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Sermon Title: Religion In the News
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Philippians 1:12-19

Philippians 1:12-19

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will result in my deliverance.

I have a favorite book — or had. I can't find it anymore. It was a gigantic book, the size of *The New York Times*. In fact, that was the purpose of the book. It was designed to look like a collection of newspaper front pages, imagining what it would look like if all the Bible stories had been covered by a newspaper. Headlines. Cover stories. Editorials. Gossip columns.

Imagine the *New York Post* covering the story of David and Bathsheba. Imagine "Page Six" reporting on Jesus and Mary Magdalene! "What young Messiah has been seen around town with a stunning blonde?" Imagine a book review of "The Book of Job" or "Revelation." Imagine an imbedded reporter telling the story of Noah's Ark from the animals to the rainbow.

Imagine the front-page headline on Good Friday: "Man Who Would Be King, Dead. Jesus, 33, Executed."

In other words, "Religion in the News." Religion gets lived in real time. The news is about real time, so it's natural that religion should be found in the news.

Twenty years ago, I was invited to create a radio show, which I called "Religion in the News." Each week I scoured newspapers and magazines, looking for articles that pertained to the world of religion. Some articles were obvious. The word "God" or "Pope" or "church" might actually be in the headline. Some were more subtle, or they begged a religious perspective, even if they didn't have it. Wouldn't any story about war, poverty, crime, the environment make you at least wonder about a religious perspective?

Since coming to Greenfield Hill Church, my "Religion in the News" class has been a staple of our Adult Education. Every Sunday after the 10:30 service, we gather in the parlor for what I call "great topics, great conversation, with great people," as we hash out the latest "religion in the news." Tim Tebow. The new pope. The old pope. Churches sued by neighbors for singing too loud. Broadway shows like "The Book of Mormon" and "The Testament of Mary." Presidential candidates and their faith. Every year or so, I devote one Sunday sermon to it, mostly to get you into the habit.

The world of religion is all around us. It permeates our culture, so I look for it. Some of it is interesting, some is infuriating, some is wrong, some is inspiring. But the fact is, there's plenty of religion out there, and that's good news, seriously.

Our Scripture lesson offers an interesting perspective. St. Paul was in prison, writing a letter of instruction and encouragement to the Christians in Philippi. He tells them that being in prison has been a great opportunity to spread the news of Jesus Christ. He writes, "What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel ... everyone knows that I am in chains for Christ, and that has everybody talking God, courageously and fearlessly.

Now, it is true, some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, some out of good will and love, some out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, trying to stir up trouble. But so what? The important thing" (and let me emphasize this for the sake of today's sermon), Paul declares, "the important thing is that in every way, whether good or bad, whether from fake motives or true, Christ is talked about. And for this, I rejoice." (Philippians 1:12-18)

Everybody's talking about God. That's almost "Marketing 101," branding, name recognition. Get your name out there. Get people talking about you, thinking about you. Be in the conversation.

You don't think that matters? Forgive me for introducing an awkward reference, but three of the stupidest political stories of recent years were Governor Sanford of South Carolina, Governor Spitzer of New York, and Congressman Anthony Weiner of New York. All fell in great disgrace. Yet, today, Sanford is now a United States Senator, and Weiner and Spitzer are leading in their races for mayor and comptroller of the City of New York.

Name recognition. That's all Paul was saying. He's in prison, and he started talking up Jesus, telling everybody about what Jesus means, what Jesus has done for him, what Jesus can do for them. He's got a name, a brand, a cause, a calling, a purpose. It's "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus" all the time. And it worked! Paul is in a prison where nobody ever heard of Jesus, in a city, Rome, where nobody ever heard of Jesus, at a time when hardly anybody had ever heard of Jesus. And before you know it, everybody's talking about Jesus!

Notice, Paul doesn't say everybody became a nice, sweet, baptized, sincere, Christlike Christian. He's quite blunt about that. Some are mocking, insulting, ridiculing, using it for their own gain.

I used to do "prison ministry" regularly, and every week the prison chapel was jam-packed. Men, women, guards, wall-to-wall people, to hear me, David Johnson Rowe, preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even when I finished, they wanted me to stay longer, preach more! Then one week only about five showed up, all men. Turns out the female prisoners had been transferred to another prison. *They* had been the attraction! In one fell swoop, I lost the women and most of the men.

Not to be outdone, I started bringing women with me into the prison to help out, sing, serve Communion. Yes, I know, "shameless," but if St. Paul is right, if marketing and advertising and branding are right, you want to stay in the conversation. All I'm saying today is that "religion in the news" keeps us in the conversation. And as long as faith, as religion, as Christ are in the conversation, we have a chance to tell our story.

Kanye West's new hip-hop album is titled "Yeezus," with its number-one song, "I am a God." You don't think that's got people talking? I know it has. I've heard it. So when your kids are listening to Kanye West, there's your opening.

And then there's the tragic killing of Trayvon Martin with the "not guilty" verdict last night. On Tuesday, I heard a talk radio host who claimed to be a devout Catholic; he proclaimed that true Catholic teaching would have no problem with the killing of Trayvon Martin. You don't think that doesn't open the door for some serious conversation? Beginning with I think the pope would like to punch that talk show host in the nose! But still, it provoked some thinking.

I went to two movies recently, absolutely full to the max with religion. One is a comedy, "This Is the End," perhaps the grossest, crassest movie I have ever seen. And it's all about "redemption"! A bunch of Hollywood comics are at a party when the end of the world comes. The "rapture" takes all the good people up to heaven, leaving the riffraff behind, including these crass comics ... who finally figure out if they want to get to heaven, they'd better figure out how to be nicer and better.

