

A Month of Living Evangelically
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SCRIPTURE –

Luke 2:8-11 – But the angel said, “Do not be afraid; for see – I bring you good news (“*Evangel*”) of great joy...”

Matthew 9:35-38 – Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news (“*Evangel*”) of the kingdom...

First Corinthians 12: 4-12 – There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit...

I have been so excited to write this sermon, that I can hardly contain myself. You have heard that last spring when we ministers planned our themes, we each chose to live for the month of October with a new spiritual practice.

I began thinking that I would wear a clerical collar. I wanted to see what it was like to have to physically represent my faith throughout my working day wherever I went. I actually own a clerical collar shirt. When I was younger and looked even less like a minister than I do now, I wore my clerical collar in political protest marches (both as a faith witness and hopefully to reduce my chances of getting clubbed in the head). I wore it when I was asked to be a character witness in court, and in recent years I wore it for Halloween.

But I haven’t worn it seriously in years, and at some point in the discussion Sandy asked if I really wanted to wear something I didn’t believe in as my spiritual discipline. A really good question, the answer to which she and I already knew was no. So I looked at what outward sign would characterize my faith. I decided that I would wear this “God is Still Speaking” shirt, produced by our national denomination, the United Church of Christ. I would call it a month of living evangelically, UCG style, however known.

I knew that *Evangel* meant good news in Latin. I skipped Greek at Yale Divinity because I was more interested in what the Flip Wilson TV show at the time called “The Church of What’s Happening Now.” My good news is that Vince actually did study Greek.

Vince explained that the Latin “*Evangel*” comes from the Greek *Euangelion* (you-ahn-Geh-lee-on), which is the word the writer of Matthew has Jesus use when he says he comes to bring the good news of the kingdom of God. In Luke, when the angels say, “Behold I bring you good news of great joy” they are actually using the word as a verb. The preface “*eu*” is happiness as in the word *euphoria*. *Angelion* means messenger, from which the word *angel* comes. They are messaging us with happiness.

I ordered these three long sleeved *God is still speaking shirts* from the United Church of Christ website. They had one black shirt left in stock. The only other

available shirts were these in-your-face, garish, and quite noticeably, red ones that I am wearing this morning.

I decided that I would wear these shirts, like an Episcopal or Lutheran minister would wear a clerical collar, which was basically when I was on duty. This meant I didn't have to wear it around the house on Saturdays or to a Jaguars game, or a Gator football party.

My initial plan was that when anyone asked or commented about my shirt, I would talk about how God is still speaking in new ways. I would tell the story of how our denomination started with the Pilgrims. John Robinson, the first pastor to the Pilgrims, who was not allowed to sail with them to the new world, told them as they were departing on the Mayflower, "God has yet more truth and light to break forth from God's holy word." When anyone asked about the "God is still speaking phrase", I would explain the concept of God who speaks in new ways throughout history and throughout our lives.

Armed thusly, I wore my shirt for the first time on Friday, October 1, ready with words of evangelism. Nobody said a word about my shirt. Sunday, October 3, after I finished preaching, I took off my robe and walked around the courtyard in my red shirt. Again, not a word.

On my third day of wearing the GSS shirts I went to an interfaith meeting of clergy who had worked together in response to the threatened Quran burning. One pastor asked me about my shirt. I explained the concept of the still speaking God. He went off on a complete tangent that I didn't quite understand. No other clergy at that meeting mentioned the shirt.

The first person to be interested in the shirt was our custodian Ken. He said he'd like a shirt like that. He said that in his years around UCG he's noticed the way we open ourselves to new voices of God. I ordered him a *God is still speaking* t-shirt. He now wears his proudly.

The fourth day of wearing my shirt, one person came into the office and said, "Wow, that's a bright shirt. It wakes me up." And that's as far as we got.

That day I wrote in my journal, "I clearly don't have the hang of this evangelism thing yet."

Seeing that just wearing a shirt and waiting for people to ask about *God is still speaking* was taking my month of living evangelically basically nowhere, I went back to the drawing board. I decided to be more proactive and ask those who noticed the shirt to share how God was still speaking in their lives.

The next day I took a deep breath and asked the members of a church committee how God was still speaking in their lives.

One person shared the experience of pausing on a walk in the woods in one of Gainesville's greenways and sensing the words, "Surely God is in the place and I did not know it."

Another person spoke of visiting an adult child with a new baby whose home embodied a very different spirituality from her own. Taking a leap of acceptance of her own adult child's unique lifestyle revealed a new way God was speaking.

Another person said that he went to the interfaith press conference we held in September in response to the Quran burning. He expected nothing but rather dull speeches. Instead he was surprised by God speaking so many ways through so many voices.

I was learning that evangelism was neither spouting off my beliefs nor passively waiting for someone to notice the writing on a shirt. I learned I had to initiate conversations on faith, and that this was not easy.

Feeling confident, I went to the second men's lunch group of my month of living evangelically, intending to ask them how God was still speaking in their lives. I choked. The confidence I had earlier in the week, I learned, was not an unbroken upward curve. I bailed.

That afternoon, a Muslim friend whom I had met through our interfaith groups brought me a beautiful calligraphy of the name Allah. Smarting a little from my failure of nerve at men's lunch group I asked him how God was still speaking. To him the simple name of God, Allah, is dynamic. The writing or speaking of the name is an embodiment of a still speaking God.

