

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 20, 2011  
Sermon Title: Always There  
Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-4  
Pastor: Alida Ward

My parents give me awesome Christmas gifts. I don't mean diamond tennis bracelets – in fact, I'll be honest, I don't actually know what that is. I mean they give me really, really useful Christmas gifts. I know that makes you think socks, and yes, I have received socks. But actually I mean stuff that I end up needing that I didn't know I needed.

When the power went out 'cause of the storm, all I had to do was going into the closet and dig out that battery-operated lantern that lit up an entire room. *Thanks, Mom.* The other day when my tire oozed out all its air in a parking lot, I pulled out the portable air compressor, and pumped it up enough to get myself down the road. *Thanks, Dad.* (You can also jump-start your car with it, which I have done).

And -- probably five years ago now -- they gave me a GPS for Christmas. I'll be honest – I didn't think I needed *that* – I pride myself on my keen sense of direction. But then I went to visit a church member over on the other side of Burr Street. I'll tell you – there is a rabbit warren of roads over there that people have disappeared into and never been seen again. Hollydale and Bridle Trail and Rolling Ridge which turns into Rock Ridge, and the aptly named Deep wood Road— you end up on that, there's no hope. It's like some kind of corn maze over there – you go drive over there after church and see what I mean. So one day I got myself lost on Bridle Rolling Rock Ridge Road or whatever, and I thought *this is it – this is where it all ends.* Then I remembered – wait, I got this GPS. And *that*, people, is what saved me.

After that incident I gave my GPS a name – I've noticed a lot of people do that – I went with Daniel – I had selected the male English accent voice – somewhere between Hugh Grant and Colin Firth, and Daniel just seemed to work. And from then on, Daniel was my constant companion. I even took Daniel to

England a couple years ago, for my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary trip – he seemed glad to be back in the old country. He was there when I blew out on a tire in Carlisle, England, offering directions to the nearest automotive repair location. Daniel was there for other difficult moments, too – when I got lost in Boston, when I almost had a head-on collision on a divided road, going 50 miles an hour down the wrong side of the divided road.

(Actually, to be honest, Daniel was the *reason* I was lost in Boston and headed down the wrong side of a divided thoroughfare – I hadn't realized the importance of downloading the map upgrades regularly)

And, three weeks ago, Daniel was there as I was driving home from LaGuardia in the snow – the snow, how crazy was *that*, having chosen a really bad day to be flying home. Now, I of course *know* how to get home from LaGuardia. I didn't *need* the GPS. It's just that it was dark, and snowing and a little scary, and I wanted to hear a friendly voice. Even if all it was saying was "*Recalculating.*" It was comforting to have a companion on the journey.

My daughter Brigitta will often call me on her cell when she needs a companion on the journey. The college she's at, Bryn Mawr College, is a mile or so away from another school, Haverford College, and she's been taking classes there. If it's a nice day, she likes to walk, and as soon she leaves her dorm, she'll call me on her phone, and talk with me all the way there, just to have some company, just to have someone else who strolls down Lancaster Avenue with her, shares the journey with her.

It's nice to have companionship on a stroll down the street. It's *particularly* nice, of course, to have companionship when the journey *isn't* a pleasant stroll down a sunlit street. More than a decade ago, my siblings and I joined my parents on one of their infamous walks – I've told you many times before about their penchant for rugged hikes, usually through the mountains of England and Wales – they are, in fact, on a mountain in Wales right now. This *particular* walk was the West Highland Way in Scotland, 100 miles over 8 days, which meant nothing to *them*, but for we their children, in much worse shape than they, it was something of a challenge. *Ordeal* might be a better word -- though to be fair, each day ended in a Scottish pub.

It was the *last* day that just about did me in. We were 14 miles from the end of the walk, which was the town of Fort William. We awoke to the voice of the weatherman on the telly, promising gale-force winds, heavy rain, and a temperature of 5 degrees Celsius. Yep, 40 degrees. *In June. Guess we're stuck*

*here for the day, huh?* I said to my mom. *Guess again*, she said, *we're booked on a train out of Fort William at dawn tomorrow*. So out the door we went, into something like Irene. For a while I slogged alone, head down, feeling very sorry for myself, and then my brother came alongside and fell into step with me. As soggy and cold as *I* was, he was in worse shape – he'd was wearing jeans and they were soaked through with what was close to ice water. *This stinks*, he said, or something like that, and then we began to laugh, both of us, the laugh of slightly deranged people, and we walked, side by side, two drowned rats with backpacks, coaxing each other along, step by step. Fourteen incredibly long, slow, miserable miles that I'm convinced I wouldn't have finished if not for his companionship on the way.

