

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



---

Date: November 27, 2011  
Sermon Title: A Thanksgiving Christmas  
Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25  
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **Matthew 1:18-25**

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord through the prophet had spoken: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Today, the Christmas season officially begins, the first Sunday in Advent, the countdown to Christmas, only 27 more shopping days left. Noel, Noel, and "Ho, ho, ho," and bring your pepper spray.

Alida wrote her December church newsletter column on Advent and mentioned that in a lot of churches, Christmas was really downplayed. She wrote:

*The church in which I grew up was in many ways a pretty laid-back church ... But when it came to Advent, some strict rules suddenly emerged! To preserve a real sense of Advent — waiting, preparing — we were never to sing Christmas carols before Christmas, and the mood of church services was quite serious all the way up to Christmas Eve. That's the classic*

*understanding of Advent: it was meant to be almost as somber as Lent, as people prepared themselves in repentance and humility to receive the great gift of Christ's birth. Well, as you already figured out, we don't really **do** somber in Advent around here! For us, the Advent season is a lot more like the way a child anticipates a birthday — with a joy and eagerness that can barely be contained.*

*Seems to us that we're anticipating the best birthday of all — and so we do it with nothing but joy!*

Alida has it right. I do think Advent should be fun, joyous, happy, like every family waiting for the birth of a baby! But even though I'm willing to fully embrace the joy of Christmas all month long, I still hate to push Thanksgiving out the back door.

Thanksgiving really is my favorite holiday. The name says it all (thanks-giving), and people really get into it. At our "Living Room" service last Sunday night, we looked at gratitude — what makes it happen, what blocks it. Fred Zarrilli brought in some terrific quotes about "gratitude":

G. K. Chesterton:

*You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.*

Cicero:

*Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but also the parent of all the others.*

Buddha:

*Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.*

And perhaps my favorite is from a great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart:  
*If the only prayer you said in your whole life was 'thank you,' that would suffice.*

Then we looked at what keeps us from being grateful. Things like anger, fear, selfishness, taking things for granted, feeling "entitled," or just plain dwelling on the negative.

Then we shared Bible stories and personal stories that show gratitude. I told about a Vietnam vet who lost his legs in the war and became a marathon runner. He puts pads on his leg stumps and on his hands, and he catapults himself along the road, completing the marathon in 90 hours. Or he could have sat in the corner and sulked, cursed the darkness, lived in bitterness. He didn't.

I told the Bible story about Elijah and the widow. It was during a time of great drought and famine, an economic downturn, a time of scarcity and want. Elijah visited this widow and asked for some food. She said plainly, "I haven't got enough. I am making one last meal for me and my son, and then we plan to lie down and die." Elijah dared her to share and count on God — and she did! She cooked, she shared, and the food lasted till the famine ended. Again, people chose to try, to believe, to hope, even in the midst of huge want. And they were blessed. Repeatedly, gratitude is a better motivator than ingratitude, thanks-giving is better than whining.

One of my favorite Thanksgivings was in 1975. I found myself far away in a remote village in central Africa in the country of Zaire, now known as the Congo. I tell this story in my book on page 70 to 72. It is one of the most important stories of my life, and with your indulgence I am just going to read it.

*It was Thanksgiving Day, and we were way out in "the bush," not quite jungle but not Kansas, either. Our hosts did a lovely job of preparing a Thanksgiving dinner as near to the classic American feast as they could. At the end, an American Baptist missionary named Gene Gentry asked if I wanted to go for a ride. We hopped on his dirt bike, and thus began my Ph.D.-level course on what modern mission can be. As we rode deeper and deeper into the bush, on paths that weren't identifiable as paths, heading for a remote village, Gene told me a story. Gene was an agricultural missionary. His calling was to share the Good News of Jesus Christ within the context of helping subsistence farmers improve their farming. That could mean teaching the value of crop rotation, or planting on a hill in such a way that erosion won't kill your soil and stop your crop, or changing from the short-handled hoe to a long-handled hoe.*

*Or taking care of your chickens. Gene had grown weary of trying to tell subsistence farmers what to do. A subsistence farmer is exactly what it sounds like, a farmer who ekes out just enough from his little land to put enough calories into the family to last another day. Subsistence is a step below existence. It is the bare minimum. When you can't see past today, it is hard to change.*

*Gene stopped trying. He decided to concentrate on farming his own land, trying "best practices" with his own farm, which included chickens. He took care of his chickens, built a coop, fed them, cleaned out the coop. As people walked by the mission compound's little working farm, they could judge for themselves. Maybe Mr. Gentry was just another pushy American with no respect for traditional ways. Or maybe he knew something.*

*Mankwela was a subsistence farmer, lurching from crisis to crisis, trying to survive. He saw Gene Gentry's chickens, Rhode Island Reds, fat, healthy, meaty. He wanted to buy some. Gene's offer was too good to resist. Mankwela could buy a chicken for, say, \$1. Or he could have them for 50 cents if he agreed to allow Gene to show him the proper care and feeding for plump, meaty Rhode Island Reds. He knew a good deal and took it.*

*This is not as easy as it sounds. The "care and feeding of chickens" was not in the worldview of rural Zairian subsistence farmers. They assumed that chickens exist to serve man, not man to serve chickens! The idea of housing, feeding, and cleaning up after — incomprehensible, not the natural order of things. Unless you want delicious and productive chickens.*

*That's why I was on the back of a dirt bike careening through centuries to visit Mankwela.*

*One of the paradoxes of mission work is the unsettling combination of beauty and poverty. Eden could not have been more beautiful than the trip to Mankwela's village. Paradise won't be more beautiful. A green canopy overhead, gentle hills, idyllic, quaint mud huts with a hint of smoky fires.*

*And hunger. Tattered clothes. Distended bellies. The almost red hair of malnutrition.*

