

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 14, 2008, dedicated to the memory of Paul Swinger, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Bethany”**

***Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11;  
John 1:6-8, 19-28***

***(Part III of V in the  
Advent/Christmas sermon series:  
“Places on the Journey to  
Bethlehem”)***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We started this journey to Bethlehem on a mountaintop and spoke of mountaintop experiences and our own battles with our “inner Everests.” We descended to the desert floor and explored the dryness of faith.

Today, we enter a small town two miles east of Jerusalem – the distance between First Church and Bexley. It is a town called Bethany. Bethany is far enough from Jerusalem to stay off the radar on the Roman Empire, but close enough to be in danger if conflict erupts.

Bethany was a town Jesus visited often during his lifetime.

When you enter the village of Bethany, you feel like you have arrived at a “dead end” on your journey – with an accent on “*dead*” (Micah and Martin Marty, *Places Along the Way*, Augsburg Press, p.88). Can a journey of faith avoid death and endings? We know it cannot. Can we reroute our plans in life to stay away from places that seem too far off the beaten path to be useful? Not really. Can “dead-end” places actually be turnabouts for us on the life of faith? Yes, they can be.

In Bethany, we begin to explore these questions along the way. In Hebrew, Bethany means “house of the poor.” It appears on our geographic radar today because in John’s Gospel, the scene with John the Baptist happens, “across the Jordan River, in Bethany” (John 1:28).

West of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, east of Jerusalem, Bethany, today is known as “El-Azarieh,” or the Town of Lazarus. Lazarus is Bethany’s most famous son and his raising from the dead is Bethany’s biggest story – close to 2,000 years old. I find it beautiful that Islam, Judaism and Christianity claim this town and this story as significant for all time in the renaming of the town. It was in Bethany that Mary and Martha hosted Jesus in their home. There, Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Jesus fled to Bethany on Monday of Holy Week to pray and gain strength to face Jerusalem on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday – and ultimately to rise from the dead on Easter Sunday!

In this small town, and other small towns like Capernaum, Casaerea Philippi, Bethpage and Nazareth, Jesus encountered God and people, face to face, nose to nose, heart to heart. I believe in the “Bethanys” of this world – in the so-called “dead end” places on our journey of faith – as we discover that God is Still Speaking!

I was reminded yesterday of the power of our “God is Still Speaking” ad campaign in the United Church of Christ. Do you

remember the “bouncers” kicking people out of the pews in the ads a few years ago, followed by “In our church, everyone is welcome?” We have posters, too. My favorite reads, “If you think getting up on Sunday morning is hard, try rising from the dead!” They are all over the church. The banner in front and in the back parking lot says, “Never place a period when God has placed a comma . . . God is still speaking!”

The whole ad campaign was conceived and delivered by a small town kid – Ron Buford – who grew-up and was “outed” in the Pentecostal church of his childhood. He was driven out of this small town and ended up in the big city! Moreover, he was welcomed into the arms of the United Church of Christ, where he experienced the extravagant love of God. Ron is a man who was able to hear God speaking – even through the thunder of prejudice and hate from his “loving Christian” neighbors. He took the “dead-end” in his Bethany and turned his life around for God! He discovered God speaks in such places and times!

But, has God ever **stopped** speaking? Somewhere in the autumn of say, 755 B.C., the prophet Amos was speaking God's word to people who refused to listen. Stopping by a worship center, probably in a small village called Bethel, and unloading his brutally frank "word of the Lord," Amos' message totally rejected the worship of the people. Clearly, the Lord despised and hated the people's feasts, their solemn assemblies, their burnt offerings, their cereal offerings, their peace offerings and their noise and melody. God disdained the sights, the smells and the sounds of their worship. Through Amos, God cleansed the sensory nightmare his people offered as worship.

God sought justice and righteousness as true worship! God saw that there was no communion with the Holy One, only commotion in the Holy Place and the Lord demanded an end to that garbage.

I remember years ago seeing a painting by Sal Brownfield in which God was washing away the garbage of injustice with the everflowing stream – the waterfall – of God's justice and righteousness

and power.

***Yes, God is still speaking.***

***The justice that our God seeks and speaks has three dimensions.*** First, God's justice is **dynamic**. It is not the justice that balances scales judiciously as portrayed by the blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice. God's justice is the moving, torrential justice that rushes down until injustice is swept away! The prophetic justice of God is never at rest. It is moving forward in power and in truth. It will not be silenced, neither will it be subdued. God's justice is dynamic.

Second, this justice is **God's expected response** to what God has done for the people of God. In other words, doing justice is what you and I are expected to do for God. The pattern of divine indicative followed by expected human response runs throughout the Bible.

