

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Growing Our Faith: Speaking Faith”
Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 54:4-10; 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

A Red Rider bb gun and Ralphie are both familiar to those of us who have watched the Christmas Story at least once in our lives. For any of you who have not seen it, the story line is about Ralphie, a familiar name in this church, and his not so secret desire for a Red Rider bb gun. Like many of us he obsesses over the gun and does everything he can to get one. What I want to ask all of you this morning as we begin, is how many of you had your own metaphoric Red Rider bb gun, that you just had to have at Christmas? Ok, now that we have confessed, I want you to turn to your neighbor and in two minutes each of you share that one thing you had to have. Go...ok let's come back here and out of Christmas wishes past, and remind ourselves that we are not alone. People from the dawn of time have wanted particular gifts, trinkets, beads or toys. And, as you might have guessed by now, so did the Corinthians...but the one gift they all wanted was a spiritual gift, speaking in tongues.

For most Presbyterians, the whole idea or concept of speaking in tongues seems a bit foreign. Most of us, I would guess have not ever seen it...any of you ever witnessed speaking in tongues? But while it may be foreign to us, evidently it was a regular part of worship in the church in Corinth. What it consisted of is individuals, at any moment, beginning to speak in language which was not only not their own, but was not a recorded language. Some people have called it glossolalia, or in a sense a language spoken by God and the angels. Though there were many other spiritual gifts, this was the one everyone wanted under the tree at Christmas, so to speak. Why would they want it? I think for a couple of reasons. First, it was pretty spectacular. It makes the speaker the center of attention. Second, it is, as I said a moment ago, supposed to be direct communication between an individual and God. Thus, it is hard to beat. For Paul though, speaking in tongues, was not the gift everyone ought to desire. Let me say here that Paul does not say, “don't speak in tongues,” partly because he did, but the one gift everyone in the Corinthians' church ought to desire is to be able to prophecy.

The thought of wanting to be able to prophecy might seem as strange to our ears as is speaking in tongues. After all, aren't prophets those people who foretell the future? In other words, aren't they sort of God's fortune tellers? “Yes, I proclaim that the Lions will win the Super Bowl...in 2030” and “Is your auto insurance up-to-date? Good because you will need it next week.” So often this is our image of prophecy partly because at Christmas time we are always reading Isaiah's predictions of the coming messiah. But that concept is not what Paul had in mind when he spoke of prophecy, because prophecy is also forth-telling, meaning it is speaking God's great story of hope for the world to those who need to hear it, and then helping them live into that hope. Let me say that again, the gift of prophecy is the ability to speak God's great story of hope for the world for those who need to hear it, and then helping them live into that hope. For Paul this hope story telling was more important than speaking in tongues because tongues only helped one person, while telling God's great story of hope in Jesus Christ changed not only the lives of individuals, but the entire community.

The gift of this book (the Bible) is that it is not simply a set of moral guidelines, though it has them. It is not simply a history of God's people, which it is. It is not simply a set of interesting stories, which it is as well.

Instead, this book is God's great story of hope for the world. It is the story of God's creating the world and everything in it good. It is the story of humanities turning from God and yet of God sticking with humanity even when they ran away.

It is the story of hope when God saves God's people from slavery. It is a story of hope when God brings God's people back from exile. It is a story of hope when we read of God coming to be one of us so that we might become new people. It is a story of hope when we watch as God's Spirit gives us gifts that we might become the living, breathing body of Christ, showing love and doing justice. In other words, is a story of hope. It is a story of the hope that all life can be made good again. It is the story of hope that we are never alone; that we are never abandoned. It is the story of hope that we can find authentic community in and with our brothers and sisters in this place. It is a story of hope that we have those around us to support us in our times of need. Prophecy is the ability to tell this story to those who have lost hope; to those who feel left out; tot those who seem adrift. This is the gift Paul wanted everyone to have, to be able to share with others, that there is hope. And if there is ever a time when we needed hope, this is it.

I say this because of what I have come to refer to as the Great Honey Baked Ham incident. This past Wednesday Cindy went to Books-a-Million at the corner of Southfield and 13 Mile Road. For those of you who have never been there, one of the other shops there is the Honey Baked Ham Store. Cindy described what she saw as the Hunger Games. People were screaming and yelling at each other. People were honking their horns and making strange hand gestures. People were arguing. It was all in all a frightening scene that somehow does not quite fit the day before our national day for giving thanks. And the context for all of this is we are in a moment of prosperity, where people have their own cars and can drive to a store where they can pick up a ham that they did not have to prepare and then have enough food on their tables. Yet they are angry and frustrated enough to just lose it in a parking lot. This is a society that needs to hear a word of hope that God is present and that all will be well.

So how are we doing with our gift of prophecy? If recent studies are any indication, the answer is not all that good. In his book Learning to Speak God from Scratch¹, Jonathan Merritt, describes the slow but steady decline in our nation of what he calls, spiritual conversation; and what I will call, sharing God's great hope filled story. Merritt uses recent national surveys to make his point. He shows that half of Americans had a conversation of a spiritual nature, less than once or twice a year and that sixty-three percent of Americans try to avoid having those conversations at all. Two of the reasons that we try to avoid those conversations are that people often get angry when we start talking about faith (any of you try this at Thanksgiving this past week) and because we don't know enough about God's great story of hope or the vocabulary of faith to make telling the story possible in order to share it. If either of those are your reasons for not sharing God's great story of hope with someone who needs to hear it, then I hope you will plan to be with us after Christmas and through Easter. I hope you will be with us because Joanne, Bethany and I will be preaching a series on the Vocabulary of Faith, where we will be examining and unpacking the language of God's great story of hope in which all will be well, in a way we hope will allow you to speak hope to those who need to hear it.

My challenge to you then is this, to pray that God would give you the gift of Prophecy, so that you can share a story of hope with those who need to hear it.

¹ Jonathan Merritt, Learning to Speak God from Scratch ; Why Sacred Words are Vanishing-and How We Can Revive Them (New York, USA: Convergent Press, 2018)