

## “*Deus ex machina* OR *Deus vitae*?”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden  
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, June 6, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ

website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

*Scripture Text:*

Acts 9:1-9 [NLT]

### OPENING

The highly regarded English theater and film director, Peter Brook, once said, “All you need for theater is for someone to walk across the stage and for someone else to watch.” (\*Mary Moore’s one-woman performance.\*)

We’re talking in this series about the communication of powerful truth in two different ways: theater and religion. I chose the word “theology” in the series title b/c I like alliteration! But the sense of the series is that both theater and religion seek to convey transcendent truth: something very difficult to do and impossible to do fully.

To use an illustration from a much beloved movie:

♪ “How do you solve a problem like Maria? How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?”

(\*Spoken...\*)

“How do you keep a wave upon the sand?”

“How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?”

That’s what I mean by conveying transcendent truth:

We know what we mean, but gee-whiz, is it hard to put into words! And let’s face it, theology is all about words!

And that’s where theater comes in. Sometimes, often times, in fact, different ways of communicating simply help us get our point across better.

### SERMON THOUGHTS

One of the concepts we’re going to talk about today is a powerful device in ancient Greek theater called *Deus ex machina*. (\*Describe this briefly in the context of theater: it was invoked to solve a particular problem that seemingly had no solution. Don’t go into the theology of it yet.\*)

### TO THE SCRIPTURES

I’m going to use a modern version of theater – *animation* or *cartoon* – to demonstrate this:

ILLUSTRATION: Cartoon clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eRXq-cKmr0>  
0:00 – 01:55

Did you see where the device of *Deus ex machina* was employed in the cartoon? (\*Refer to the impossible situation of the fate of the early Christians in light of Paul’s seemingly intractable hatred for them and his single-minded focus on destroying the church. The solution? A miraculous change of mind and heart!\*)

Now, I’m not saying that Luke, in his writing of the book of Acts, created the “voice from heaven” as a theatrical device to explain Paul’s miraculous change of mind and heart.

What I am saying is that if we’re paying attention – to life, in general, but in this case to theater, drama, even

film – we can experience insights that help us connect to the deeper message of the Scriptures AND our Judeo-Christian faith.

### *Deus ex machina* OR *Deus vitae*?

I said earlier that in ancient Greek theater, the *Deus ex machina* was invoked to *solve* a problem. In theology or religion, it *raises* a problem...a *BIG* problem.

What is it? God pushed to the ever-expanding margins of human life.

If our theology is one of *Deus ex machina*, God eventually becomes irrelevant EXCEPT when we become desperate. And then, if God doesn't "show up" and "fix" our desperate situation, we go away very disappointed and disillusioned. Sometimes, we lose our faith – if our situation was desperate enough and our disillusionment bitter enough. Or we resort to some very poor theological reasoning to rescue our faith from the black hole that threatens to swallow it up – and us with it.

What's the response? *Deus vitae*...the God of life.  
(\*Expound succinctly here, too.\*)

### CONCLUSION

So, being aware of the theatrical device of *Deus ex machina* reminds us to look for God in every aspect of our lives and to live in increasingly intimate fellowship with God, so that no matter what comes our way we can say, "It is well with my soul."

**9 AM:** Prz Team and "It Is Well", K. DiMarco and P. Bliss

**11 AM:** Camille Redding's Special Music piece, FUMCGJ choral arrangement of "It Is Well".

### TRANSITION TO COMMUNION

For the community of Christ, Communion is the ultimate and ongoing expression of *Deus vitae*.

### BENEDICTION

Biblically, there is plenty of evidence of God acting as the *Deus ex machina*, but there's more evidence of God functioning as *Deus vitae*.

My challenge to you going into the week ahead is to spend some time in the Scriptures and identify a few of these places. I'll give you a start on this: John 14:14 and Luke 22:31-32.