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Sermon Title: Religion in the News
Scripture: Isaiah 40:6-11
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Isaiah 40:6-11

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Let me start with a story Donna Bossa sent to me:

A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with a bag of potato chips and a six-pack of root beer and started his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old man. He was sitting in the park, just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer, when he noticed that the old man looked hungry, so he offered him some chips. He gratefully accepted, and smiled at him.

His smile was so pretty that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer. Again, he smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As twilight approached, the boy realized how tired he was, and he got up to leave; but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old man, and gave him a hug. He gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? He's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old man, also radiant with joy, returned to his home. His son was stunned by the look of peace on his face and he asked, "Dad, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I ate potato chips in the park with God." However, before his son responded, he added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

I like that story. It's not much connected to this sermon, except that it's something that caught Donna's eye and made her think about God, so she passed along to me.

That's how "Religion in the News" came about. "Religion in the News" is just news stories that make us think about God, faith, religion. Anything that touches upon the world of religion — good, bad, and ugly, and always fun.

National Geographic had an article on the 12 Apostles. *The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* had a photo essay of worship across Boston, all the different styles and places. *The New York Times Magazine* had a fun piece called "Heavenly Bodies" about a female Episcopal priest bodybuilder and her search for the perfect bikini for bodybuilding competitions. *The New York Post* has an article this week about a tree in New Jersey whose bark looks like the Virgin Mary, "Our Lady of Guadalupe."

Lots of articles about churches making it and not making it and interesting churches doing interesting things. Like the church in Cheyenne, Wyoming, with a weekly Bible Study called "Bibles and Beer" at Uncle Charlie's Bar; the Drunk Monkey Tavern in Tulsa that shows worship on TV on Sunday mornings. There is the African immigrant church in the Bronx that has a daily conference call for prayer for all of their members who are home healthcare aides. And the Bridgeport church, where one-quarter of the people attending church leave in the middle of the service to deliver food

and groceries to the homeless. Lots of articles about churches using technology like an iPhone app for confession or search engines that are designed to lead to your salvation.

There are some big "Religion in the News" stories bubbling up now. But I'm not up to speed on them. The Chick-fil-A restaurants being banned from some cities because of the owner's anti-gay bias and even the Aurora movie theater massacre, with one politician claiming the murders are the result of the constant attack on Judeo-Christianity in America and one pastor's declaration that the murderer was demon-possessed. Religion is all over the news.

For today, just to whet your appetite, I'm going to zero in on three topics: Mormons, clothes, and sports. The clothes one is fun. The Mormon one is fraught with danger, with Gov. Romney running for president, so anything I say is bound to make 50 percent of you unhappy. The sports one is popular.

So let's get the tough one out of the way first. And let's face it, Mormonism is a big topic precisely because Gov. Romney is a candidate for president. Since John F. Kennedy — or actually Al Smith — a candidate's religion has been scrutinized. Kennedy's Catholicism, and this year Santorum's Catholicism; Joe Lieberman's Orthodox Judaism when he was a vice-presidential candidate; Jimmy Carter's "born-again" Southern Baptist roots. Mike Huckabee and Herman Cain and Pat Robertson are ordained pastors, and if we ever get to Bobby Jindal and Nikki Hayley, Governors of Louisiana and South Carolina, respectively, we've got converts from Hinduism to Catholicism; and with Marco Rubio on the horizon, we've got a convert from Mormonism back to Catholicism.

But for now, Romney's Mormonism is in the spotlight, just as Obama's — guess what — Congregationalism was in the spotlight four years ago. Obama's pastor, Obama's church, our denomination, his pastor's sermons were all dissected, analyzed, critiqued by people looking for an edge or an understanding. Now it's Romney's turn.

Stephen Prothero, a religion professor at Boston University, writing in *USA TODAY*, calls this "A Mormon Moment." (Prothero, Stephen. "A Mormon Moment." *USA TODAY* 21 May 2012 Print.)

