

LAITY SUNDAY
Theme: "GOD IS STILL SPEAKING"
January 30, 2005
Remarks by Michael Bendixen
Copyright © 2005

The question was: "Is God still speaking?" I'd like to add to that and ask: "Are we still listening?" An excerpt from Psalm 46: "Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth. The lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."

"What's this for. Oh, it's just for peace, uh, and diversity, and community, you know, stuff like that." I stuff my mouth with cold pizza as I listen, to the women's conversation in front of me. They're attempting to get students to sign a board in support of Martin Luther King Jr. "What's this for again?" "Just peace, and well you know. (whisper aside). Did I tell you how hot this guy is in my business class," she whispers in her friend's ear. With glowing faces and stiletto heels, the two quasi-philanthropists seem more interested in what they're doing tonight than the students breezing past them.

"It's for peace, and stuff." "And stuff." I can think of so many other titanic ways to speak for Martin Luther King Jr. Stuff! Are these two the best ambassadors OSU can get. Stuff! Girls who seem more interested in cute guys than: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

My imagination runs wild. Soon I yarn up an entire story for them. They slept in that morning only to be woken up by their Big Sis, after a night of heavy boozin,' telling them that they shouldn't forget about their required Philanthropy assignment for the year, and they begrudgingly got up to spend two hours globbing their make-up on.

Stop!

At the moment, I couldn't help but see a glaring weakness within me, a weakness often overlooked, yet insidious. Biases, Stereotypes, Judging, Assumptions: you finish the list. The more I think about it, these processes are fundamental to our psychology. When we are given a snippet of information, we tend to fill in the blanks with our past experiences, the biases we're born with, stories we've heard. . .the dirty joke cousin Bob told me last week. Sometimes, this imaginative response gives us answers, or helps us gauge people before we have all the answers, but more often than not, it leads us astray. We miss opportunities. . .that sometimes we desperately need.

The story I just told is not very dramatic, not a moment of Moses/burning bush proportions: "Take off thy sandals for thy is standing on holy ground." But more a story of a quieter nature. something that could happen everyday; in fact, with me, it does happen every day. And that's what scares me. I'd like to say that after chewing on this epiphany, I

would have stopped this judging-no more writing stories in my head-but it happens all the time.

Stiletto heels-Cowboy boots
Clothes from Armani---Clothes from K-Mart
Pierced lip---Collagen injected lip

Biases, assumptions, the dirty baggage we all carry can be so ordinary, that we float through life without ever giving them much notice. But they have a way of growing into something bigger, the cast-away seed growing into a barbed bush. We create stories in people where there are none.in essence.we reinvent them. In our heads, we know them so well, in fact so well, that we don't leave any room for the truth.

"Watch your children 6-7 weeks before Passover... Everyone knows that just before Passover Jews need the blood of a Christian child.to mix in with their Matzah."

This polite word of warning comes from "Der Sturmer," a Nazi propoganda paper, circa 1930. The Nazis said they knew what Jews were all about. A lot of people listened. Six million people died.

Misunderstanding.Division.Hate.Genocide

What would the world be like if instead of filling in the blanks we held still and opened our ears.opened ourselves to the mystery of those we don't understand.opened our hearts to the mystery of humanity? "Be Still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am God."

The Chinese have a knack for layering their language in multiple depths of meaning. For example, the Chinese character "To Listen" contains many symbols.(pick up calligraphy). "Ear" we expect; but what I find most interesting.over here.is the symbol for the heart.

It's as if the Ancient Chinese, a thousand years before Christ, knew what a colossal challenge listening is.an art that demands all of our faculties, especially the one here (point to the heart). This.(point to heart).the place where courage dwells; courage to leave ourselves open to what we don't know: the stillness.the mystery.

"Be Still and know that I am God. Be Still and know that I am God." We recite this Psalm time and time again. Just like we hear some of Jesus' most famous teachings:

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged"

"How can you say to your neighbor, let me take the speck out of your eye, while there is a log in your own"

There's something else that Jesus says that I tend to look past, just because it's so

common, so ordinary. At the start of almost every teaching in the Gospels, He calls us to listen.

"Let anyone with ears listen." Matthew 11:15

"Let anyone with ears listen." Matthew 13:9

"Let anyone with ears listen." Matthew 13.43

In just a quick search, I found Jesus repeats this call eleven times. A figure of speech? An interesting coincidence? A linguistic vestige of translation? Maybe. Or maybe it's something deeper; maybe Jesus starts us off with the biggest challenge in life, something often attempted, often failed: To listen. Jesus knows us. He knows our flaws. He saw the pattern of how our little judgments, our little lapses in listening lead into bigger things. Like the systematic execution of millions of people. Like rushing to war, without hearing the patient words of peace. Will I stop judging tomorrow? Probably not. I don't claim to be that perfect. . .but I will try.

I remember a Rabbi explaining to me why there are eight candles instead of seven in the Chanukah celebration. There's always an extra candle. He told me that the extra beacon of light reminds us that nothing is ever finished; there is always something to strive for, a flaw always to fix. That gives me hope.

I want to leave you with that hope: To know who we are and what we can be-what God asks us to be.

"GOD IS STILL SPEAKING"

Remarks by Cynthia Janes

Eons ago, when I was in college for the first time, I felt the unsettling "call to serve God." I believed it meant the "ministry." So I asked a friend, "How did a person know they were called to serve God?" Danny was Baptist who, at 19, already was a good speaker and seemed as though he had known forever that he would be a minister. Way back then, the "Call to Serve God" meant being a preacher or going into Christian Education. It was sobering, daunting; a feeling one did not ignore. Who better to ask than a peer?