Later that afternoon I visited UCG member Sam Harris in the Alachua County jail. He noticed the shirt right away. I asked him how God spoke to him in his terribly difficult situation. He said with God's help he was breaking out of a cycle of depression. This along with the postcards and prayers of the congregation and the visits of our four pastors were ways God was still speaking for and to him.

At the staff meeting that week, I asked our staff members to share personal stories of God still speaking. One staff member spoke of the drawings our children did of heaven. You can see them in the courtyard. She felt God was especially speaking in the drawing one child did that pictured his brother, who had died a few years ago, in heaven. Another staff member told of being a recipient of UCG's care in a recent crisis. Another spoke of the continuing witness to our Open and Affirming mission. Another spoke of the ongoing discomfort when family members ask for prayers for friends back home in very traditional ways. This staff member said that UCG's practice of holding someone in God's light truly helped in learning how to pray again.

Another staff member told of how awareness of God's new speaking often comes with the passage of time. Some issues don't become clear until years and years later, when a reconciling phone call comes from nowhere.

I felt as if I had finally broken through my fear of asking faith questions in public settings. I was living evangelically.

One tender moment came in visiting Ray Meeks. Ray arrived on death row in 1973 when he was twenty years old. He's now fifty seven.

Ray said, "I feel God's presence with me and over me is like a shield with a calming effect. People ask me how I can be so calm and happy in a place like this. They say they wish they could have this calm. They say they wish they could have me as a neighbor in the next cell to keep them from worrying so much.

"I was calm when my death warrant was signed and I was moved to the cell next to the electric chair. I could still smile. The guards let another inmate whose warrant was also signed come talk to me for two hours. I was the only one who could calm him down. I remember a bible passage that says, 'Put on the whole armor of God.' That's what I do."

I finally came to last chance with men's lunch group on my last Friday of my 30 days of living evangelically. Like standing on the edge of the high dive, I counted to ten, took a deep breath and asked everyone in the group to share a way God was still speaking in their lives.

The result was an outpouring of honest and self disclosing stories of faith. Many shared journeys of uncertainty that have led them into were in into agnosticism. At the same time their inability to say specific things about God was accompanied by a sense of wonder over the beauty life and creation. When it came to the meaning of those dear to them who loved them, some were near tears. Most importantly, they treasured the fact that their questions and uncertainties were accepted in this church. Many said that in the church itself, in acts of kindness, in the number of children who come forward for the children's story, or perhaps an unexpected song, there was wonder again.

So here's what I learned in my month of living evangelically.

First, putting on a shirt with a message of my faith made me conscious of behaving publically as a representative of my faith.

Second, just wearing the shirt was not enough.

Third, trying to tell my story of faith was not enough, nor was it even a very good idea when no one had particularly asked me to do so.

Fourth, asking others an open and accepting faith question consistently took the conversation to a deeper and more rewarding level

Fifth, asking such questions was to me the key to the Evangel, the good news, and evangelism. I think of the last scripture listed for this morning.

In First Corinthians 12:4-12, Paul writes, "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. There are many forms of work, but all of them in all people, are the work of the same God. In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose. One person, through the Spirit, has the gift of wise speech, while another, by the power of the Same Spirit, can put the deepest knowledge into words. Another, by the same Spirit, is granted faith; another, by the one Spirit, gifts of healing, and another miraculous powers; another has the gift of prophecy, and another ability to distinguish true spirits from false; yet another has the gift of ecstatic utterance of different kinds, and another the ability to interpret it. But all these gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit.

I believe that this passage is telling us that each of us has the evangel, the good news, the gifts of the spirit within us.

To be an evangelist, or in the Greek, an Euangelion (you-ahn-Geh-lee-on), a messenger of joy, even an angel of joy, is to enable one another to recognize the good news within them in their own gifts, and in so doing, I believe, we

discover the good news of grace, coming often unexpectedly to ourselves as well.

To ask the good question every now and then, with a friend, with a family, with a group is to unlock the grace of good news in each other. This is one way to live evangelically. For me it takes a deep breath, a gulp of courage, and a trust that in asking these questions, grace happens (bumper stickers available in the foyer).

This is my current learning of my month of living evangelically.

I have a postscript as well.

In the midst of getting the hang of my God is still speaking shirt, I had a jolting experience. Along with about 100 other UCG members I was part of the Gainesville Pride parade and wore my UCG shirt, "Gay and Straight Together." It was an honor to be part of that event.

After the parade I went to the 39th Avenue Publix to pick up some stuff for dinner. Suddenly, alone, with no other "Gay and Straight Together" blue t-shirts around me, I felt strangely vulnerable. I am a regular at that Publix. I know a lot of the staff by name. We talk. On this day my Publix people took a look at me and looked away. Living evangelically my Open and Affirming faith outside the comfort and support of this church is gift I need to pay attention to. It is also a witness I am proud to be part of. Public witness is one of the ways God speaks to me.

God also speaks to me in unexpected moments of grace when I put myself in a place to be open to new discoveries of faith. On the men's overnight last week, there was an outdoor labyrinth in a clearing among the Live Oaks. I walked the labyrinth at dusk with the stars appearing, candles lighting the paths, and men walking all a round me. When I reached the center, I lit a candle to carry with me as I walked out of the labyrinth. I lit a candle. Rather inexplicably the words, "I carry my light with me" came to me and stayed with me as I journeyed back out. God was speaking again to me.

All of these experiences are part of my month of living evangelically. They are all good news.