

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 17, 2011  
Sermon Title: The B-I-B-L-E  
Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Psalm 23 (sort of)  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **2 Timothy 3:16**

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness ..."*

## **Psalm 23 (sort of)**

*The Lord is in charge  
so I'm OK.  
He sets me up nicely,  
peacefully,  
makes me feel better  
and be better.  
Even when things are tough  
I don't worry –  
(thank you, Jesus!!)  
I know you push me when I need it,  
or pull me back,  
tough love and all that.  
You deflate my enemies  
but pump me up  
with confidence and a divine high-five.  
So I know that I win  
now and forever.  
Hurray!*

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We keep pushing our Vacation Bible School because VBS is the best Christian Education we do. AND VBS is the most fun week of the year. It's especially fun for me because VBS is one of my favorite childhood memories. Often it was two weeks long, sometimes four weeks.

One year I was part of a particularly bad group of boys. We were too big for VBS. We made life miserable for our teachers and the other kids. We were disruptive and obnoxious. "Spawn of the devil," one adult called us.

So one day our teacher rounded us up. "You be back here at this church at 5 PM, or else. I don't care what you tell your parents, just be here." Quaking in our boots, we all showed up at church at 5 PM. The teacher crammed us into the car, drove us a long way to a remote town in upstate New York ... where she fed us, took us to stock car races, made us eat ice cream, then drove us home, never saying a word about our outrageous behavior. Believe me, we became her puppy dogs, carrying her bags and classroom supplies, escorting her to and from the church. She loved us within an inch of our lives. Pretty cool.

I remember the Bible's being central to VBS. Not only Bible stories, but also the Bible itself. I even remember carving an open Bible out of Ivory soap. And, of course, Bible songs:

*The B·I·B·L·E ... yes, that's the book for me!  
I'll stand upon on the Word of God, The B·I·B·L·E!*

Another little ditty taught us the books of The Bible:

*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth  
and First and Second Samuel ...*

The Bible was the book we were expected to know inside and out. Later, as an adult, I saw a bumper sticker that really summarized the importance of the Bible: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." And, of course, that Bible was The King James Version.

For many people in many churches, The King James Version is the only Bible. People left this church 20 years ago when we changed the pew Bibles from King James to the Revised Standard. And for anybody over 50, The King James Version was the only Bible we knew.

This year is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The King James Bible, that's why Alida's Book Chat group just finished reading *God's Secretaries*, an excellent telling of how it was done. And it's why our adult ed's "Culture of Learning" group is headed into New York City next Saturday to the Museum of Biblical Art to see its exhibit on The King James Bible.

As one scholar said, "The King James Version is the building block of our cultural heritage ... it is the English language Bible on which all others

stand." (Sweeney, Jon. "The KJV at 400." *Christian Century* 12 July 2011: 30. Print.)

The author goes on to list all the common phrases we took straight from the King James:

*Eat, drink, and be merry ...*  
*the apple of his eye ...*  
*an eye for an eye ...*  
*fight the good fight ...*  
*fell flat on his face ...*  
*can the leopard change his spots? ...*  
*am I my brother's keeper? ...*  
*let my people go! ...*  
*holier than thou ...*  
*a labor of love ...*  
*the salt of the earth ...*  
*how the mighty are fallen ...*  
*a house divided against itself cannot stand.*

In fact, it was "a house divided" that led King James to authorize a fresh translation of the Bible. Europe was torn asunder, Protestants and Catholics at each other's throats. England was divided. The Protestant Church of England, the Anglicans against the Catholics, but also Anglicans and Puritans were fighting it out. So King James "authorized" top scholars, Puritans and Anglicans, to come up with a Bible that would unify his kingdom, a Bible meant to be spoken out loud, pleasing to the ear, a Bible that would emulate the feel and majesty of monarchy and hierarchy, as well as God. And yet a Bible left mysterious and complex enough for the kind of personal interpretation that Protestants wanted the freedom to pursue.

