tricky topic to unravel as you wonder about it. In our culture today, hearing voices is often connected with mental illness, and that is no spiritual high or laughing matter – we have care and medication that actually seeks to relieve people from those symptoms which can be so debilitating. Or our culture is one that can simply reject the idea of God speaking as unscientific, or sentimental – I'm not sure which is worse, being called illogical or quaint. But my own skepticism falls more in the area of being concerned that people use the voice of God as their own sort of power play, a religious trump card: 'I've heard

God's voice and it agrees with me, now lineup behind me or go to...' – well, you get the idea.

Alright – so hopefully I've muddied up the waters enough to realize that some clarity about such things could be helpful. So what I'm thinking is that we can use the story we read in Acts 16 as a case study for hearing the voice of God – that's my plan. In this story, things begin quite clearly and impressively as Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia saying to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." A couple of things about that: in the verse just before this we're told that the Holy Spirit has been restraining Paul and his companions from going various places, so they are wondering about what to do, and this vision is an answer to that; you'll also notice this is not precisely the voice of God in the vision, but we're told in the story that they perceive this as God calling them to go there. So, a very clear vision – impressive to have this word revealed to Paul...except - and here's a really interesting thing, I think – this vision wasn't exactly right...or at least didn't turn out as Paul expected. Did you notice that? Paul's vision is of a man in Macedonia – 'come help us'...but that's not how things turn out at all. Paul ends up instead in the home of Lydia – she hears the good news and helps Paul, becomes his host. And that's a very good thing – but it's not what the vision told him. Don't you think Paul was expecting to run into some man in Macedonia saying 'we need your help!' I do – but that doesn't happen. So the vision is wrong, and yet good things come out of it – this wonderful connection with Lydia.

I think that's very interesting – this 'wrong' vision that turns out right - in fact I think it's very important...because it's not really that the vision was wrong at all, it's

just that it wasn't so precise. Sometimes the word of God received in these stories of Acts was very precise, but not here, and yet still in this case a very good thing comes of it. That's important, because it can say for us who might not feel so familiar with dramatic visions and direct messages from God (I am personally not so familiar with such things) that God speaking to us is not about step-by-step directions, it is not a divine GPS to precisely guide your every move...but what it is, is being open to God speaking into your life what is life-giving – it's about you listening to what directs you to wholeness with others – and whether the details are precise or imprecise, God uses that speaking and listening in good ways.

The Spirit of Christ speaks life to us – and it turns out that Lydia is a very compelling example for us of that too – because she doesn't have one of those direction visions or precise messages from God – she is one simply trying to listen to God. We're told she was already someone who worshipped God, probably a Gentile adherent to Judaism, and she had gathered with others to pray – she is already seeking and listening. And so when Paul speaks the good news to her of Jesus, she is someone prepared to listen – she opens her heart – and she even opens her home. In these stories of Acts with visions and messages, Lydia seems someone much more like a lot of us – someone trying to find her way - and that desire in her is in itself an openness to God speaking – it is a hospitality to God: hospitality of heart, and hospitality of home – an openness to God that leads to life-giving ways. That's the story from Acts – this interesting picture of listening to God: Paul with an impressive vision that actually turns out to be less than

precise, but still very good; and Lydia, with much less claim to visions and messages, but who hears God's word through Paul and responds with her heart and her home.

And I really was just planning to stay with the Acts story with this sermon, until I noticed something interesting about the Gospel of John – a connection of Acts to John...did you notice as Jesus is talking about his word being with his followers, that Jesus says: 'the Father and I will come and make our home with them...' Well that sounds like Lydia – it's a hospitality image of God speaking and us listening: Lydia is someone with whom the Word of God made it's home – literally – in her heart and in her home. And what Jesus goes on to say, is that as the Word of God makes it's home in us, is at home in us, that then the Holy Spirit teaches us – 'the Spirit will teach you all you need' Jesus says 'even new things! – and will give you peace.'

What we find here isn't a requirement to have stunning visions and crystal clear turn-by-turn directions from God. If that happens – that's great. But it's great too if it doesn't happen – and to have a hospitality of the heart in which God is at home, to have a hospitality of your life in which the Spirit speaks and teaches what is life-giving – that is good – that is what it is for us to be followers of Jesus. As we seek and worship and live and listen, with a sense of God being at home in our hearts and in our lives – good and fruitful things happen – God forms us to be open to what is life-giving: to new direction and blessing and healing – to new ways and people and expressions of what it means to receive and embody the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

There are two images of what that looks like that I want to share with you. For the first one, you'll have to go the website of the United Church of Christ – www.ucc.org –

and what you'll find there first is that I borrowed the title of this sermon from our UCC friends – 'God is Still Speaking' is the very engaging phrase the UCC has coined - and along with that is a recent video 'The Language of God' – and you have to watch it – it's really great: it's a montage of people/images on themes of love and compassion and worship and justice and praise and creativity and service and reconciliation and joy...and it is in those things that the voice of God is spoken; it is in the hearts of people engaged in those things that there is a hospitality of the heart that hears the language of God.

The second image I want you to think about is Las Posadas – that Christmastime tradition from Hispanic cultures of acting out Mary & Joseph looking for a place to stay as Mary is close to giving birth to Jesus. It might seem strange to think about Christmas right now, but I came across Las Posadas this week as a unique definition of and image of hospitality. When Las Posadas is done all-out, it's a 9-day event...for 8 days Mary & Joseph look for a home to stay in, and for 8 straight days they are turned away: 'no room'; until finally on the ninth day... 'yes, come in', a home is opened, hospitality is offered. If we bring together the story of Acts, Paul and Lydia – the words of Jesus in John, to come and make a home in us...it is the same Las Posadas story being played out again and again in us and the church and in all God's children – Jesus the living word of God seeking again and again and again to make a home in us to bring life to us.

There are a lot of words from God that I want a lot of people to hear – that I think they need to hear – I think they could use some direct visions and messages; I'll keep praying for that to happen. But I know too what needs to happen day by day for me and

for you and for us, for this church and for our lives – to be persons and a people in which the word of God is at home – a hospitality of heart and life to God’s Spirit that speaks God’s grace into me and teaches me to embody it. It’s the truth to be claimed that God is still speaking – to you and through you in the Spirit of Christ – and it will bear good fruit. Is this the 1st day knocking on the door, or the 5th, or 8th ...?...Jesus the Word will make and find it’s home...and it is the place called Peace. Amen.