

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Date: May 1, 2011  
Sermon Title: Be Prepared  
Scripture: 1 John 2:28  
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **1 John 2:28**

*And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.*

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What a happy day! Confirmation Sunday. Holy Communion. The week after Easter. This sun is still shining, 26 young people are choosing to follow Christ, to be part of our church family. It's a good day.

Oh, I forgot to mention Judgment Day is May 21. Seriously. With billboards and bus advertisements up and down I-95, there is a worldwide effort to prepare the world for the end of the world as we know it (to quote the great Georgia rock 'n' roll band, R.E.M.).

If you Google May 21, 2011, you'll go straight to the Web site, "May 21, 2011 – Are You Ready?" which will explain all their mathematical, Biblical calculations. The creation of the world was 11,000 years ago; Noah and the Ark were 5,000 years ago. God quit the church 23 years ago, which puts Judgment Day three weeks from today. All the dead who've ever lived will be resurrected and fly up to heaven to be judged; the people who are living healthily – some of you – will be captured up to heaven, literally plucked out from whatever you are doing and taken away to be with God forever. The rest are stuck here to suffer till October, when the earth will be destroyed. Unless, of course, it's next May, according to another Web site.

Or, it's December 21, 2012, based on the end of the ever-popular Mayan calendar. Or, 12/12/12, a potentially frightening day for those who like nice round numbers all in a row. Glenn Beck worried about Turkey, where the mysterious hidden 12<sup>th</sup> Imam of Islam is about to show up as the Antichrist and re-create the Caliphate, marching us all steadfastly toward Armageddon.

Beck, in his latest production, points out that all three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, all have an emphasis on what is called "eschatology," the end times, Judgment Day, God's triumph over evil.

Jews are awaiting their Messiah. Christians await the return of our Messiah, the second coming. Muslims await the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam. Each scenario brings victory for the good guys; deceit, punishment, hell, death for the bad guys.

I don't have a lot of time today, so here's the CliffsNotes version of the reasoning on this. God created the world. It was supposed to be paradise. Humanity loused it up. Year by year, century by century, millennium by millennium, people ruined creation: rotten leaders, rotten behavior, rotten people. Selfish, violent, greedy, immoral, perverted.

Along the way God sends messengers and prophets, holy people, holy books, and lots of wake-up calls: earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, diseases. All signs that God is not happy. All pointing toward May 21. Or the Mayan calendar. Or the Turkish Caliphate. Or some day.

There's nothing new in this. People have been worrying about the end of the world since the beginning of the world. Just this week, I saw the most convincing story of God's exasperation, man's evil, and the end result. This story makes it clear: the earth stinks, and God is fed up! The earth is full of evil: too much wine, women, and song; girls, beer, tobacco, more girls, big business, bad music, licentious dancing, too much fun, too much pleasure, disobedience, free thinking, not to mention war.

So the world is finished. Judgment day is coming. God sends an angel trumpeter down to earth to end the world with a trumpet blast at midnight. But the angel loses his trumpet in this 1945 comedy starring Jack Benny. Oh, well.

So what do we do with this? Here we are. We are serious Christians, the Bible is not a joke to us, and we are not here to make fun of people's fears or to make light of people's beliefs. Truth is, believing in the return of Christ, the triumph of God, Judgment Day – all that is mainstream, Orthodox, Biblical Christianity. It's been part of people's hopes, fears, faith, and unfortunately, calculations for centuries.

It's the calculation part that leads to silliness. Here's what Jesus said about "The End": "No one knows the day or the hour. No one. Not even the angels in heaven, not even me! No one knows the day or the hour only God." (Mark 13:32)

Ironically, the May 21 Web site actually says, "No one knows the day? We do!" In other words, Jesus lied. That's an interesting way to promote the second coming! But Jesus seems pretty clear. This isn't a game or a puzzle. It isn't something to be calculated, figured out, or predicted.