King James ended up with a Bible that unified much of the Christian world for almost 400 years. It was not entirely original; English translations had been around for decades. William Tyndale was burned at the stake for his efforts to bring the Bible to the people in a language they could understand, but his Bible formed the basis of the King James.

The end result was a Bible people swore by, literally and figuratively, through four of the most astounding centuries of human history. It worked. It pleased the ear, it fed the imagination, it was lofty, mysterious, poetic. T. S. Eliot referred to its "auditory imagination ... feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought, with feeling invigorating every word." In other words, it sounded the way God ought to sound!

Which is why I subjected you to my ungodly renditions of the Lord's Prayer\* and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. They're accurate, the gist is there, you get the point. But they're not memorable. You wouldn't want to say them over and over again your whole life. No one would turn them into songs or request them at funerals and weddings. Yet the King James versions are requested all the time, even after 400 years.

But enough said about King James and his Bible. Just come with us on Saturday. I'd rather we focus just on the Bible, that amazing book which is really a collection of books, 66 books all together. History, poetry, stories, battles, revelations, prophecies, wisdom, songs written down, stories remembered from oral tradition, letters sent out to churches, explanations, rationales, theology, God-talk, doctrine, dogma, ritual, stuff nobody believes anymore, stuff people still fight and die over, stuff from God to God about God, human nature, divine nature, just plain nature, promises, punishments, hopes. And love. All in one big varied complicated book of books.

I'm going to zero in on just two little sections of Scripture that tell us a lot about the Bible. First, our more serious morning Scripture lesson, 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training." The other is a fascinating exchange between Jesus and the Devil. It happened while Jesus was in the desert, preparing to start his ministry, and being tempted by the Devil. What's fascinating is that they both throw Scripture at each other, Jesus AND the Devil both quote the Bible, the Devil throws Psalm 91 at Jesus, and Jesus throws the Book of Deuteronomy at the Devil. Dueling Scriptures. And ever since, for 2,000 years, folks have been hurling Bible verses at one another.

So we get two lessons here: All Scripture is profitable. And the Devil knows the Bible inside and out. It's all good, it's all useful, it's all "God-breathed." Second Timothy says, "inspired"; it's all in there for a reason. BUT, anyone, even the Devil, can twist it and turn it to his own devices. One hundred fifty years ago Americans slaughtered one another in the Civil War, each side quoting Scripture, pro-slavery Scripture, anti-slavery Scripture, even Abraham Lincoln's "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

Two years ago, President Obama's pastor got into hot water for his take on Scripture. This week Michele Bachmann's Lutheran pastor got into hot water using the Bible to call the Pope the "anti-Christ." Mitt Romney's Mormonism will come under attack, and support, with Scriptures. Wars, campaigns, causes, issues, elections all get fought with Bible verses flung about. So it's all useful, and it can all be used for good or ill.

The guy who predicted the end of the world on May 21 – it was all based on the Bible; the people who knew he was wrong 21 – that was all based on the Bible. For or against capital punishment, homosexuality, a debt ceiling, welfare, tax increases, the gold standard, the United Nations. I've heard it all argued out, both sides, all based on the Bible. So there's power there, to be used, or abused.

I've told you my conversion story many times, but this is a good time to repeat it, the short version. I was a sophomore in college. I'd made a mess of my life, been kicked out of college, and I end up in Brooklyn on the Coney Island Boardwalk, just up from Nathan's Famous Hotdogs, and I'm getting paid to give away free Bibles. That's right, I'm standing on the Boardwalk in the middle of summer, catching people as they get off the subway and head to the beach, and I'm shoving free Bibles into their hands. Some people took the Bibles, laughed, threw them away, cursed me out, hit me, spat in my face. Other people took the Bibles, went to the beach, came back hours later, hugging me, kissing me, putting money in my hands. And I knew right then, there's something in that book. I'd better check it out.