The New York Times has done excellent reporting on Mormonism in general, and Romney's Mormonism in particular. In the heat of the Republican primary, they looked at how evangelical Christian leaders are mounting a campaign to choose "Anybody But Romney," trying to unify behind Gingrich, Santorum, or Perry. This is rooted in deeply held evangelical animosity

toward Mormons, whom they view as a non-Christian, heretical, even a cult. *The Times* did two superb front-page pieces. One was titled, "Romney's Faith, Silent But Deep." (Kantor, Jodi. "Romney's Faith, Silent But Deep." *The New York Times* 19 May 2012 Print.)

Romney was the leader of his local church in Belmont, Massachusetts, and a bishop over many churches in his area. The article quotes friends and church members describing Romney's faith as "his design for living ... at the center of who he really is." The other article is "Mormons' First Families Rally Behind Romney." It's actually an enlightening look at Mormon history, a reminder of the oppression and persecution Mormons have faced. (Rutenberg, Jim. "Mormons' First Families Rally Behind Romney." *The New York Times* 16 July 2012 Print.)

Let me confess I have had my own problems with Mormons, all from personal experience as a pastor and none having to do with politics. In my pastoral career I have found them to be secretive, exclusionary, and even sneaky. But *The Times's* article helped me to think that through.

Mormons started out as Americans in upstate New York. For years they were hounded, persecuted, jailed, and murdered. The church Romney taught Sunday school in during the '80s was torched by arson. Such experiences could make you paranoid, insular, secretive. But the two most fascinating articles were op-ed pieces by Mormons. One was by a Brigham Young University professor, titled "Why We Fear Mormons." (Fluhman, J. Spencer. "Why We Fear Mormons." *The New York Times* 3 June 2012. Print.)

And the other was even blunter: "I'm a Mormon, Not a Christian." In that one the author writes. "I'm about as genuine a Mormon is you'll find, and I'm emphatically not a Christian." (Mason, David V. "I'm a Mormon, Not a Christian." *The New York Times* 12 June 2012: A 27. Print.) He makes an interesting point. It reminds us that once upon a time all Christians were Jews, but eventually the Jews didn't like it, and the followers of Christ didn't like it, so Christianity became its own thing, a unique, stand-alone religion with its own special message for the world. The op-ed writer says it's time for Mormons to do the same. Stop trying to be Christian. They don't believe Christian stuff anyway, and Christians don't believe Mormon stuff, so let's go our separate ways, each standing on our own two feet and not in each other's shadows. Good deal all around, he thinks. As he says, "I am emphatically not a Christian." That's what makes this "Religion in the News," pushing us to go deeper into what it means to be a Christian.

A few years ago, two young Mormon missionaries came to my house — earnest, good-looking, energetic, determined. They wanted to give me *The Book of Mormon*. They invited me to their church. They wanted me to embrace their true faith. Fair enough! I admired their drive. So I made a deal. I gave them a copy of my book, *Christlikeness*. And I promised to read *The Book of Mormon*. No deal. They wouldn't even accept my book as a gift. No way! They didn't even have to read it, just hold it. Nope. Their offer was a one-way offer. I was Protestant evangelical Congregational Christian. As such, I have nothing of value to them. It was their way or the highway.

Here's the bottom line: Mormonism is a new religion. They haven't got their act together; they're still figuring things out. They're young, full of themselves, and know better than anybody else ... which is exactly what Congregationalists were in the 1600s and 1700s! With time, things may smooth out. Their good stuff will get better, their bad stuff will get lost. They got rid of polygamy. They ended their racist teachings that kept black people out of full church life. It's all evolving under the glaring spotlight of "Religion in the News."

All right, we got the tough one out of the way. How about sports and religion? Believe it or not, the news is full of religion-in-sports stories, and in the past year we've had Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin. Tebow, now a quarterback with the New York Jets, is more overt and expressive as an outspoken Christian. He prays on the sidelines, he used to paint Scripture references in the eye black under his eyes, he did an anti-abortion Super Bowl ad, he does missionary work in the Philippines, he was a guest preacher at a mega-church Easter service. His proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior is public and proud, and his physical action of taking a knee to pray has led to the phenomenon called "Tebowing," where people all over the world take a knee, striking a pose, some seriously, some poking fun.

