

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: August 2, 2020
Sermon: "This Is the Day"
Scripture: Psalm 118:19-24
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Psalm 118:19-24

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter, and give thanks to the Lord. We will give You thanks, for You have answered us; You have become our salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

When people like a sermon, they'll often say, "David, you were preaching right at me . . . that is exactly what I needed. How did you know what I was going through?"

I'd love to take credit for being clairvoyant, but the truth is much more practical. Years ago, an old seminary professor told me, "David, preach a sermon at yourself; that way, at least one person will get something out of it!"

This sermon is definitely directed at me. Start with that single Bible verse: "This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Or take the slogan of AA, Alcoholics Anonymous: "One day at a time." Or the wise saying, "Be in the moment." Or the popular coach's advice, "Pour yourself out on the field." It's all the same idea: NOW. NOW is what we've got. NOW is all we are guaranteed. The past is over. The future is "who knows?" But NOW is golden. NOW is ours.

I arrived at this the same as you did. You look down the road at any aspect your life—work, school, sports, vacation—"Who knows?" Right? Broadway. College football. Thanksgiving family reunions. Christmas Eve services. "Who knows?" Weddings are on hold. Movie openings delayed.

Personally, I'm not good at this. Alida will tell you: I plan tomorrow's dinner today. I planned next week's sermon last week. Every summer I go to Prague,

and when Alida picks me up at JFK, I tell her about next summer's trip to Prague. I live in "Tomorrow Land."

So if anybody needs this sermon, I do. "This is the day, *this* is the day, *this is* the day the Lord hath made." It's here. It's now. We're in it. So "let us rejoice *now* and be glad *now*, right *now*, about today."

I feel so strongly about the urgency of this message that I'm letting it sort of take center stage in our Church. It's been our email Bible study the past week. It's the focus of our Advent Devotional this year. And today, today it's our sermon message. "*This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*"

Through the years I've had the joy of being a guest preacher at a lot of Black Churches, and among the many features I've enjoyed was the approach to prayer. And if there was any single common phrase in just about every Black Church, North/South, urban/rural, large/small, it was someone standing up at prayer time to say, "Thank you, Lord, for getting me up today. You did not have to get me up. But today you have given me breath and life. Thank you, Lord, for getting me up today."

Lots of religion can be about yesterday. And there is a place for that. Everything from mistakes and confession and repentance, even gratitude. They all require a good hard look at the past. Lots of religion can be about tomorrow: Heaven. Eternal life. Or simply showing improvement. Putting into practice what we've learned.

Yesterday and tomorrow have their place, but it's today that allows us to plan for tomorrow; it's today that allows us to remember yesterday. When you ruin today or waste today, you ruin your memories and your plans. The Bible says two key things about today. One, the Lord made it. It is the "day the Lord hath made." Two, be happy about it. "Rejoice and be glad in it." Which goes back to what I've always heard in Black Churches. "Thank you, Lord for getting me up today." God gives us this day as a gift, as an opportunity, as a privilege.

You all have calendars at home, probably dozens of them. Homemade, store-bought, artistic, inspiring. Dog calendars. Cat calendars. Sacred spaces. Favorite Italian Towns. They're especially fun to get for Christmas. On December 25, you can open it up and flip through it, enjoying the monthly photos and enjoying the empty spaces. Each day sits there, totally blank. Empty. Clean. Just waiting for you. The Bible verse for today is saying, "Look at that empty space on your calendar, the empty page in your day planner. Look at your iPhone screen. Click on the *Remember the Milk* app, and see it clean and clear. This, THIS is the day the Lord hath made. Go for it!"

I say this as one who begins each day with "What? My coffee house isn't allowing sit-down customers?" "What? Our favorite French restaurant in New York City is still closed?" "What? Whaddya mean I can't go to country A, B, C, D, E, or F as planned? They're expecting me!!" So, yes, I need an attitude adjustment!

Alida and I sneaked out the back door for a few days last week, and I made a vow, a prayer: I was going to be nice every day, pleasant, "in the moment," fully there. Yeah, I know, it's sad for your pastor to have to make a vow to be nice for a couple of days in a row, but it's a start. One day at a time. THIS is the day" to "rejoice" to "be glad," to "be pleasant." Alida says I did pretty well, and it is because I approached each day, even each half-day as a gift.

I once had a person in my Church with a number of difficulties. Finally I was able to convince her of today's message, that this day is the key to all the rest, "so one day at a time." But even that was overwhelming. We finally settled on 15 minutes. She began living her life in 15-minute increments "one quarter-hour at a time." That was a start. Take what you've got, what you can handle, and rejoice and be glad in it.

May I insert a rather unpleasant reality from these months of shutdown, isolation, and protest? My goodness, have they been a reminder of the fragility of life, of how fleeting life is. The Bible has tried to warn us, Ash Wednesday, every Lent is designed to warn us, but mostly we choose to ignore how brief, how uncertain, how unpredictable life is.

Here's a sample from the Bible: "Life is a mist that appears for a little while and vanishes." (James 4:14) "My days are a mere handbreadth." (Psalm 39:5) "My days fly away." (Job 9:23) All variations of "Here today, gone tomorrow."

George Floyd: one moment he's leaning on his car on a lovely spring day. Eight and a half minutes later, he's dead on the sidewalk. Ahmaud Arbery: One moment he's out for an energetic run, the next, he's shot-gunned to death. And the 150,000 Covid deaths, most unexpected. Even those with so-called "risk factors." They were not expecting the Grim Reaper. Sure, some diabetes, some respiratory issues, some ailments, even old age. But they weren't expecting death.

