

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon Title: Some Fun Stuff  
Scripture: Acts 20:7-12  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Acts 20:7-12

*On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.' Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.*

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Summertime worship and summertime preaching are different from the rest of the year. Up until last August, I spent my entire career preaching in non-air-conditioned churches, two made of brick, two made of stone, that function like ovens in the summer. I remember looking out at everybody fanning with hand-held fans provided by the local funeral parlor, with everyone secretly hoping that this Sunday service would be short and the sermon light. But now that our church is air-conditioned, I have no problem hammering you, as I have the last two weeks, with weighty sermons like "God's Message for America" and "God's Message for Nations and Rulers," hefty topics right in the middle of the presidential campaign. You were very gracious as I took you through some of the things the Bible says about citizens, nations, and our leaders.

So today you get a light sermon, the kind of sermon I used to preach when it was 90° outside and 190° inside, a sermon with a little humor and a little whimsy, based on two unusual stories in the Bible.

One is about a donkey that talked a little; the other is about the preacher who talked too much. One is about how to be a better listener; the other is about how to be a better preacher. In one, the donkey saves his listener's life. In the other, the preacher actually kills the listener.

Let's start with the donkey. There was a guy named Balaam, who was very good at putting curses on people. He had some sort of "in" with the gods, some influence. Maybe it was magic or mystery or sorcery. The Bible doesn't really say. It might have been "hype," but it worked. Balaam got paid to jinx people, put a hex on them, curse them. This was around the time when the Israelites escaped from Egypt. They were on the march, and other nations were afraid of them. So this one prince wanted to hire Balaam to put a curse on the Jews. I don't know what that means exactly — give them a rash, make them afraid of the dark, send a flood or a hurricane, have them all come down with chickenpox. Anything to stop them, weaken them, defeat them, wipe them out, if necessary.

Balaam was sort of a prophet for hire, but he was sensitive enough to the supernatural to check with God first. So he says to God, "These guys want me to curse the Jews, is that O.K? They want to pay me a lot of money! Please, please, pretty please, just this once?" God said, "No," but that didn't stop Balaam. He sort of pouted and whined and begged. Like a kid with matches, he was determined to use the matches! So God, like a lot of parents, said, "Go ahead and burn the house down!"

That's called sarcasm, but Balaam didn't get it. He was so determined to get his big payday that he hopped on his donkey and set out to meet the bad prince, do the curse, get his money, and live happily ever after. God was not happy. The Bible reports, "God was very angry at Balaam and sent an angel with a sword in his hand to stand in the road and oppose Balaam." (Numbers 22)

Do you have the picture in your mind? Balaam, with dollar signs in his eyes, is riding his donkey to go to meet the evil prince and then do what God told him NOT to do. God puts an angel smack-dab in the middle of the road with his sword and a big menacing scowl on his face as a deterrent. Balaam doesn't see it. He doesn't see the angel, doesn't see the sword, doesn't see anything but dollar signs.

The donkey, on the other hand, sees the angel, sees the sword, sees the angry scowl, puts 2 and 2 together, and tries to save his oblivious, greedy master. The donkey veers to the left, veers to the right, trying to avoid the angel. Balaam starts beating the poor donkey, beating, whipping, screaming, "You stupid so-and-so, you dumb you-know-what!"

Finally, the donkey just lies down. Right there in the middle of the path, bends his four little donkey legs, and stops. Now Balaam was so furious, he beats the donkey some more! Finally, the donkey turns around, looks Balaam in the eye, and says, "What's up with the beating and the yelling and screaming? Why do you treat me like this? Open your stupid eyes! Wake up! What do you see standing there in front of us? Doesn't that look like ...?" "Holy cow," Balaam yells, "that really does look like ... an angel ... with a big sword ...!" And from that moment on, Balaam did what God wanted him to do. I like to think that he gave the donkey an extra carrot or lump of sugar or a slice of pizza, whatever donkeys like for a reward, but the Bible doesn't tell us that. This is a fun story for a lot of reasons. I love the fact that the donkey speaks and Balaam answers. He's not surprised. It's natural. It's O.K.

Balaam, for all his weaknesses, was smart enough to know that God never stops trying to get through to us. Our job is to be looking for that or listening for that or being open for that. Above all, to know that God is trying to get through. With Balaam God tried truth: "No don't go," God said. That didn't work. So God tried sarcasm: "Sure, burn the house down, see if I care!" That didn't work. So God sent an angel with a sword. That didn't work, so God sent a talking donkey, the "Mr. Ed" of the Bible. From the sublime to the ridiculous, God kept trying to get through.

It's no different today for us, for you and me. God keeps trying to get through. "I'm here," God says, "I want to help. Won't you stop for a moment? Listen a bit?"