I'm sure Danny took my question seriously. After a few minutes he replied, "Maybe it is just a call to surrender to God for the first time," or words to that effect. I was stunned. I was a serious grown up, 18 year-old, who had been raised by serious people in the Presbyterian faith. We were in church nearly every time the doors were open. I'd held Youth Group office in every capacity, gone to every conference, had sung in the choir forever, and even led worship services. What did he mean, "Maybe it is just a call to surrender to God for the first time"? As you may well guess, I was vaguely offended at the mere suggestion that I should "surrender to God for the first time." Hadn't I been serving God all this time? Didn't I already love God ! ? Whatever did he mean "Surrender"? - Well, Presbyterians don't use those words in context with church. Some

of you understand, "Surrender, Cynthia" is not something you say to me without serious consequences-you know-angst, gnashing of teeth, stomping, and frothing at the mouth. Hand me the pruning hook !

As I matured and talked with other women who had the same call, we felt that our peers and advisors (all men) discouraged women from going into the ministry. We don't think they discouraged us callously or jealousy, only from the standpoint of traditional sexism. Remember, it was the early 60's in Texas.

Now we understand that God's call is to all sorts of service. Even some of the Institutional Sexism has retreated-I said some, not all. I continued with my merry life, doing what a lot of women did then: went to college (long enough to get my man), married, had and raised children, was housewife and mother, helped hubby through two graduate degrees, became divorced, got a low paying and demeaning job, finished raising the children alone, and all the while worried about "What was I going to do when I grew up?"

Fast forward twenty years: Two events coincided-a weekend seminar and a dream. The conference focused on problems and resources in the community. There I saw a short film about teaching inner-city people to grow food and feed themselves on a long-term basis. That night I had an incredibly real dream. Upon waking, a palpable, yet vague understanding of my life's next phase stayed with me. When Dale, my younger son, graduated from high school in five years, I was going to finish college with a degree in Botany or Horticulture. Then, I would work in a developing country (probably Africa not Latin America), with women in raising their own food, for the rest of my life.

I was comforted and scared out of my wits. My constant prayer was to do God's will- not my will. A college degree required Organic Chemistry. "OK God, if I'm supposed to serve you, you'll help me through chemistry." God's message echoed in my soul all the while. Every time I talked about my plans, I choked up and tears filled my eyes. I feel that way right now. Why now, years later, having achieved most of those high goals, do I still get emotional? Is that God speaking? Comforting me? Egging me on? Encouraging me?

When a goal is clear, even five years away, subtle life changes begin immediately. For example, my yard needed more landscaping. I focused on long term items like shrubs and hardscape, not annuals or tulips. I began taking classes at the local community college. I read more about agricultural and community development in Africa. Dale and I talked a lot about what was going to happen after his graduation, though he didn't believe I would really follow through until the "House For Sale" sign went up.

Though class-work was engaging, I barely squeaked through Organic Chemistry. After graduation I was able to find positions with Non-Governmental Agencies and began working in Malawi, Belize, and Tanzania. Those two years were not easy. Extreme

poverty, disease, hunger, superstition and corruption were all around. It was hot, humid, snaky, and roach infested. I was robbed and an English nurse was murdered within sight of my house. The Chairman of my organization's Board of Directors really disliked women and white people and showed it by making my life totally miserable. Cows ate our seedling trees that were nearly ready to transplant. Sometimes the only prayer I could say for weeks on end was, "GOD, I HATE THIS PLACE!" My Presbyterian minister friend, Rebecca, said, "That is a valid prayer and God heard you." Then a student would come to me with something new she had done at my urging. I was formally invited to take Communion with orange crush (not grape juice) served in dirty, moldy plastic cups, and we sang "In Christ There is no East or West," in Swahili.

Upon returning home from nearly two years of working in foreign countries, I still didn't know what to do. To continue working internationally, without a graduate degree, I probably would have to fund myself; with a graduate degree I probably would be an administrator-clearly not God's message.

I did understand the importance of re-entering this culture gradually. Loving elderly friends who knew I was home said, "Until you decide what to do, would you mow my yard, clean my house, prune my bushes, wash my windows?" Soon I had a more than a full time job-enough for two people. That was God speaking through my friends-turned-clients. After about two years of that kind of rewarding and hard work, a friend/fellow choir member/client, invited me to a Memorial Day celebration. As we chatted, Nancy mentioned casually that she needed to find a new Meal Site manager. I literally saw the light bulb go on over her head. With only a tiny bit of encouragement from her, I applied and was hired as Senior Meals Manager in Corvallis. I was "feeding" people, especially women. God was still speaking, this time through Nancy, who was very much in touch with God.

It is the perfect job for me. I still help elderly people clean house, closets, prune, mow, etc. and manage a large Meals-on-Wheels program. It is a good balance: Pulling me just a little more than my comfort level, so I don't get bored or become static. I'm not doing exactly what I interpreted as the dream's demand; I clearly am doing God's will.

When I first agreed to speak today, I thought it would be about God speaking through music. And that is why "How Can I keep from Singing?" is on the program. We can translate the word "singing" to mean whatever you're doing, God is holding you, keeping you safe. Are you just plodding along in any situation because you are afraid of change? Are you participating in life? Are you struggling because of someone else's expectations? God is there. God will be there-through whatever trials you face-even Organic Chemistry. What is your dream? What makes your heart sing? God is so BIG, omnipresent, and omniscient. Who am I that God should speak to me? Little ol' me.

"How can I keep from singing?"