

SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS, C
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:1-18

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There have been a lot of changes in the way we communicate. This year our family received quite a number of Christmas cards by email instead of snail mail. People are shifting from land lines to cell phones to text-messaging to smart-phones. And then of course there's Facebook. Some of you know I got overloaded pretty quickly when I first began venturing into Facebook, and I still find it offers just a whole lot more communication than I'm able to keep up with. Which is why I haven't yet been brave enough to try Twitter. That's the one that allows you to monitor a running commentary from thousands of people you don't know, all at the same time.

I got a kick out of humorist Dave Barry, in his tongue-in-cheek review of 2009. Among the year's woes, from the stock market to unemployment to swine flu, he listed an "alarming technological development" when hackers shut down Twitter in August. Although service was eventually restored, he said, "most of the estimated 875 million thoughts that went untweeted during the outage will never be recovered, making it the nation's worst social-networking disaster ever." (2009 Dave Barry www.miamiherald.com)

One thing about communicating in this electronic age — there are so many words and messages flying around that you have to learn to be selective, to sort through the trivial and focus on the essential. We have more ways to communicate than ever, but I wonder how often we really connect.

That is the amazing gift of our ability to communicate. It allows human beings to connect by expressing themselves and being acknowledged by another person, that powerful exchange of listening and responding.

I think we appreciate it most near the beginning of life and near the end. Think of the wonder and delight that come when infants and toddlers first begin to develop speech, how parents lovingly keep track of each new word as it appears. How amazing it is when it becomes possible here in the congregation to finally exchange spoken thoughts with the little ones among us. To be able to connect with these amazing new people.

At the end of life, too, there's a profound treasure in being able to communicate when death is near. Whether we're by the side of a parent or grandparent, or as a pastor bringing word to a church member that their community is thinking of them and praying for them, there is that powerful sense of connection that comes when we know our words are recognized, the message is received, that communication is real between one soul and another, while there's still time.

The gospel of John begins with a beautiful poem about how God communicates, how God expresses Godself to humankind. God communicates with us through Jesus Christ. In Christ, God creates an amazing and enduring connection. Scripture identifies Jesus as God's Word— God's utterance, God's speech, God's message to the human race:

In the beginning was the Word— that is, Jesus- and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...

Throughout the ages, the human race was waiting for some kind of communication from God. Waiting expectantly, the way you would wait for word from the doctor, or word from the mortgage company, or word from the employment agency. Waiting in need, the way you wait when you are grieving, waiting for somebody, anybody, to reach out to you with a word of kindness to cut through the lonely silence.

The world's waiting ended when Christ was born. Christ became the Word of God addressed to us, the living message communicating God's heart to us. Everything God wants to say to us is expressed in Jesus—in the way he lived his life and gave his life for all of us. And through Christ the Living Word, God is still speaking God's message of forgiveness and love, and God is still calling to us to follow in Christ's way.

Following means listening. It means sorting through the trivial messages that surround us every day and focusing on the essential message our Creator offers us in Christ.

Along those lines, a funny thing happened to me on New Year's morning. I actually read the Bible before I read the newspaper. Now you can call me old-fashioned, but I always do look at the newspaper first thing in the morning, just like I always turn on the radio news when I get in my car, just like I always check my email when I get into the office. These are my routines. But this particular New Year's morning my routine changed. I had a rare moment of peace and quiet, and I had the added motivation of our daily Bible reading effort in the congregation. So I started out the new decade by reading and reflecting on that beautiful scripture about how God called creation into being with a powerful word of communication: "Let there be light."

The New Year brings us a particular gift: the opportunity to reshape our habits and routines to reflect our most authentic values. To let God speak first. And why not? Over the course of a day, I allow all kinds of diverse voices to saturate my consciousness – newscasters, advertisers, anybody who sends me an email (whether I know them or not!) If I'm going to be God's person, then it's absolutely necessary that I allow God to get some air-time too. Part of being Christ's disciples is intentionally carving out space to listen and receive God's perspective on the world

and God's purpose for our lives. In other words, to let God get a Word in edgewise with us.

When we do decide to let God get a Word in, when we intentionally open ourselves up to God's communication through Christ, then we discover that God is speaking all the time.

We discover that God does speak through scripture, especially when we read slowly and thoughtfully, asking the questions we need to ask and letting ourselves be open to understanding God's take on things. As we read, it helps when we ask, "What is God's particular word for me in this passage? What can I do in response to what I'm reading?" I encourage you to stick with scripture this year, get familiar with the Bible's language and its stories. Let's support each other in this.

God also speaks through people, when we are open and paying attention. Through friends we trust, especially those who share our Christian faith. Through groups or communities of people who demonstrate what it looks like to be committed to Christ, caring, serving, wrestling with whatever life brings.

God speaks through music and art. God speaks through books we read and films we view, so it matters what we choose to take into our consciousness. God speaks through nature, in all its beauty and power, moving our hearts and teaching us how to take care of the earth.

God speaks through prayer, which people sometimes call "conversation with God." In my experience prayer is a different kind of conversation, not exactly like having God sit down for a heart-to-heart talk. That's because we're not God, we are limited human beings, and I doubt we could handle everything God has to say to us, not all at once. So we receive God's Word in small portions, hints and insights.

In prayer God sometimes speaks through giving us a sense of peace. Or giving us a sense of disquiet, stirring us up. Sometimes granting understanding, sometimes raising more questions. Making regular time for prayer is one way we listen.

And okay, you'll think I'm nuts, but I have even known God to actually speak in a more or less audible way. It has happened for me during times when I was anxious, as I've sat in this sanctuary and prayed, and it has seemed as if that figure of Christ over the altar has whispered words to settle me. Words that sounded like: *You don't have to do it all, let me be your strength.* These words came as a communication from beyond myself, a message to center me again in God's love and grace.

Which is just to say that God is always speaking, in many and various ways, to each of us. Because Christ, who is God's living Word, never leaves us alone on the journey.

People who are trained as spiritual directors often pose one simple question to help people open up to God. They ask: "What is God saying to you in the midst of your life experiences?"

What is God saying, as you deal with this illness, or this time of unemployment? What is God saying, as you receive gifts of friendship and love? What is God saying, while you ask questions about your future? While you try to make ends meet? What is God saying, as you go through the changes of learning to be a responsible parent, a trustworthy friend, a productive worker, a loving life partner, a faithful caretaker of the natural world... God is always speaking through Christ. As we listen and reflect, we will begin to hear and learn.

What is God -- the living Word -- saying to you in the midst of your experience, today?

Listen, as God speaks comfort or peace or forgiveness... Listen, as God speaks challenge or guidance, or even warning... Pay attention to where God is prodding you and pushing your edges... To help you be more fully the person you were created to be... To draw you more deeply into relationship with the Savior who gave you birth and loves you forever... To help you live God's values of compassion and forgiveness and generosity in your corner of God's world... Let's listen, together, to what God is saying to our congregation about the precious mission we have to share God's message, through words and through actions.

In this New Year, let's listen. God is speaking. Amen.