Jeremy Lin is a Taiwanese-American basketball player who brought electricity and victories to the Knicks this year. His Christianity is quieter, but just as clear. Alida used a wonderful 12-minute video of him with our high school youth group this winter, and for 12 minutes, 75 teenagers sat spellbound.

The fact is Christian athletes have been using their prominence and celebrity status to celebrate God for years. A football player scores a touchdown and immediately kneels to pray. A baseball player hits a home run, taps his heart and points heavenward to God. Players cross themselves. They begin media interviews giving all honor and glory, even credit, to God for victory and success and achievement. What do we make of this? Is this good, bad, or indifferent ... for religion or sports?

This is actually fairly easy. The 10 Commandments say, "Don't take God's name in vain." So if you use God's name, mean it. If you're thanking God, praising God, representing God, mean it. It's not for show. The Bible also says repeatedly, "Give God the glory," "Declare his glory among the nations ..." "The heavens declare the glory of God ..." "The whole earth is full of His glory ..." and so forth, reaching the pinnacle in St. Paul, who says, "Whatever you do, whatever you do ... do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31) *Do it all for the glory of God.* And that isn't true just for home-run hitters and touchdown scorers. It's true for you and me in our various efforts.

Do the Connecticut Challenge for the glory of God. Do your daily chores for the glory of God. Your dinner conversation, your family vacation, your hobby, yes, your career, your work, AND your retirement to the glory of God. But mean it. And keep the focus on God. It's not about you.

That's where the problem comes in, when athletes act as though God is on their side. There's a difference between honoring God and making it sound as though God chose you to score a touchdown. This played out a few years ago. The New York Giants won the Super Bowl, thanks to a spectacular one-handed catch in the closing seconds by David Tyree. Ever since, he's made it very clear that he believes that God chose him, God blessed him, God favored him to make that catch. That didn't sit well with the New England Patriots' defensive back, himself a born-again, Bible believing, prayerful, sincere, active Christian. There is an absurdity to this or an arrogance that the all-powerful, holy, and awesome God, who can't solve the Middle East crisis or Greece or drought in the Midwest, actually sits in heaven deciding whether this football player catches the ball or this other football player stops the catch, whether this Christian football player gets to be a hero or that other Christian football player gets to be the goat.

What such articles do for us is to get us to think through ... what is prayer? What is prayer for? How far should we go in expressing our faith? Whom do we look up to, and why? Even, what is the purpose of sports ... or prayer ... or religion? That's why we do "Religion in the News." It makes us think. It provokes us. It takes the everyday world and allows us to intersect that world with our faith, our Bible, our church.

I'll close with a quick one that will leave you with more questions than answers. Orthodox Jewish stores in Brooklyn will not serve women who come in immodestly dressed. Bare shoulders, bare midriff, too short, too tight, and so forth. Let me tell you, right away I thought that was wrong, stupid, illegal. Case closed in my own mind. But then I read this quote that

said, "This is no different from stores with signs that say, 'No shirt, no shoes, no service.'" We accept that, no questions asked. But put "Orthodox Jewish" or "Muslim" in front of the store's name, and we get nervous. And there's plenty to be nervous about.

In our "Religion in the News" classes, we discuss Muslim taxi drivers who refuse to drive cabs with topless bar ads or to take passengers with dogs; a private Jewish bus company in Brooklyn, with a *public* route, that separates male and female passengers; the mall in New Jersey where a security guard kicked out a Muslim woman for wearing a veil; and a Christian church in Milford that bought up adult video stores in order to shut them down. All these stories and a thousand more help us to confront our faith, our mores, and our American identity. We are a nation of laws and of faith. We have a Constitution and a Bible. We live in both worlds. Both worlds are important to us.

If we lived in some places, we could just stone anyone whose sensibilities offended us. Or, we could simply say, "Freedom of speech, freedom of expression." But we're in a religion that says both "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" AND "Don't cause others to stumble." In other words, we've got laws that tell us what to do and not do. And yet we don't have to do everything just because we have the right to!

That's really the heartbeat of New England Congregational Protestantism, a thinking believer's faith. A faith for the real world.

Is your head spinning yet?