For those of you who aren't into this stuff, let me tell you what the folks who are into it do. They take a bunch of verses in the Bible, mostly from the Book of Daniel and Revelation, and anything with numbers, and they start playing with the numbers and symbols and signs. For example, the Soviet Union's Gorbachev had a huge birthmark on his head like the Antichrist. That's a symbol. Israel got reestablished as the Jewish nation in 1947. That's a sign. May 21 is 5,000 years after Noah's Ark. That's a number. Plus, gay people are getting married, Egyptians want freedom, marijuana may be legalized, Charlie Sheen is a TV star, and the world is going to heck in a hand basket. So buy gold, hoard food, count the days.

Well, O.K., but not quite. There's a little logic to it, there's a little Bible to it, but it's a little off. You know how when your tires are out of alignment? You still go forward, but it's just not right? That's what is going on now. It's not quite right. What the Bible really says is the Kingdom of Heaven is like Kate and William's wedding reception, an incredible, terrific, joyous, extravagant, fun, happy banquet. You could be there!

Your job, Jesus says, is to be ready (Mark 13:44), keep watch (Matthew 25:13), stay awake (Revelation 16:15). It doesn't say be scared, be hung up, get obsessed, fret, or panic. Just live your life, ready.

So what's this got to do with us on Confirmation Sunday with 26 delightful teenagers joining their church family?

I have a new book coming out in September. Don't worry, it's not poetry! And I've already started my next book after that, simply called *Church*. That led me to interview my father. He preached his first sermon when he was 12 years old. He's been in some form of ministry for 77 years. His father was a pastor for 16 years. His brother, for 50 years. So I asked my father why he became a pastor. "It was the only choice," my dad said. "We believed Jesus was coming soon. There was no sense in becoming a lawyer or hoping to be president. It only made sense to preach and get people ready. There wasn't time for anything else." He would have been 18 at the time he made that choice. For the next 71 years, he lived his life at the intersection of two great ideas: be prepared, AND make the most of your life. He wasn't run by fear, or obsessed with the calculations. He took Jesus at his word: Don't worry. Stay awake. Be ready. Besides, what's coming is great, whether it's more life here, or eternal life there. So my father did his work and lived his

life to the max, with equal parts of joy and seriousness. He didn't absent himself from the world. He embraced it. He challenged it, fixed some of it. He enjoyed it.

That's our approach. Our Confirmation class is our statement of faith. Each one is proof of God's goodness. Each one is proof of God's grace. Each one is proof of God's purpose. I look at the young people of our church, and I smile when I think of the future of our nation and the future of our world. I look at the young people of our church, and I smile! I don't see America in decline or the world going to heck in a hand basket. I look at the young people of our church, and I smile. You can't help but smile when you know them as we know them!

Last Monday night we had our last Confirmation class. A lot of pizza, a lot of laughter, a lot of work, a lot of hugs. We went out to the Memorial Garden, gathered around the big wooden cross, talked seriously, told some stories. At the end of the night, I played two songs. One, kind of eerie, scary, screaming about evil and demons and destruction. The other, by our own John Giannicchi, from his CD, his song about "hanging on," not giving up, not giving in. Then we concluded with a sort of reading based on our own conviction and John Giannicchi's lyrics, together. It went like this:

*We do not tremble, we will not be afraid.  
This world is ours, this life is ours, and we go with God.  
We'll choose our path and make it clear,  
Make it ours, won't live in fear,  
Be ourselves, won't give in,  
Use our gifts, and let our lives begin.*

*So it's all for one and one for all.  
Trust in God, break down the wall.  
Some day we'll understand,  
Find ourselves in the Promised Land.*

That's our answer to "end-of-the-world" religion and fear-mongering politics. There is a Promised Land. And we'll end up there when it's time. But until it's time, until Jack Benny finds his trumpet, we've got great good work to do and great good young people to do it with.

They are the best proof that May 22<sup>nd</sup> is going to be a good day.