Companionship makes a pleasant journey even more lovely, but companionship makes a *lousy* journey bearable. And companionship makes what seems an impossible journey somehow do-able.

Four weeks ago, a large group assembled out at Sherwood Island State Park. It's a group that gathers on a Saturday in October every year. Over just the past couple years that I've been there, it has grown considerably. And that's good, and it's bad. All of us there *want* to be with each other, but none of us are glad that we have to be there. Because it's the *Out of the Darkness* walk, and we are gathered there by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. We are there, all of us, because someone dear to us was lost to us through suicide. David and I are there because we, this church family, lost an amazing young woman named Emma, two and a half years ago, and we will love and miss her forever. And *everyone* who is there is there because there is someone *they* will love and miss forever.

And so we walk. We walk to do something, to raise awareness, but also simply to *walk* together, companions on a difficult journey. We walk with mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and friends and husbands and wives, for whom a journey forward has seemed impossible ... but somehow, in the company of others, has become possible. Not easy, but possible. On that walk, there is hurt and many, many tears, but there is also shared memory ... even laughter, even song. None of which would be possible without the person walking next to you. All of which is possible because of who is walking next to you.

The scripture which Andres read to you just now says that everything is possible *because* of the One who walks with you, because the one who walks with you *through* everything is God, a God who has loved you from the first

breath you drew. Listen again to the voice of the prophet Isaiah – it is God who is speaking here, and this is what God says: “*Do not fear, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.*”

When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. I will be with you. I will walk with you.

This is the God we believe in. Not some made-up voice giving you directions from your dashboard in the snow, not even a friendly voice on the other end of a cell phone as you walk, but the One who walks *right beside* you, through gale force winds and much, much worse, through driving rain and much, much worse.

This is the God we believe in: a God who walks through *fire* with us, because there is no place God would rather be than in the fire with us. This is the God we believe in: a God who so desperately wants to be with us that God became flesh and dwelt among us, and, in Jesus, laughed, and wept, and hurt, and bled, and danced, and rejoiced, as God does each day across this world.

Last year, March of 2010, our church welcomed a man named Zacharia Diing Akol, who spoke to the adults one night, and came and visited with our youth group another. Diing was one of what became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. He left the Sudan on foot as a 9-year-old boy, as his village came under attack, With him were hundreds of other lost boys, 8 year olds, 6 year olds, 12 year olds. *Their* journey makes a joke out of my description of the Highland Way as an *ordeal* – theirs was the ordeal, hunted by animals, under fire from enemy soldiers, at all times on the edge of starvation. Diing ended up in Ethiopia, and then Kenya, in a refugee camp run by the United Nations. He was there for twelve years.

It’s hard for us to imagine how anyone would keep their hope, keep even their humanity. For Diing, it was, he said, because he knew he was never alone. In that camp someone gave him a Bible, and Christians there taught him the stories, taught him the hymns, and he felt the presence of One who would never leave him. He knew that the God who was with him would walk through fire with him *had* already walked through the fire with him.

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.*” Diing knew that verse. He had *lived* that verse.

We may not know what the desert sands of the Sudan feel like underfoot, or the fear, the constant fear, of hunger and hurt. But many of you – *all* – have known hurt, some great hurts -- many of you have struggled with things that those around you right now may not know. For many among us, this country’s time of hardship has meant *your* hardship. You have walked through fires, many of you -- All of you have passed through the waters. And to you, to us all, God says *I am with you You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.*”

It’s the Sunday before Thanksgiving. So doesn’t it seem like I should be preaching about gratitude, about counting our blessings, and giving thanks? Shouldn’t this be more of a Thanksgiving sermon?

***People, it is.***

Because I don’t know what greater blessing we could possibly have than the blessing of a God who is always there.

I don’t know what greater thing there is to be thankful for than a God who will walk with you down the path, even when it’s the *wrong* path.

I don’t know what could be *better* than to know that we have a companion on every journey, who will walk through the driving rain with us and point to where the sun is still shining.

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.*

Thank you, God.

Thank you, God. Amen.