

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 8, 2012  
Sermon Title: God's Message for America  
Scripture: Various  
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## Scripture Litany God's Message for Nations and Rulers

Leader: Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless or the widows. (*Isaiah 1:23*)

**People: Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless, or the widow. Then all the people shall say 'Amen.'** (*Deuteronomy 27:19*)

Leader: Therefore, you rulers, be wise. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. (*Psalms 2:10-11*)

**People: Love and faithfulness keep a ruler safe; through love his throne is made secure. (Proverbs 20:28. By justice a ruler gives a country stability. (Proverbs 29:4)**

Leader: Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people. (*Exodus 22:28*) Do not revile the ruler even in your thoughts, or curse the rich ... because a bird may report what you say. (*Ecclesiastes 10:20*).

**People: Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13:1)**

Leader: Show proper respect to everyone: Love the fellowship of believers, fear God, honor the ruler. (*1 Peter 2:17*)

**People: Righteousness exalts a nation. (Proverbs 14:34)**

Leader: Do not lose heart or be afraid when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next. (*Jeremiah 51:46*)

**Together: If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked way, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)**

I love America. That doesn't make it easier to preach about it. Everything is so politically charged that if we even hint at being better, somebody gets annoyed. But I have an image in my head that has always inspired me.

When I was a young pastor in upstate New York, I had a lovely sanctuary with some unusual designs. We had a beautiful stained-glass skylight. And also up above the altar was a gigantic seashell. A huge, handcrafted wooden seashell — scalloped edges, concave, probably four feet wide and just as tall. You couldn't miss it. It functioned in two ways. First, the seashell was an ancient symbol of Christianity. Second, it served an acoustical function, reflecting words and music out into the congregation.

So here's the gigantic seashell hanging over the altar. And every Sunday, a half-hour before church, an elderly gentleman would come in and sit in the first pew and stare up at the seashell. Just stare at it. Well, after a few weeks. I learned he was the carpenter who had handcrafted the seashell. One Sunday I sat next to him, thanked him for it, told him it was beautiful, said he must be very proud. The gentleman took a deep breath and said, "I come here every Sunday, sit right here and look at it, and all I can see is the place where my hand slipped and the chisel made a gouge in the wood." All those years, all that work, all that beauty, but he could still see the mistake. People in the church said, "That's what made him a good carpenter."

And that makes us a great country. The boldness to see our own mistakes. At the end of today's service, we will sing, "America the Beautiful," and we'll love it, and we'll even sing the phrase, "May God thy gold refine." That's a simple admission that we believe we can be better and better. And that in itself makes it easy to say. I love America.

A lot of folks are stuck on how great we used to be. I like being stuck on how great we are. And how great we are yet to be. I chose this week's title purposefully, "God's Message for America," because it puts the onus on me not to be political. Every Sunday, I try my best to give you God's sense on one thing or another, but today, I've put God right there in the title: "God's Message to America." Not a liberal's message, not a Republican's, not a Congregationalist's or a 21st-century observer's. I'm trying to channel God. It's not that easy, ever, but especially on a patriotic holiday in the middle of the political season that is already overheated, such a topic is risky. But let's try.

I've made it easy for us with that litany of verses we just read. They run the gamut, don't they? From pessimistic to optimistic, from negative to positive. I especially love that verse about rumors, "Do not lose heart when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next." That

was written 2,700 years ago, but rumors and conspiracy theories were still all over the place. "Laugh at them," the Bible says.

We've got so many of them, they are actually fun. This is what I heard with my own ears this week from a radio talk show host. The guy was explaining how the Supreme Court approved the healthcare bill, and he said that Obama was turning America into Sicily. That's Obama's plan, to pattern America after Sicily, and then make America into Venezuela, and the way to do this was to have the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court be an epileptic. It was Chief Justice Roberts's epilepsy that led him to allow Obama to turn America into Sicily.

I guess that's why they call the election season the "silly season," except nowadays the election season is all the time, so the silly season is all the time. And that makes it hard to preach about America, but let's try.

Truth is, God doesn't think much of rulers, ever. Look at the first verse we read. "Rulers are rebels, companions of thieves, they don't defend the widows and orphans." In the history of the world, we've tried every kind of ruler: kings, tyrants, generals, emperors, czars. Presidents, prime ministers, Caesars, pharaohs, judges, patriarchs, tribal chiefs. People have come to power through heredity, coups, wars, and election. We've had men, women, and children. We've had religious leaders and atheists. And God has never been much impressed with any of them.

Every year in July, the *New York Post* does an analysis of the baseball season so far, at the halfway mark. They tell you who the best players are so far, and the best pitchers, and then they list the worst: the anti-MVP, the anti-Cy Young. And those are the players who have underperformed, not just stunk, but underperformed. They pick the pitcher who is supposed to be great, who was paid to be great, but he stunk. They are the anti-Cy Young. They pick the hitter who is supposed to be great, and paid to be great, but he stunk. They are the anti-MVP.

They underperform. That's God's general view of rulers. They underperform. They are in a position to be great. They have the power, the influence, the resources to be great. Instead, they stink. God's expectations for rulers are pretty straightforward. They are to defend the defenseless. In Biblical times widows and orphans were the most defenseless, the most vulnerable, the true poverty stricken. They had nobody. God expected the government to stand with them. God even goes so far as to give re-election advice, job security for rulers. You want to be re-elected? You want *not* to be overthrown, *not* to be assassinated, *not* to be subject to rebellion, insurrection, recall, defeat?