You read the stories as I do, all around the nation, one day they're with us; one day they're not. These harsh realities are, let's face it, a wake-up call: to take life seriously, to take today seriously, to take now and the people you care about seriously.

There is a brand of religion that has emphasized this a lot. Their sales pitch was "If you die today, do you know where you'll spend eternity?" Or "Are you ready to meet your maker?" It was said of my grandfather that he preached so convincingly about the end of the world, that half the congregation rushed outside Church hoping that it had happened and the other half were afraid to go outside in case it had happened!

But nowadays, most religion is not that scary or stark or threatening. I don't use each Sunday to frighten you into faith. And yet, without being alarmist, nowadays is a valuable tool to value today. Truth is, life has always been fragile and unpredictable. Only now it's in our face and on the news every day, an updated tally for how many died, how many hospitalized, how many on ventilators. Death has our attention.

Don't ask me why, but I've been walking in a lot of cemeteries lately, and it really is a wake-up call: Your name is there; my name is there. On some headstone, on some plaque, on some monument. We were walking through one cemetery, and there was a lovely stone sarcophagus: "ROWE," it boldly proclaimed. Not far away, a tall obelisk: "WARD," it said. And each time I see your name, my name, it is a statement of fact: we'll all be there one day. Again, this is not an attempt to be crass or melodramatic. But I'll say this bluntly: Death used to be more in your face, and it is again; death used to be more sacred, and it is again; death used to make us all more aware of how precious life is, and it is again.

With that being said, back to the key point of today: "THIS is the day the Lord hath made. It's ours. It's precious. It's in our hands. It's now. So let us rejoice and be glad in it and make the most of it."

That got me thinking about what can you do that you control with this day? What's doable today that would show how grateful you are to have this day in your lap?

You can't build a bridge in a day, but you can climb a mountain. You can't write a novel, but you can start, or read one. You can't become a saint, but you can act like one. You can't play or perform, but you can practice. I think that's why baking has become the number-one hobby in America these months. It's something you can do start to finish, in one day, in part of one day.

That kind of thinking sent me to the Bible. What's in there that you and I can do "this day"? Not put off till tomorrow. Not wish we'd done it yesterday. What can we do now? You could begin with the Book of Proverbs, all those pithy little statements designed to create good people. "Hold your tongue," it says.

Seriously, wouldn't that be interesting for one day? Hold your tongue. Be careful what you say. For one day. *Hold your tongue.*

Here's another: "Hope deferred makes the heart sink; a heart at peace gives life to the body; an anxious heart wears a person down. A kind word cheers a person up." That's all attitude that you control: to be at peace, to be hopeful, kind. Not anxious. Try it for one day.

How about some "try it for one day" socio/political stuff? The Bible says: "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers all wrongs . . . They who mock the poor will not go unpunished . . . A generous person prospers . . . Make level paths for your feet, take only ways that are firm, do not swerve to the right or the left."

Come on, for one day: be "generous," not "mocking," and " don't swerve to the right or the left." In every conversation you have, in every news item you read or listen to, in every opinion you form, "make level paths for your feet." No "swerving right or left," be guided by love and generosity. You can do it! If I can be pleasant and nice to Alida for several days in a row, you can live without swerving to extremes for one day.

The basic Proverbs message is: watch your mouth, watch your attitude, watch your ego, watch your lust. Don't fret, gloat, lie, drink too much, gossip, be lazy, stingy, or stiff-necked. Be a good friend. And above all, seek wisdom and understanding.

That's a good day's work! Same in the New Testament. Jesus has his Beatitudes, Parables, and Miracles. St. Paul has his "Fruits of the Spirit," definitions of love, advice on being a Church. It's all doable "this day." "Love is not jealous," Paul wrote. "Be a peacemaker," Jesus said, and "pure in heart." Practice "patience and self-control," Paul advised. Be prepared, Jesus's Parables teach us. None of that should wait for tomorrow. Today, be prepared. Today, be pure. Today, be self-controlled.

I'll close with two tough ones, both doable in one day: "Be still and know that I am God." And "Pray without ceasing." Be still . . . and pray constantly. We're stuck at home. Everything is up in the air. We could fret the day away. Or, quiet ourselves. "Chill," as the young people say. "Stay calm," as the British say. "Be still," as the Bible says. Then, put some of that time to work in prayer. To "pray without ceasing" takes all the stress out of prayer. No formalities. No rules. No structure. Just throw it out there . . . Or up there. Whatever crosses your mind, anything, everything, say it to God, blurt it out. Spell it out. Any form it takes. If it's from you to God, it's prayer.

So there you have it. A prescription for making today better. You say you've always wanted to practice your prayer skills or baking skills or being a better citizen or staying in touch with your friends? There's "no time like the present." Today.

I'll end with a drop-dead political statement. Everybody is already focused on Election Day, November 3rd. For one side or the other, you're counting on it, betting on it, donating, or working for it. Four more years. Or no more years. So I'll tell you this: November 3rd isn't worth a plug nickel if you and I can't figure out how to make something good out of today.

"This is the day the Lord hath made." If we can't act as though today is worth something, why should we be trusted with tomorrow?

Our final hymn today is "This Is the Day," No. 286

*This is the day,
this is the day that the Lord has made,
that the Lord has made;
we will rejoice,
we will rejoice and be glad in it,
and be glad in it.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day,
this is the day that the Lord has made!*