For example, God delivers the Chosen People out of bondage and in so doing God lays out expectations for them in the 10 commandments. In the letter to the Romans, Paul begins with an exposition of the gospel in chapters 1-11, followed by suggestions for the expected response to that good news in chapters 12-16. In Colossians, the meaning of the Christ event is explained from the first verse of chapter one through 3:4 with imperatives following in the rest of the letter. In the words of I John 4:19: "We love, because God first loved us!" **Our God expects justice as our response to what God has done for us!**

**Finally, to do justice means to act as advocates for the powerless.** In Amos, in Isaiah, in Deuteronomy, and throughout Hebrew scriptures, "to seek justice" means to advocate on behalf of the poor, the orphan and the widow.

When the prophets of old speak of justice, there is nothing theoretical, nothing philosophical, nothing even legal in their notions. And the prophets of old are with us still! In their new manifestation,

God is still speaking in the prophets of our times who lead us out of the halls of worship into quarters of the city where the poor live. They invite us to look into the eyes of the lonely widow, the hurting orphan, the hungry and homeless man. They call us to listen to and respond to the more than 134,000 people who are uninsured in Franklin County, 75% of whom are **working** poor!

They call to us to see and respond to the abused and neglected child, the unfairly paid immigrant, the forsaken, the forlorn and the forgotten of our community. And they say to us now and forevermore, "Justice now! Justice always! Let justice roll down like an everflowing stream!"

### **Yes, God is still speaking!**

We know that God **was speaking** in Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me, to preach good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Good news to the poor, healing, release (or **forgiveness** as the Greek often translates) from various kinds of captivity and proclamation of Jubilee all become themes of Jesus' ministry and teaching. Was it coincidence or was it a "God-speaking" incident that brought this text before Jesus (years after his birth) when he stood in his hometown synagogue, opened the scroll and read this to everyone listening? I say the second. But, no matter how I interpret that moment, Isaiah 61:1ff was the perfect scriptural selection for the spirit-filled and fully-anointed son of the Nazarene synagogue.

On THAT day, God was not finished speaking when the scrolls were laid down! Jesus sat down and continued to speak in prophetic ways that nearly costs him his life by stoning to death when he added, "Today the scriptures have been fulfilled in your hearing."

You see, it's not enough to *read* the Bible. It's not enough to offer

clear and concise exegetical references and interpretations, so that folks nod in agreement (or perhaps nod off in a catatonic sleep state).

God knows – people need fulfillment of scripture.

God knows – people need the Spirit upon them and within them.

God knows – the poor need good news!

God knows – people need to be healed of the pain they carry around daily from losses they have experienced, from depression they have battled, from injuries they have sustained in life's walk.

God knows – people need forgiveness of sins, forgiveness of debts, forgiveness of burdens, forgiveness of foolish words spoken and strange behaviors acted upon.

God knows – people need to be released from captivity, whether physical, mental, spiritual or emotional. God knows, those blinded, for whatever reason need to see again.

God knows – the Spirit of God is needed for fulfillment, not just one more reading of one more ancient text.

*God is still speaking!* God will not be silent. God will not sit down and turn God's head and turn away from the needs of God's children.

And wherever, and whenever, and however justice is done, the garbage of injustice is washed away, healing and forgiveness happen, captives are released, the blind see again, the joy of Jubilee is fulfilled and the beautiful feet of the prophets take to the streets, the plains, the sea sides and the mountaintops of this world.

***God is still speaking.***

Isaiah 40:21-22 asks, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is God who sits above the circle of the earth . . . and God who makes the rulers of the earth for nothing." In answering the prophet's questions, we must always remember we have a legacy to uphold at First Church. We were birthed in resistance to injustice. Our legacy is rooted in justice action with the enslaved, with the poor, and with the dispossessed. Our

legacy is also embracing "strength and beauty" in the awesome grandeur of our "Gothic Cathedral of Grace." Together, these horizons and heights of our legacy intersect in the cross of Christ. And it is in the cross that suffering and glory, justice and beauty embrace.

It is my hope and heartfelt prayer that today, and for ages to come, God knows us as people living in communion with the Holy One, not simply making commotion in God's Holy Place.

In the places like Bethany, which may seem like dead-ends to some of us, we need to recognize and respond to God who is still speaking. As we live into our future in the heart of Columbus, serving Christ with a heart for his power and truth, may we be known as bearers of good news; as restorers of the breach; as those who live God's word.

As our worship reflects justice action in God's name, may we know that the men and women who cross our threshold looking for food, assistance and hope are none other than angels of God watching our actions and listening to our words to discover if **God is still speaking** at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio.

In the "dead-end" town of Bethany, God is still speaking! At First Church, God is still speaking! Are we listening? I pray our answer is "yes." Amen.