The other was the new "Superman" movie. Believe me, there's nothing subtle about its Superman/Jesus analogy. Superman's job is "to save the world." That's a quote. Like Jesus, Superman is 33 when he has to make the final sacrifice. He spends half the movie with Jesus-on-the-cross symbolism, arms stretched out wide, head up to heaven, suffering, yet determined.

Given that both movies are huge hits, we've been handed evangelism on a silver platter — if we're aware. Religion is everywhere. Good, bad, and ugly. Atheism may be growing in prominence, irreligion may be on the rise, staying home on Sunday mornings may be on the rise, but religion as a matter of interest is huge.

If nothing else, following this stuff keeps you thinking, keeps you sharp, keeps you ready. A few weeks ago I shared one of my favorite verses with you, "Always be ready to give the reason for your hope." To be ready you need to be aware, informed. What's out there? What are people doing? Thinking? Arguing? Seeing? Listening to? And where's God? Everywhere!

Tell me, do you watch "Duck Dynasty" on A&E TV? Forgive me, I've not seen it, but it's evidently about a Louisiana family that's big into ducks. Nine million viewers each week, two books on *The New York Times* best seller list, three more coming out this year. They got a huge color two-page spread in the *New York Post*, announcing that one of the "Duck Dynasty" brothers is leaving as pastor of a mega church to join the TV show full time "to spread the word of God." Who knew? But nine million Americans are about to get a dose of God from a reality TV show about a family that looks like ZZ Top and lives like the Beverly Hillbillies set in Louisiana. Is that good or bad?

St. Paul says it's all to the good. Take whatever pop culture will give you, whatever daily life or conversation or "religion in the news" will give you, and run with it, use it. These are all wide-open invitations to join the conversation. What's more, there's a lot of interesting stuff out there.

For example, we're all sick of terrorism and terrorists and jihad and militant Islam, and there are Christian voices attacking Islam. I get e-mails all the time calling Christians to action against Islam. But if you follow "religion in the news," you'll notice a sharp increase in reformist Islam, moderate Islam, Muslims denouncing terrorism, Muslims turning in terrorists, Muslims standing up against violence. After the Boston Marathon bombings, *The Boston Globe* covered the efforts of local mosques, local imams, local Muslims to condemn terrorist, to be part of "Boston Strong."

The New York Times had an inspiring Op-Ed by Salman Rushdie on "Moral Courage" that included this quote from a courageous Saudi poet, who sent these birthday tweets about the Prophet Mohammed:

"In February 2012, a Saudi poet and journalist, Hamza Kashgari, published three tweets about the Prophet Muhammad:

'On your birthday, I will say that I have loved the rebel in you, that you've always been a source of inspiration to me, and that I do not like the halos of divinity around you ...'

'On your birthday, I find you wherever I turn. I will say that I have loved aspects of you, hated others, and could not understand many more.'

'On your birthday, I shall not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do, and smile at you as you smile at me. I shall speak to you as a friend, [nothing] more.'" (Rushdie, Salman. "Whither Moral Courage?" *New York Times* 28 Apr. 2013: SR5. Print.)

The writer was arrested almost immediately, but don't miss the key point. There are Muslims standing strong against terror, against tyranny, against the ruin of their own religion. That's "religion in the news" and good news!

On another matter of "religion in the news," Hollywood comics aren't the only folks focused on "redemption." The whole idea of forgiveness, second chances, new life is central to America, central to Christianity, We want it for ourselves and our loved ones; we're stingy when it comes to folks we don't like.

The New York Times followed the story of ex-New Jersey Governor James McGreevy and his attempt to become an openly gay Episcopal priest and to have a ministry, told in a documentary called "Fall to Grace" on HBO. (Genzlinger, Neil. "In New Jersey, a Resignation, Then a Search for Redemption." *New York Times* 28 Mar. 2013: C8. Print.)

The New York Post had an op-ed titled, "The Too-Forgiving God: Dubious Claims on Redemption." The author blamed God and skewered politicians who turn to God when caught, everyone from Newt Gingrich on up or down. The author yearns for the good old days of "fire and brimstone," happily quoting Timothy Dwight's grandfather, Jonathan Edwards, who promised in his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," "The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow." (Riley, Naomi S. "A Too-forgiving God: Dubious Claims of Redemption." *New York Post* 8 Apr. 2013: 23. Print.)

That's the Christianity the op-ed writer yearns for, that's the Christianity that much of the world thinks IS Christianity; that's the Christianity that competes with our little old country church as we proclaim the GOOD News about the God of love. But our church doesn't live in a vacuum. Our religion is lived out in the world of news, and just as Islam is tortured and fractured by its own kind, so are we.

But this is where St. Paul is so instructive, so I'll close by returning to his advice. St. Paul found himself in an environment where religion, even his religion, was front and center, very public, used and accepted by some, but abused and exploited, mocked and attacked by others.

Now, here's the David Rowe approach to that reality: I'd get really angry. I'd start to whine, "Everybody's so mean, everybody's against me!" And then I'd fight back, punch for punch. Paul says, "Chill," it's all to the good. Use it. Turn it to your advantage. The time to worry is when nobody's talking about you, when you're ignored.

That's all I'm saying today. Religion is already in the news. We are already a major part of the conversation. Our God, our Christ, our faith is always major news. Our job is to make it Good News.