

Brookfield Congregational United Church of Christ
Sunday February 13, 2011
Have You Heard From God Lately?

Have you ever had a time when you *really* wanted to hear from God? All of us could likely share at least one time – and probably many more – about a time we wanted to hear from God.

Although it is almost exactly 2600 years ago in ancient Judah, we can relate to the young King Zedekiah from our scripture reading. Zedekiah was just 29 years old when he looked out over the ramparts of Jerusalem at the Babylonian armies just outside the city gates. Things did not look good and his ill advised alliance with Egypt had succeeded in bringing about the imminent collapse of Jerusalem and what remained of the nation of Israel.

Zedekiah calls the prophet Jeremiah – who had been thrown in prison for telling truth – and asks, *"Is there any word from the Lord?"* I have had times when *exactly* that question was on my heart and mind. And this begs the question; *Does God speak to us today? Can we hear God's voice in some fashion?*

Perhaps there are people you know who belong to one of those Pentecostal groups where people regularly say things like, "God spoke to me." In some churches, individuals in the congregation will stand and offer a message from God.

Although that is not our tradition, I did serve a church once where one Sunday evening a month we would gather for an informal service of singing, scripture reading, and sharing of ways that God had touched our lives. At one of those services, a young man none of us knew came into our service a bit late. After a hymn and scripture reading, I asked (as I usually did) if there was anyone who had an experience they would like to share.

A young man I had not seen before stood up and said, *"I was driving along when God told me to turn right on main street. So I did."*

[*"Oh brother,"* I'm thinking.]

The fellow continued, *“Then God told me to turn right on Neuman Rd and bring a message to the first church I saw. So I came in here. But then God told me to sit down and shut up. And he sat down.*

[And I’m thinking, *“Maybe God **did** speak to this guy!”*]

Author Karen Wolf has a humorous take on some ways God might get our attention.

“Wouldn't it be great if God decided to use billboards to talk to us? Just think, we could drive down the road and God would simply choose one of a zillion billboards to get our attention. There we'd be with a message straight from God.”

“I've often thought that method would certainly work for me! On the other hand, he could use something more subtle. Like a gentle rap on the side of the head whenever we veer off the course. Yup, there's a thought. God smacking people whenever they don't listen. I'm afraid we'd all be walking around in a daze from all that rapping "activity.”

Of course, you could be one of the lucky ones like Moses, who was tending his father-in-law’s sheep when he sees this bush on fire. The thing is on fire, but not being consumed so Moses goes over to take a look. What happened next would cause most of us to jump out of our skin!

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

Instead of screaming... *“God – you almost gave me a heart attack!”* Moses answers, *“Here I am”* – and a long conversation ensues.

The result of that conversation is that a group of slaves in Egypt begins its amazing journey into the future. We could very well use the theme from our annual meeting a couple of weeks ago for this amazing beginning with Moses and the People of Israel – *“Into God’s Future!”*

So – have you heard from God lately? This is a subject we are about to embark on as a congregation. Marilyn Cummins explained briefly

at our Annual Meeting that we are in the process of forming a Next Step Vision Team.

The basic question is "*Where to from here?*" and the short form of the purpose of this team is: "*...to lead our church in prayerfully discerning where God is leading our congregation in the next five years.*" Notice that the team's task is to *lead* the church in the process of listening for God's voice; not to *tell* the church what God is saying. We discern the voice of God when we are in community.

It is coming up on one year ago that Kathleen began talking with Kurt Kreznar, the chair person of your search committee. Kathleen and I both felt that God was leading and guiding in the events that brought this partnership about. Then this past December, the current, past and future moderators met to talk about what God might have in mind for our church. Kathleen and I both believe very strongly that God has plans for this congregation. I believe there is a strong sense in the congregation that our journey together is going to be remarkable.

The moderators asked what *our* vision for the congregation is. We affirmed that we don't have a vision for the church, but that God surely does and that it is only *together* that we can discern and fulfill God's purpose for us. So it is *together* that we shall hear God's voice and gain God's vision for our life together.

There is much to say about this time together and it will be woven into the fabric of our life as a church in the next period of time. *Meanwhile* a story from the book of Acts can provide some beginning notions about our journey.

I would recommend that you take some time to read the 15th chapter of the Book of Acts. ([This link will take you there >>>](#)) Let me give you a synopsis and lift up one particular verse that is crucial for our journey as a congregation. Acts 15 is the story of the infant church's first crisis. Had that crisis not been satisfactorily resolved, we would not be here today!

Jesus had told his followers to take his message all over the world. *"Into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* The plan was great, but the reality did not go so smoothly. You see, all the disciples were Jews. Their culture, religion and religious practices were Jewish. When the story of Jesus came to gentile communities and non-Jews embraced Jesus as their messiah, a crisis erupted.

"Wait a minute," some of the Jewish believers exclaimed, *"These guys are eating pork, and they don't observe Jewish laws and the men aren't circumcised. If they are going to be followers of Jesus, they should be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses!"*

Meanwhile, Peter and Paul had both seen amazing numbers of Gentiles receiving the story of Jesus with great joy. **If** the Gentiles were told that they first must become Jews before they could be Christians, the faith would have become a minority Jewish sect and we would not be here today.

It is not the specific situation that informs our journey today, but the process they used to move into the future and one phrase from Acts 15 that is at the core of a vital church.

Here's what they did:

- Everyone involved in the mission went to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders. (The first church council)
- Everyone told their stories of what God was doing in the places where the good news of Jesus was being received.
- The apostles and elders listened carefully to all who had something to share.
- The apostles and elders and the whole of the church considered the issue and sent Paul and a contingent to the new believers with an amazing letter.

I want to share just a bit of that letter with you. Listen for the phrase, "...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Plant this phrase deep within your spirit: *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...* It is almost 2000 years since those words were written – but they are words that can inform our journey into God's future!

Our Next Step Vision Team will work to help us as a congregation do the work in discerning God's desire for us as a congregation. I am challenging all of us to be in prayer and in openness as we look to a time in the next six months that we can come together as a church and say...

It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us...