*We rolled into the village, greeted immediately by Mankwela and his family. The village chief came to formally welcome us, sending a young boy to shimmy up a nearby palm tree to retrieve a gourd of palm wine, a ceremonial toast to thank God for what God was doing through Gene and Mankwela.*

*Before we drank our explosive palm wine, we poured an Old Testament-like "drink offering" onto the ground, thanking God for bounty and blessing.*

*When I recovered from the wallop of the palm wine, I was taken to the chicken coop as Mankwela told us his story. He had endured a lot of derisive abuse when he started doing things Gene's way. People mocked him when*

*they saw him bending over to feed his chickens, or climbing into the coop like a chicken himself to clean it out.*

*Now there was no mocking. Mankwela was the pride of the village, the chief said, "bigger than me," he laughed, truthfully. The chicken farm was now feeding his family, and his kids sold eggs door to door. There was money for more chickens, extra money for school fees and medicines, and nutrition in the bellies. Other farmers took notice. Maybe planting in rows across the hill instead of up and down is not so silly. Maybe letting the land rest for a season, maybe trying new crops, maybe the longer hoe all make sense.*

*And maybe the other story the missionary farmer talks about, the story of God's love in Jesus, makes sense, too. Worth a listen.*

That missionary, Gene Gentry, probably changed my life more than any other person I have met. Hollywood-handsome, brilliant, successful, the kind of person who could have achieved anything in life. Yet, there he was in remote, rural Africa, trying to change the world, one chicken at a time, one farmer at a time. All because of a little baby named Jesus.

The Bible tells us that an angel told Mary and Joseph to name their baby 'Jesus,' "because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) and he's also to be known as "Emmanuel ... which means God with us." (Matthew 1:23)

My missionary friend found something compelling in that little Baby Jesus, something convincing, something worth committing his life to. If Jesus was willing to be "God with us," if Jesus was willing to do all he could "to save us from our sins," then my missionary friend was willing to do all in his power to make that Jesus real and present, even for the poorest farmer in the poorest village in one of the poorest countries on earth. Jesus is THAT special.

I say that as a student of comparative religion. I first studied comparative religion in high school. I was learning about Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism when I was 14. I studied comparative religion in college and more in seminary. My doctoral thesis is in comparative religion. And I took courses at the Harvard School of World Religions. I not only studied comparative religions, I also experienced them: voodoo in Haiti, Santeria in Brooklyn, Hare Krishna and Moonies, mosques and Sikh temples in India, Hinduism and Buddhism.

I can talk to you about their wisdom, their beauty, their inspiration. But we have Jesus, and there is nothing like Jesus anywhere else.

Now I'm not talking about Christianity or religion or the Bible. There is plenty about those things that embarrass me. St. Paul, sometimes. St. Peter. Some of the stories in the Old Testament

Last Sunday I was the guest teacher for our 7<sup>th</sup>-grade Sunday School class. Easy enough, right? But wait ... I had to teach about Joshua leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. Fighting the Battle of Jericho. You know that story? Joshua comes to Jericho, finds it a big, impenetrable, walled city. God tells him to have his soldiers and priests and trumpeters march around Jericho for six days. And on the seventh day, they are to march around seven times, blow the trumpets, and shout! So what happens? The walls come tumblin' down! Just like that! Great stuff. The good guys win! Without a shot being fired. Without a single arrow or spear tossed in anger. Lovely story.

But wait ... there's more! God orders Joshua to take his army, go into Jericho, and kill every man, woman, child, animal, pet, baby, old man, goldfish, goat — every living thing — kill it. Yeah, I'm embarrassed by that.

And I don't like the way St. Paul talks about Jews, and I don't like the way St. Peter talks about non-Jews. But I'm never embarrassed about Jesus. Nothing he says, nothing he does. It's all good. It's all right. It is, frankly, all pure.

Even Don Imus loves the Baby Jesus and says so. He's pretty hard on just about every aspect of religion. He's irreverent and blasphemous, but when he talks about Jesus, there is a surprising softness. Even my favorite band, Green Day — loud, rude, playful — even Green Day has a soft spot for Jesus. And I think it all begins with the Christmas story. There is something surprising, something unusually sweet, tender, pure. Angels singing, shepherds watching, wise men seeking, the Star of Bethlehem guarding, the humble stable and manger, and even the Virgin Birth.

I know that people are flummoxed by the Virgin Birth, but I think it was God's way of saying, "This is rare, this is special, this is extraordinary." There is a purity to the whole Christmas story that nothing else can touch. Not Dickens. Not Mohammed. Not even my own fine Christmas poetry! Jesus just stands there in the middle of the world, in the middle of the universe, and invites us to know God in the best possible way.

We've been trying to figure out how to put together a church trip to Broadway to see "Godspell," the revival of the old 1970s Broadway musical about Jesus. It's very much an upbeat, joyful, energetic telling of the life and ministry of Jesus. "Godspell" is very much a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed,

happy and hopeful, innocent and fun glimpse of this person at the heart of our church.

I said earlier that I'm sometimes embarrassed by St. Paul. Let me balance that by saying that sometimes he's right on. At the very end of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he is trying to summarize what's important, what's worth remembering and doing if you're serious about being a Christian. Here is what Paul said: "Whatsoever is true, whatsoever is noble, whatsoever is pure and right and lovely, whatsoever is admirable ... concentrate on that." (Philippians 4:8)

That's Jesus: pure, lovely, true, noble, right, admirable. That's the Jesus of Bethlehem, the Jesus of Galilee and Jerusalem, the Jesus of Holy Week and Easter, the Jesus of Advent and Christmas.

So here is my final thought: maybe we end the Thanksgiving season with gratitude for what begins the Advent season: the Baby Jesus.