O.K., the Bible says, "Love, justice, faithfulness secure the throne." *Love, justice, faithfulness, secure the throne.* That's what rulers are for. That's what government is for. "Righteousness exalts a nation," the Bible proclaims. Righteousness, an old-fashioned word for "right-ness." Do the right thing for the defenseless.

When I first started thinking about this sermon, I came up right away with three things I was pretty sure God would say to America:

1. "It is good."
2. "To whom much is given, much will be required."
3. Stop whining.

The first two come straight from the Bible. The third is my pet peeve. I hate whining. I'm in my second year of marriage, and it's going great. We all bonded nicely. I've learned to read the signs. I know that whenever Alida encourages me to go off to the Berkshires for a couple of days by myself, it's because she's doing something to the parsonage that would go more smoothly without my opinion. So I go.

Everything truly is wonderful. Except the dog. I inherited a dog in the marriage, and the dog is a whiner, 24/7, about everything. He whines to go out. He whines to come in. He whines to eat. He even whines when he's happy. And I hate whining. And I'm of the opinion that God hates whining. Whining is when you don't have enough wisdom to say anything; you don't have enough gumption to do anything. So you whine.

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt — for 400 years they were slaves in Egypt — God delivered them, God rescued them, God got them out of the mess they were in. And they whined. It was too hard. Being free and independent was too much work. Standing on your own two feet was tough. Some of them even wanted to go back, back to Egypt, back to slavery, back to having to think for themselves or do for themselves. Even when they got to the Promised Land, they whined. Whining is laziness.

I hear that too much in America — whining. I'll give you a silly example of what I call "intellectual laziness." For too long now, every opponent is a Nazi, every policy you disagree with is a holocaust, every mistake is a Watergate, every war is Vietnam. Everything the other party does is either socialism or fascism. Such talk is lazy, slovenly, slothful, whimpering, simpering, whining. If you don't like the person in power or the people or the party, beat them, outsmart them, outthink them, outwork them. Don't outwhine

them. Or else God will make you walk around in circles for 40 years, till all the whiners are dead, which is what God did to the Israelites. I actually like that idea!

Let me go back to No. 1, "It is good," and No. 2, "To whom much is given, much will be required." I told you I love America. I love the place. I love the idea. I love the oomph and the spirit and the pizzazz. I love all the ideals. In our opening hymn, we sang, "I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills." And I get that. America is a stunning, visual delight. But I love more what America stands for, and I love the people of America and the work of America. I love it.

The Bible tells that when God created the world, he did it in six ways, six stages. He created the heaven and the earth, oceans and rivers, animals and birds, trees and fruits and vegetables, man and woman. And after each act of creation, God stepped back, looked at it carefully, and said, "It is good." "It is good. I like this, I'm pleased. This is just what I intended." If you ever created anything, you know that feeling — a craft, a poem, a child, a painting, a plan, a project. If you have ever brought something into being, you know what it's like to look it over, tweak it a little bit, fix it, smooth it over until it's just so, just right, just the way you want it. And then you know. It is good.

That's what I do with America. Look at our foundation and principles. Look at our courage and vision. Look at the diversity of the people. Look at the abundance of resources. Look at the accomplishments of history.

Look at Korea. Really, look at Korea. Korea divided itself in half, each half an idea, an inspiration, a model it wanted to follow. North Korea liked what it saw in China and the Soviet Union, and it took that path. South Korea liked America, it liked our Christianity, and it liked our democracy. And it took that path. Which Korea chose wisely? All over the world people try to emulate the best of America. They look at it, we look at it, and we know: "It is good."

But that's not enough. We can do better. That's what makes us good in the first place. We're not afraid to be better. That's what that other verse is all about, "To whom much is given, much will be required." I don't see that as a burden or as a threat; I think that's high praise. Jesus looks at us, our church, our community, our nation, you and me, and he's blunt. "I expect a lot out of you," Jesus says, "don't settle for less. Don't settle for second best. Don't settle, period." Our God is the God of the "Protestant work ethic" that built this country: strive. effort, excellence. We keep getting better.

Last Saturday we had a sort of family gathering at the Brooklyn Cyclones. The Cyclones are a New York Mets Minor League that plays in Coney Island, right next to Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs and right next to the Coney Island Boardwalk. For those of you who remember the old parachute jump (the scariest amusement park ride ever made), it stands just a few feet beyond right field. So, we all took my dad there for a ballgame.

Waiting for the gate to open, we found ourselves next to a magnificent statue. Two old-time baseball players in uniform out on the field, Pee Wee Reese and Jackie Robinson. At the base of the statue, carved into stone, is the story of that embrace. Indeed, the story of America.

Jackie Robinson was the first black baseball player, the first African-American allowed to play in the Major Leagues. He was the second baseman for the old Brooklyn Dodgers. It wasn't easy. Hotels wouldn't let him in. Restaurants wouldn't serve him. Bigoted fans taunted him. Opposing players mocked and disrespected him. One day, the Dodgers were playing in Cincinnati. The nastiness was merciless, hateful, relentless. So Pee Wee Reese, the quiet, dignified shortstop from Kentucky, went over to Jackie Robinson and put his arm around him. The crowd hushed. The hate silenced. Things changed.

Isn't that America? We've made mistakes, some whoppers. It took time, too much time. But we've changed. We've confessed, we've repented. We've learned and grown, matured and improved. We're better, much, much better. We've taken what was given to us, and "it was good," and we made it better.

That's what God expects of us. And what makes it better, that's what we expect of ourselves. You get my point, made on God's behalf. This is a great country. We have a lot to be proud of, a lot to be thankful for. And best of all, we've got a lot left to do. "It is good!" "Much is required of us."

And there's no time for whining.