We've all been at parties where you're in a conversation with somebody, and he's going, "Hmmm, hmmm," and nodding appropriately, but all the while he's looking over your shoulder, looking right past you, not listening. You're not that important. You're not worth it. Real listening requires commitment. You have to believe that the other person has something worth knowing, worth hearing, whether that person is God or your spouse or your child or a stranger.

Sylvia Woods died this week, the owner of the famous Sylvia's Restaurant in Harlem. Reflecting on her life, one person said, "Whether she was talking with a panhandler out on the street or a politician sitting in the main dining room, she talked with them the same."

The lesson of Balaam and his donkey is twofold. One, God, never tires of trying to get through to you. Two, you can learn something from anything. Well, that's the first Bible story for today, about listening.

The other story is about preaching, based on our Scripture lesson for today. It says St. Paul preached somebody to death. Oh, the Bible says it nicer than that. It says, "On the first day of the week we came together and Paul spoke to the people. Because he was leaving the next day, Paul kept on talking till midnight." At that point some poor guy named Eutychus fell asleep. Unfortunately, he was sitting in an open window, so he falls asleep, tumbles out of the third-floor window, lands on the street below, and dies. He's dead! Paul rushes downstairs, out into the street, raises the young man from the dead, runs back upstairs, and then keeps preaching till daylight!

Where to begin with this story? Well, notice that nobody remembers what Paul preached! Half the New Testament is full of Paul's words, carefully laid out. Just about the whole homosexuality debate is based on eight or 10 words by St. Paul. Women were kept out of church ministry for 1,800 years, based on another six or eight words from Paul. But on this particular night, when he preached all night long, not a word is recorded! He must have had an off night. He wasn't that good. Believe me, I've preached some clunkers in my day!

Preaching, or really any good conversation, any genuine communication, is a two-way street. It requires good listening and good speaking. I don't care how good my sermon is, if you're not in a mood to hear it, it's going nowhere. And I don't care how good a mood you're in to listen, if my sermon is no good, it's going nowhere. Preaching is a partnership. You have a job to do. I have a job to do.

Rick Warren, the famous California pastor and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, says he can't stand it when he hears church people complain, "I didn't get anything out of church today!" He says, "You're not supposed to get anything out of church, you're supposed to bring something to church!" So when he hears people complain, he asks them, "Well, what did you bring to church today?" Did you bring an open heart, an open mind, an open spirit? Did you come with a willingness to listen, to learn, or know, or grow ... or sing or praise or pray? Did you bring yourself, your whole self? Are you willing to look for angels and listen to donkeys? And be smart enough not to sit in an open window past midnight, while I drone on and on! Of course, that's my job, not to drone on and on.

There is an old truism about public speaking, that the mind can only absorb what your rear end can endure. And every rear end has a limit. Now that can vary a bit. I was a guest preacher at a great African-American church, and I asked the pastor how long I should preach. "Sixty minutes," he said. "What if I preach less?" I asked. "Then I'll get up and finish it," he said.

In my own career, the expectation of sermon length has been cut in half. One church I served was in Forest Hills, Queens. Most of the people belonged to the West Side Tennis Club, and if church wasn't over by noon, people walked out. The first sitting for Sunday brunch was at 12:15. You have to know your audience. And your purpose.

Elsewhere, the Bible gives a great description of preaching. St. Paul said, "How can someone understand if he hasn't heard? How can someone hear if someone hasn't preached?" So ultimately, the preacher's purpose isn't to preach; it isn't even to be heard. It's to be understood. I'm not supposed to kill you or bore you or test the limits of your endurance. I'm supposed to help you.

I heard this story long ago about a young Presbyterian pastor. He had a large church in a big city, and the main benefactor, the biggest giver, was a wonderful woman. Her husband was hugely successful, very prominent, but never came to church, never helped in any way, was never involved. This wealthy, successful gentleman weighed very much on the pastor's heart, and after a few years, the pastor got up the courage to go visit the man.

When they met together in the gentleman's impressive office, the young pastor was very nervous, but proceeded to try to share the Christian Gospel with the man, tried to help him see why the Good News is important, and urged him to welcome it, to embrace it. Silence. Not a word. No response. The pastor sort of cleared his throat, gathered his wits about him, and told the Christian story a second time, a bit deeper this time. Nothing. Again, nothing. The poor minister wished he'd never come, but there he was, so he tried again, looking for the right words, the right spirit, the right tone. Again, that awful silence. The pastor just wanted to get out of there, go home, hide his head, forget this embarrassment ever happened.

Finally, the older gentleman reached for a tattered paper, wrote something, and passed it over to the pastor. It said, "I am so deeply moved that I cannot speak." No one had ever talked with him in such a way; no one had bothered or dared to take the time. Maybe folks were intimidated by him or figured he had everything he needed. But the reality was he was hungering to listen, if only there was someone hungering to speak.

That's perfect preaching, when what the preacher needs to preach matches what the hearer needs to hear, even if the preacher is a donkey!