I hadn't bothered with it since my rough-house days in Vacation Bible School, but there was something about that book I must have missed to make perfect strangers kiss me, hug me, give me money, or hit me and curse me. I found it was time to get back to the Bible. And the truth is, "all Scripture is profitable." Everything in there is worth reading, worth arguing, worth wrestling with.

My grandfather was a pastor for 70 years, and till the end he began every day with three hours of Bible Study, but he didn't count that as part of his workday. I was amazed! He'd been preaching and teaching for decades. I figured he knew the Bible inside and out, but he told me, "Every time I read the Bible, I find something new; every time I read a verse I've read a thousand times before, I find something new." So he kept at it, and I agree!

Read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm – the real one, not mine – read it when you're 15: "Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death." Read it when you're 25, read it when you're 50, read it when you're 80. It won't be the same.

Read "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" when you haven't done anything; then read it again when you have really messed up.

Read "the Parable of the Prodigal Son" when you've gone astray; then read it when your children have gone astray.

As my Grandpa said, "You see something new every time." So you keep reading, because "all Scripture is profitable."

Many years ago when I was a pastor in New York City, I got a phone call from a man with a deep, rich, baritone voice. Turned out he was an opera singer. He'd been out on tour, took real sick, couldn't sing, was about to cancel his concerts. In desperation he found the Gideon Bible in his hotel room desk, took it out, sat down and read it. He found verses that guided him to prayer, and he prayed. And to his surprise he got better, and he did the tour.

Now he was back in town looking for a Bible Study. He showed up at my church at a slow time. My Bible Study was dead. My choir was dead. My church was dead. But he jumped in with both feet. We revived the Bible Study, we transformed the choir, we renewed the church. But it all began when one person took the Bible to heart.

When I was writing my last book of poetry, I knew I wanted one poem about the Bible. All the other 100 or so poems are based on something from the Bible, some verse, some story, some person. But I wanted to do one poem *about* the Bible. So I went up to Yale University to their Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the library built with stone that light shines through. Up on the second floor, they have one of the few copies of The Gutenberg Bible, the first book every printed. The Gutenberg Press changed not only the world of writing and reading but also changed the world AND the world of religion.

With the printing press, it really was possible to imagine everyone in the whole wide world with his or her own personal Bible in his or her own language. All of a sudden people could think for themselves, even about God, and let their imaginations run wild, even with the Bible. Before you knew it, we had Protestantism and Congregationalism and individualism and freedom and democracy and America and Civil Rights and human rights and equal rights. And I'm not the only one to trace all of that back to the Bible in everyone's hands – thanks to Gutenberg.

So I went to the Beinecke Library and sat next to the Gutenberg Bible and wrote this poem:

**The Bible**  
**(2 Timothy 3:16; John 8:32)**

*The Gutenberg Bible*  
*the printer's first marvel*  
*proof*

*that "all scripture is profitable"  
economically and spiritually  
if we know it, have it  
read it and receive it  
so I sit next to it  
pondering  
The Word of God made flesh  
yes  
but then reversed  
the flesh became word  
first spoken  
then written  
the power private, and hidden  
until the printer's miracle  
made  
the word of God  
moveable  
roam aroundable  
into everywhere and everyone  
God's word in and on  
every tongue  
each one set free  
a step toward democracy  
liberty  
of the mind  
for humankind  
taking the word seriously  
that you shall know the Truth  
  
and the Truth  
shall set you  
free.*

After 600 years after Gutenberg, 400 years after King James, maybe we take the Bible for granted. This fall, let's all get to know it better – we'll be glad we did.

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**\*The Lord's Prayer (sort of)**

*God upstairs,  
you're holy, we're not,  
so make things work out here the way you want*

*Give us what we need  
including forgiveness  
and we'll aim to be better at forgiving, too.  
And don't put temptation or bad stuff in our way  
because we can't handle it,  
steer us away.  
Because without you we are nothing.*

Amen