

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING: HOPE

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, 'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name'; ¹⁰and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'; ¹¹and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him'; ¹²and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.' ¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(Romans 15:4-13, NRSV)

Just when I think our culture has sunk as low as it can go something new comes along. Last week it came in the form of an Internet game called JFK Reloaded. Contestants pay \$10 to "to take aim through Oswald's rifle scope and fire away at a 3-D image of the presidential motorcade passing through Dealey Plaza in Dallas" ("Tasteless JFK video game hits the

Internet,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, Nov. 21, 2004). But it gets even worse, “The company is even offering a \$100,000 prize to the contestant who most accurately re-creates [the timing and accuracy of] the three shots Oswald fired . . . (Ibid.). The instructions encourage participants to “Concentrate, and think like a sniper” (“Seeing Isn’t Believing,” *Newsday*, Nov. 23, 2004). “Kirk Ewing, [managing director of the Scottish company that invented the game], tried to make [it] seem like a public service instead of a . . . money-making gimmick. [Ewing said] ‘This new form of interactive entertainment brings history to life and will stimulate a younger generation of players to take an interest in this fascinating episode of American history’” (Ibid. *L.A. Daily News*). Something tells me that history teachers will *not* be sending their students in droves to play this despicable game.

Not only can things seem hopeless in our culture, but churches sometimes seem hopeless. Not a week goes by without a news story about a minister somewhere who embezzled church funds or became involved in a sexual scandal. Besides scandals, a look at statistics is enough to make us despair. It’s a well-known fact that open-minded, mainline Protestant churches like ours are experiencing a serious decline in numbers when it comes to members and money. Our congregation is fortunate to experience stability in these areas. However, most mainline churches are not so fortunate.

Part of the problem is that we are not as good at self-promotion as the conservative evangelical churches. Many people in America have no idea that Christianity covers a spectrum from fundamentalist to moderate to liberal. That’s why our denomination, the United Church of Christ (UCC), is taking a bold step to raise our visibility through the God Is Still Speaking Initiative. The campaign hopes to introduce people to open-minded churches like ours, churches who welcome everybody—no matter who, no matter where, no

matter what. Our church seeks to emulate the love of Jesus who reached out to everybody no matter who they were, no matter what they had done, no matter where they had been.

A major portion of the campaign centers on television commercials to be aired during primetime throughout Advent and Lent. After viewing the commercials, people can learn more on the Internet by visiting www.stillspeaking.com. To find a participating church, inquirers type in their zip codes and a list of local UCC churches appears. The UCC churches in Nassau are banding together to buy ads in *Newsday*. Our church is also putting a Still Speaking banner in a prominent place near Northern Boulevard.

We're going to all this effort because we believe the progressive and inclusive message of the UCC needs to be heard in our community, nation, and world. We're doing this because we really believe that God is still speaking to you, to me, to all of us.

Today we're focusing on God's message of hope, the theme for the First Sunday of Advent. We believe that through experiencing the love of Christ and following the teachings of Christ that people can experience real transformation in their lives.

The Apostle Paul spoke beautifully of hope in today's scripture lesson from the letter to the Christians living in Rome. Paul wrote, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ...May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:4, 13).

To outsiders Paul's life looked hopeless—shipwrecked, beaten, jailed, and ultimately executed. But Paul preached hope because he knew that although sometimes life seems hopeless, through faith in God we can always find a reason to hope. He experienced peace in his heart despite all his troubles and when his time came to leave this earth, Paul's hope did not wane. Instead he was eager to meet Christ in heaven. After all, he had won the race. He had kept the faith.

Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, said, "Hope is the passion for what is possible." History records numerous examples of people with a burning hope, people with a "passion for what is possible." One of my favorites is Anne Sullivan who was born in Feeding Hills, Massachusetts to a family mired in poverty. She was physically abused "by her alcoholic father and at the age of five, trachoma struck Anne, leaving her almost blind. Two years later, her mother died and her father abandoned his children to an orphanage...where her brother died shortly thereafter. Despite being left in an orphanage with no formal educational facilities, Anne Sullivan [flourished]. When the state board of charities chairman, Frank Sanborn visited the...orphanage; Anne literally threw herself in front of him crying, 'Mr. Sanborn, I want to go to school'" (<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/sull-ann.htm>).

She finally made it to school and eventually graduated valedictorian from the Perkins Institute for the Blind. In an almost miraculous turn of events, Anne regained her eyesight after a series of operations (Ibid.). Her story would be inspiring if it stopped here. But Anne Sullivan's known to the world as "the miracle worker" who taught deaf and blind Helen Keller to speak, write, and read Braille. If Anne Sullivan had believed the hopeless naysayers she would never have taken the job working with an out of control 7-year-old. Thank God the Anne Sullivans

of the world nurture a passion for the possible and hope against hope that they can make a difference. And they do.

Whatever new lows our culture sinks to in the future, we can still find hope in God and inspiration in the lives of people like Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller. God is still speaking a word of hope to us today. We can find hope in Jesus Christ whose birth we celebrate. Through Christ we can find hope for new growth and renewed possibilities. During this Advent season, may we remain open to hearing God's message of hope. As people of faith, may we open ourselves to the possibility of being sustained by our ever-living God. It's true that we can't program ourselves to be seized by the spirit of Christmas or seized by the Spirit of God, but we can live our days in a sense of quiet expectancy. We can find moments to reflect on God's immense love for us. We can fulfill the hopes of the needy through our Angel Tree. We can open our Bibles and read about the greatest hope of all, a fragile baby born in a stable.

As Paul wrote, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope....May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in [God], so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Throughout this Advent season God is still speaking: hope. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)
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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, in this holiday season anxiety rises in many of us. Old wounds over people we loved who are no longer with us, economic pressures brought on by unemployment or underemployment, the stress of having too much to do and too little time threatens to fill us with worry, fear, and doubt. Strengthen us by the power of your Spirit to overcome our anxieties and instead be filled with hopeful anticipation—the anticipation of celebrating Christ’s birth and of meeting the Spirit of Christ along life’s way. Draw us closer to you and to one another in these days of Advent.

Through Jesus Christ our greatest source of hope we pray.
AMEN.