

God Is Still Speaking
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 96:1-3
July 24, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
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Let's play "Fill in the Blank." I say, "George Burns" and you say: _____ Gracie Allen!
For those of you who are too young to remember, George Burns and Gracie Allen were a comedy duo who played on the vaudeville stage, and in film, radio, and television in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s. George Burns played the straight man, and Gracie Allen played his addle-headed wife, whose responses completely confused him. At the end of each of their television shows, George would say, "Say goodnight, Gracie." And she would respond, "Goodnight, Gracie."

They were married in real life, and apparently very much in love, though George had an affair at one point, and Gracie found out about it. To make up with her, George gave her a beautiful ring. Years later Gracie famously told a friend that she wished George would have another affair because she could sure use a new ring. Gracie had a ditzzy way of delivering her lines that made you wonder if she was really clueless, or if she really understood what she was saying.

I think that she was brilliant, and she knew exactly what she was doing. I am convinced of this because of what she did at the very end of her life. Gracie had heart disease and died in 1964 of a heart attack. After her death, George was going through her papers and found an envelope addressed to him on the top of a stack of papers on her desk. It was a love letter. Apparently, she knew she was dying, and this was her final gift to him. This letter contained a line that I bet you have heard before. She said, "Never put a period where God has placed a comma." What a beautiful way to say that her love for George would continue beyond the grave. Never put a period where God has placed a comma. This is not the end. God has more in store for us yet.

The United Church of Christ adopted this beautiful line as one of its slogans, and the UCC logo is a comma, as you see on the front of your bulletin today, or on the chalice and patten that I use every month for communion. Never put a period where God has placed a comma. Don't think that the way things have always been is the way they always must be. Expect something new. It wasn't some great Christian theologian who taught us that. It was Gracie Allen.

I love this lens through which the United Church of Christ approaches the scriptures. God is STILL speaking, we say. The Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament are important and sacred texts. God speaks to us through them, but God's intention for us cannot be contained solely in those texts. God is much bigger than any single text, any revelation. God is still speaking. God is continually bringing light and life where only chaos has been, and offering resurrection where death had seemed to prevail. We can hear God's voice today in worship and in prayer. We can find God today in nature. God is still speaking. We can learn new and important truths today through fellowship with one another or even through committee meetings. God is not limited to doing over and over again what God has done in the past. God is not limited by the past. God can do something new.

How do we know this? Because God has told us so. During the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon, God gave these words to the prophet Isaiah, to give the people hope and confidence that God

would still be with them. "I am about to do a new thing," says God. "Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

I am about to do a new thing, God says. The old things are what landed Israel here in exile, far from home, unable to return to the Jerusalem of their hearts. But God is about to do something new, making a way in the wilderness, a way home, their hearts' desire. God is about to do something new, bringing rivers in the arid desert, life-giving water where water is scarce.

I have to tell you that many of us feel called to worship because of what we have known of God and of the church in the past. This is true for me as much as for you. The old hymns sink deep in our souls. We need to sing them again. We say the same words to the Lord's Prayer every week, and we want our children to learn what we have learned, to pass down what has been given to us in our faith. But this scripture in Isaiah says that the past is not all there is. God is going to surprise us again and again. God is STILL speaking. Still speaking TO us. Still speaking THROUGH us to the world.

That newness can be really exciting for us, or it can be unsettling, maybe even frightening. Think of all the ways that the Church has changed in the last couple hundred years. In the 19th century, many Christian churches used the scriptures to justify the existence of slavery. But the Holy Spirit blew through, whispering, shouting, urging Christians to recognize God's own image in the people we as a nation – even we as a church - had enslaved. God was not willing to be limited to what was written about slavery two thousand years earlier. God did something new. God was still speaking then, and God is still speaking now.

The same thing happened with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, the opening of churches to ordaining women, and welcoming LGBTQ folk as members and as leaders. Those were not merely political movements. They were also movements of the Holy Spirit that radically changed the Church and society. God had something new to say to us, and in the process, God broke open the Church again and again, to make room for more and more of God's beautiful children, and to call us to speak for those who have been oppressed. When God does something new, we cannot be the way we were. We are transformed.

How are we to respond to this radical freedom of God to act as we would not expect God to act? The Psalm we heard a moment ago says that we are to be new, as well. "Sing to the Lord a NEW song," the Psalm says. "Sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord and bless God's name."

God is still speaking. Hallelujah for that. And we have to learn some new songs to keep up. I think we are up to that challenge. We are pretty good singers in this church, both literally and figuratively, and we can learn new songs, new ways of being church, new ways of sharing God's love with more and more of God's beloved children.

Thanks be to God for God's holy word in scripture, in the life of Jesus Christ, and in the wild, untamed movement of the Holy Spirit, who calls us always into a new future. And thanks be to God for the new songs that we are called to sing.

Amen