

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



---

Date: January 13, 2013  
Sermon Title: Wading In  
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17  
Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

In November of 1999, I traveled to India for the first of what would turn out to be many times. I went that year, I must confess, under a certain amount of duress – I didn't really see why I should have to go at all. It was all Dr. George Longstreth's idea ... George Longstreth who *right now*, as I speak, is *in* India for the fifteenth year in a row, doing free surgeries for people in need. You gotta go over and see the work we do, he had said to me, You have to be there. India is David's thing, I told him, Appalachia, that's mine. That's not true, he said, *everything* we do is *everybody's*.

So I agreed to go. But I was really nervous. And I was made even more nervous when George and David told me that I was probably going to be something of an oddity when I got there, because they were quite sure that none of the Indians I was going to be with had ever seen a woman pastor before. Ever. There was some concern that in fact people might have some trouble believing I *was* a pastor. So I decided, for the first time in my life, that I should really try to *look* like a pastor. I went online and ordered one of those clergy collars, you know, the priestly things, those white dog collar things – and that's what I've heard my priest friends call them, by the way -- **and** I ordered severe black shirts to wear with the collars, and these, like, ankle-length skirts. And that's what I wore to India. I looked like Maria from the Sound of Music in her nunnery days, only with a priest collar, which itched like you wouldn't believe.

But it did work, I guess, because in India people took me very seriously. I got asked to preach everywhere I went, I got asked to distribute Holy Communion to a church full of enthusiastic Christians, and, *and*, I was asked one Sunday morning to do the baptisms. Well, sure, I said, and I looked around the church for a little baptism font thing like ours, but there was none. "We baptize in the pool," they said. Right, of course, I should have remembered – baptism in India is the real deal. And they took me to the pool. It was kind of the size of a hot tub only *not* hot and a good bit deeper. "How does this work, exactly?" I said to the leader of the church. "Don't you baptize in America?" he said. "Yeah," I said, "absolutely, but we just have a little bowl. With a really little bit of water in it, and we just kind of dribble it on." He was really baffled. "Why?" he said, "Is there a water shortage in your country?" "No," I said, "no, there's plenty of water, we just do it because – you know

what, I don't know why we do it. But we do, and so I don't know how to work this situation." "You just get in the pool," he said, kind of like "*duh*".

So in I got, in my Mother Superior outfit, It was cold, and my get-up was not the most comfortable bathing costume. but I have to tell you, when my first customer – baptizee? came forward and scrambled into the pool with me, I forgot the discomfort. This was powerful stuff. The young woman who had come to be baptized was breaking away from generations of family tradition to become a Christian, risking ostracism, even persecution. And she stood shyly before me and waited, and I gingerly put my arm around her and kind of dipped her back a bit, and I said 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

But that wasn't quite right -- the leader guy whispered "you have to put her all the way under," so I tried dipping her again, but this time I slipped and down we both went, and we sure enough did go all the way under. And when we came out she was crying with emotion, and I was too.

And as much as I love every baptism we do here at Greenfield Hill, I will never forget what it was like to be baptized with that woman, to wade into that pool with her and to be with her as her life transformed. Now, I don't know what exactly John the Baptist felt as he baptized the Son of God himself, but it was for sure the baptism that *he* would never forget. To be present in that moment when the whole *world* transformed.

Here's what had been going on. John had been out on the banks of the Jordan River for days, weeks maybe, preaching and preaching. And what he was preaching to people was that something incredible was about to happen, that God was about to do something amazing in this world... and he was telling people that they had to get ready. He said the best way to get ready was to *admit* that they needed help, admit that they had sins that needed forgiving, that they had lives that needed to be turned around. And so he was calling people down to the river to be baptized, to wash away whatever guilt and wrong and hurt clung to them.

And the people came, boy did they come, by the hundreds, streaming down to the riverside, wading into the waters to be baptized by John the Baptist himself. And then one day, a pilgrim shows up who's traveled a long way, all the way from Nazareth in the north. And maybe this solitary pilgrim watches for a while, watches as the river carries away all the sins and sorrows of the believers. And then after a while, *he* joins the line of those who are wading out into the river, who are wading out into that river of human regret and hope. And he too wades out to John the Baptist, bows his head and waits to be lowered into the water.

But instead John backs away from him, shaking his head. Because he knows, he knows, somehow he knows that this is the One. That the *something amazing* that he's been promising is right here in front of him. The *something amazing* is Some One amazing – the Messiah is here, the world's great hope is here. And the story says that John cries out

“No! I’m not doing this. You should be baptizing me. My God, you should be baptizing **me**.” And Jesus says, “no, it’s all right. It is right.” So John, overwhelmed, lowers Jesus into the water, baptizes God’s own Son in the waters which have carried away the hurts and sorrows of so many.

