

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 1, 2012
Sermon Title: The Few, the Proud ... the Remnant
Scripture: Isaiah 4:2-3
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Isaiah 4:2-3

On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem.

You're here! What a nice surprise! I became your pastor in 1997, and within a few days, *everybody* took off for Appalachia. That's what it felt like. It was only about 40 people back then, but it felt as though everybody I knew was gone. So I figured I was in for an easy week, maybe a few elderly folks in church on Sunday, and nothing to do all week.

To my surprise and joy, there was plenty of life still left in this church, plenty to do all week, and even a nice group at both Sunday services. I was pleased. But within a few years, the Appalachia trip was up to 100! Now, *really* everybody I knew was gone. Seriously, I'd be here at 6 o'clock on Saturday morning when everyone was leaving, and I'd say to myself, "O.K., there goes the front pew. That's the middle section. Over there, that's the whole balcony. Entire families are leaving." And those people always kidded me, only half joking, "Why don't you come to Appalachia? There is nothing to do here, nobody's left. Everybody's gone!"

That seemed even more likely when ASP hit 150, 170, 190. And yesterday, 200 people piled into the vans and buses. There were 200 people in church last Sunday; 200 people left yesterday. Do the math. There should be nobody here today. And nothing to do all week

Except ... we've got church today, we're feeding the homeless tomorrow night, we've got people in Stamford Hospital, Bridgeport Hospital, and Yale-

New Haven Hospital. We've got Bible Study on Thursday. We've got folks under hospice care, folks getting married, and folks having surgery. We've got our work cut out for us.

That's where today's Scripture comes in, part of what is known as "Remnant Theology." Remnant Theology has been key to Judaism throughout its history, and Christianity has latched on to it also. The idea is pretty simple. No matter how bad things get, as long as somebody's left, there's hope, there's purpose, there's work to do.

For Jews, Remnant Theology reflects their history. For Christians, it reflects our religion. The Jews are 5,000 years old, and they've been under relentless attack for most of that time. Just looking at Biblical history, they've been conquered, defeated, enslaved, bifurcated, hauled off into exile, wiped away, obliterated, scattered. That's in physical terms. In theological terms, they often thought they deserved it, they had let God down in some way, turned their backs on God, so they're wiped out ... almost. Almost, except for a remnant.

For Christians, Remnant Theology is more about religion. We Christians are always seeing enemies at our door, and usually they are other Christians. No further proof needed than Wednesday morning, the top news item was the Queen of England's shaking hands with an Irishman of the IRA. After centuries of slaughter, Protestant and Catholic, of terrorism, persecution, and oppression, Protestant and Catholic, two Christians shaking hands is a big deal.

Indeed, Christian religion in Europe is one bloody mess. Burning at the stake. Beheading. Drawing and quartering. Inquisitions. Nowadays, Christians battle other Christians with words. But the tone is the same. "You're wrong!" "You're bad!" "You're dangerous!" "You're a heretic!"

And whenever the other guys get the upper hand, whenever others get stronger or bigger or popular, we comfort ourselves with Remnant Theology — as long as a few of us are left, still faithful, still true, ultimately we will win! It gives you a psychological edge on two fronts: you know you are suffering for being right, and you know if you hang in there, you'll win. It's the theological equivalent of loving the underdog or being the underdog.

The few. The proud. That's us. Still here. I'm not comparing us to Catholics escaping marauding Lutherans in the 1500s or Pilgrims escaping Episcopalians in the 1600s or Baptists escaping the Puritans here in New England or Quakers and Mennonites escaping to Pennsylvania. I'm just pointing out that when people are outnumbered or dwindling or unpopular or

left behind, they have used Remnant Theology as a way to boost their pride, their egos, their courage.

The Israelites felt as though they were always on the verge of extinction, whether as a people or as a nation. This was hard for them to understand because they were the "Chosen People." They had a special covenant with God. God promised them that they would be a blessing to the whole world, they would rise above their enemies, they would prosper in their "Promised Land." Yet, defeat and disaster were always at their door.