This story moves me every time I read and re-read it. Because this story says *everything* about Jesus. It’s the first story about Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel that isn’t about mangers and stars and angels and wise men. This is the first glimpse of the grown-up Jesus, which is why in church tradition it’s always read in January, *after* the mangers and stars and angels. And what’s the first thing the grown-up Jesus does? He wades into the water with everyone else.

John was right, of course, the Son of God doesn’t need to be baptized, right? the Son of God surely didn’t have sins to wash away, regrets and sorrows to be cleansed. Couldn’t Jesus have just stood on the riverside watching?

But that’s not Jesus. This story tells you everything you need to know about him because Jesus just wades right in. Into that river of hurt and grief and mistakes, he wades right in. Into that river with tax-collectors and fishermen, soldiers and carpenters, he wades right in. With women and men longing for hope and healing, Jesus wades in, wades in with them, wades in *to be with them*, in all their regrets and their yearning. Jesus jumps right in with both feet, literally, into that river of human fragility because that is who he is. God with us, Emmanuel, God with us. Where *we* are, he is.

Back on Sunday, December 16, I was asked to preach at an interfaith service to be held at First Congregational Church, the same night that the President was in Newtown for their service. My friend David Spollett, pastor at First Church, told me that the scripture to be read right before I spoke would be Psalm 42. Psalm 42 – a cry of deepest hurt and lament, a Psalm which says, with deepest anguish, *Where is my God?*

So I preached what I believe, I preached the God whom Jesus was proclaiming when he waded into that river, when he walked right into the river side by side with those who were hurting and hoping and longing for healing. **Where is our God?** I said, *where was our God on Friday? God was everywhere. God was in the selflessness of every loving adult who stepped into the line of fire, who sheltered the innocents, who faced down evil. God was in the arms that held each child close, whispered words of comfort, sang songs of reassurance in closets and darkened rooms. God was in the courage of every first responder who ran to the school, and God was in their tears. God was in the arms that held close the grieving, God it was whose arms held close those lost to us.*

I said that, that night, because I believed it, and I believe it because in Jesus God has shown it to be so. From the moment Jesus waded into the water alongside all humanity, his life proclaimed: God is with you everywhere. There is no place you go that I am not there with you, Jesus was saying, there is no sorrow, no hurt, no heartbreak that God is not a part of. Just like there is no joy, no delight, no laughter, no hope that God does not

celebrate with you. Where you go, God already is, because I am there beside you. This life that we live, this life of blessing and heartache and hope and hurt, this is the life that Jesus has waded right into with us.

That's what this baptism story tells us. That's what it tells us.

But it tells us something else, too. It tells us that if *we* want to be where Christ is, *we* have to wade right in too. We have to wade right in wherever people are hurting and hoping, wherever people are yearning, longing, needing. We don't stand on the riverside watching – Jesus didn't. We wade right in, unafraid to hurt and hope ourselves, hearts wide open to feel what others feel. Because it is when we are willing to do that, when we are willing to be utterly a part of our sisters' and brothers' lives in this world, then we are most connected to the God who is utterly a part of humanity.

Jesus waded right in. And so then do we.

Which means just not holding back, not ever holding back. Whenever there is a way to stand alongside someone in their hurt *or in their hope*, that's where we need to be.

Here's a simple example. Countless times, David and I have walked into a hospital room to be with someone hurting, and found one of you there, sitting at the bedside, listening and loving, wading right in to be with someone who needs you. That's what I mean. That's the kind of thing I mean.

Or this: Last Monday night, there were 37 Confirmands in the Memorial Room, our 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and with them were 37 adults from this church, each one of them there to be a mentor to an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, each one of them willing to wade right into the life of a 13 year old and share in it. That's what I mean.

You pick up the paper and there is a story that moves you, and you don't turn the page, instead you figure out what to do ... that's wading in.

You hear that a friend is struggling, and you pick up the phone – that's wading right in.

Something moves you to tears, and you don't shut that feeling down, you *let* it move you, and you let it change you –that's wading into the river.

Jesus didn't stand on the riverbank and just watch.  
Neither do we.

He went into the river with everyone else, he went into the river with us.  
So then do we. Strengthened always by his presence, lifted always by his love,  
we enter into each other's lives as he did. We wade right in ... with him.

Amen.