How could this be? How could God break the promise and the Covenant? How could God let that happen? The answer is Remnant Theology. As long as a few people are left, the Covenant is alive, and the promise is alive. "The Remnant" hold the key. That idea is what fuels great war stories, great sports stories. The idea that there are some folks who won't give up, who won't quit, no matter what the odds.

Listen to what the Bible says about "the Remnant." "The Lord has left us some survivors," the great prophet Isaiah declared. (Isaiah 1:9) "Those who are left will be called holy." (Isaiah 4:3). God even promised the Remnant, "I will bring them back. I myself will gather the Remnant and bring them back beside streams of water, and they will be fruitful and increase." (Isaiah 2:3; 3:9), and here's my favorite verse about the Remnant: "There will be some survivors, and when people see their conduct and their action, they will be consoled." (Ezekiel 14:22). *When people see their conduct and their actions!* The Remnant are not a beaten-down people, hanging on by a thread, just squeaking by. No, the Remnant is meant to be amazing, to be an inspiration! That's us! We are the few ... the proud ... "the Remnant" ... who, by our conduct and our actions, can be an inspiration.

Back in my days as President of Habitat for Humanity International, we had a big meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. It was a beautiful city, completely revitalized, charming. I was invited to stay at the lovely parsonage of the historic First Baptist Church, a big, thriving downtown church, very impressive, great ministry, lots of people. But it hadn't always been that way. The pastor told me that only a few years earlier, the church was dying, the building was crumbling, and the leaders of the church — all men, the all-male Trustees and the all-male Deacons — voted to close down the church. Sell it, get out.

But every Wednesday night, a group of women, mostly older women, broke into the church, literally, to hold a prayer meeting. Week after week those few hearty souls, "the Remnant," broke into their own church and prayed that God would revive them, rebuild them. They were praying that God

would keep the promises of Ezekiel and Isaiah that God would “gather them ... to bring them beside streams of water ... so they could be fruitful and increase.” They were determined that their conduct and their actions would save the day. They were the few, the proud, “the Remnant.” And it worked!

That can be us, too. We are all that's left of Greenfield Hill Church. We, you and I. For the next six days, whatever gets done in this church gets done by us, and whatever is left undone in this church is left undone by us.

In fact, just for a moment, imagine if that were actually 100 percent true. Look around us right now, right here. Imagine if we were all that was left of Greenfield Hill Church. This is it, this is us. This is Easter Sunday or Christmas Eve. This is our whole church family. This is who comes. This is who gives. This is the church. The kids you saw up here for the children's message? That's our Sunday School. The cardboard on the windows? Those are our windows. The broken roof? That's our roof. The out-of-service organ? That's our organ.

Just imagine for a moment: we are what's left of that wonderful, old, historic Greenfield Hill Church. We are “the Remnant.” What would we do? Give up? Or start over? Be depressed? Or be excited? Would we live out our days with the nostalgia for the “good old days”? Or would we count on God to “gather us up,” “call us holy,” and “count on our conduct” and our actions to help us be “fruitful and increase”? To be specific, if we were all there was left of Greenfield Hill Church, what would we do for the next six days?

Of course, the good news is that in six days, our mighty team of 200 returns to us. But the equally good news is that for the next six days, we are all that is left of Greenfield Hill Church.

I'll close with three action plans for this week, these six days, for us ... “the Remnant.”

1. Pray twice a day for our ASP mission team. Pray as if their success depended on your effort. Pray as if how straight they pound a nail, how hard they work, how well they treat one another, how nice they are to the family they work with, how safe they are, and how happy ... as if all that depended on you.
2. Help feed the hungry. By 2 *PM* tomorrow, *2 PM tomorrow*, bring some baked good or some canned goods to the office. *By 2 PM tomorrow*.

3. Sign up to write a devotion for our "Advent Devotional." That would be your vote for the future, doing something for down the road.

Let's show the Remnant is alive and well.