

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: What Happened Next?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Litany for the Future

Scripture Litany for the Future

Together: Our Father who art in heaven ... thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ... yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil ... I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
(Matthew 6:9; Psalm 23)

Leader: For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. *(Ecclesiastes)*

People: "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Get thee to a far country and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" *(Genesis 12:1-3)*

Leader: Therefore I tell you, do not worry ... for who, by worrying, can add a single inch to their height? *(Matthew 6:25, 27)*

People: Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. *(Romans 8:18)*

Leader: I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. *(Revelation 21:1)*

People: And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before (God's) throne ... and a book was opened, the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. *(Revelation 20:12)*

... for the Son of Man will reward each person according to what (good) they have done. (Matthew 16:27, Ephesians 6:8)

Leader: Let not your heart be troubled, for I am going to prepare a place for you ... I will come back and take you with me ... always be ready ... be patient and stand firm. (*John 14:1-3; Luke 12:40; James 5:8*)

People: **Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have.** (*1 Peter 3:15*)

Leader: For in this HOPE we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (*Romans 8:24-25*)

People: **FAITH is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** (*Hebrews 11:1*)

Together: **Those who TRUST in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever; (Psalm 125:1) the Lord's unfailing love surrounds those who trust in God; (Psalm 32:10) whoever trusts in God is kept safe; (Proverbs 29:25) for God is the Rock eternal. (Isaiah 26:4)**

So last Sunday I ended my sermon with a story about hell, but I didn't finish the story. The sermon was about "Biblical literacy," about knowing the Bible well enough to make better sense and better judgments of all the uses and abuses of religion in the world around us. For example, even NPR did a segment this week on how popular "end of the world" scenarios are in popular movies, TV, music, and even in crime novels! Of course, the "end of the world" is a central theme in religion, Christianity, Judaism, the Bible, and a lot of churches. That led me to the current Matt Damon movie, "Elysium," which contrasts the wretched life on earth with a privileged life of the rich people's space colony just above the earth. And that led me to my personal experience of hell.

In last week's sermon I mentioned being taken across the border into Juarez, Mexico, by a Catholic priest. We were "reverse smuggling," taking medicines and food to a community of a thousand people living on, not near,

but on a garbage dump. And I drew the story out — the filth, the wretchedness, the flies and maggots and disease. That was their world. But I didn't tell you how the story ended. When we arrived at this horrific garbage dump, everybody — the whole thousand people — gathered at the very top of this mountain of garbage to have church. It wasn't even a Sunday. It was a Tuesday morning, and the people wanted church. So the priest turns to me and says, "You preach." "How long?" I asked. "An hour," he said, "in Spanish."

It had been a decade or more since my last Spanish class at Colgate University, but the priest didn't care. "God will help you," he assured me. So I stood on the top of the garbage, preaching to a thousand people who lived in the garbage. In all honesty, it was like being a guest preacher in hell, trying to bring our Good News into a world as bad as it gets. For an hour, I dared to speak of God, of love, of hope, of a better tomorrow, of not giving up, of not giving in. In Spanish!

Some would call what happened to me "speaking in tongues," that for an hour God gave me the gift of language, a gift I needed at that time, at that place, with those people. I know it was a gift because when I was done, the gift was gone; the rest of the day I could neither speak nor understand Spanish, barely uttering an occasional "hola" and "gracias" and "vaya con Dios." But for one morning, there was magic and miracles. People got medicine and food, and Habitat for Humanity began its work. The priest kept coming, and the people kept worshipping.

That's life. Life is made up of what happens AND what happens next! Life is like that. We live in the present and the future all at the same time, with the past strapped to our backs. But to get anywhere, we have to keep going. That's why I ask in my sermon title, "What's next?" Successful people, healthy people, faithful people, good churches never rest on their laurels. We're always asking, "What's next?"

We just finished our annual Vacation Bible School — 132 kids, our largest ever, great fun, wonderful spirit. But let me tell you, two days before for this year's Vacation Bible School, two days before, Marcia was already talking about changes for next year. And during this week, Wednesday afternoon, just halfway through it, Alida was already talking about next year, how to make the Bible lessons better, clearer, more visual, more meaningful. In other words, thinking about "what's next?"

Think of all those Scriptures we just read, Scriptures drawn from all over the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, all gathered under one theme: "what's next?" We began with God saying to Abraham, "Get thee to a far country ...

I'm going to make you a great nation ... and you will be a blessing to the whole world." That's all future, and once they make it to the future, to the Promised Land, then God challenges them to make it the best land ever, daring us to declare to God, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done ... on earth. And the way to do that, the way forward, is with TRUST. That's why we repeated those great Old Testament verses, "Those who trust in the Lord are like the mountain that cannot be shaken ... the Lord's unfailing love surrounds those who trust ... for God is the rock eternal."

The way forward in anything — in marriage, in business, in America, in our town, in this church — the way forward requires trust. A big part of that trust is that God has eternity already figured out. Call it heaven, call it Nirvana, call it the Kingdom of God. Whatever, it is God's way of promising that in the end, everything is better than O.K. There's a "new heaven and new earth." The church is presented as a "bride" on her wedding day. There is a New Jerusalem" of peace, of healing, of awesome "Shalom," the absolute fulfillment of every God-given hope. There is a "book" with your name in it, your reservation confirmation, and a list of all that you have done right in your life. It is a spectacular future. I love the humanness of it. In Genesis, God tells Abraham to go on a long journey, and in Revelation, God tells all of us weary travelers that there's a place ready just for us, we are expected, we are welcomed. It makes the future worth striving for.

We are a church of travelers. I've talked with many of you, and your kids, too, about your summer trips. You ski in Colorado, you spring break in the Caribbean, you take business trips to Asia and holidays to Europe, you crisscross America for college visits. And in college, your kids do semesters abroad from South Africa to India to Eastern Europe to Argentina. We travel, we emulate Abraham, getting ourselves to a far country, believing there is a blessing along the way, and at the end. We wouldn't do it otherwise; travel is too much of a hassle. We have to believe there is a blessing.

Alida is not here today. She did a wedding yesterday then drove Andres to Hood College in Maryland for five hours on I-95 South. She did all the hassles stuff of packing the van, unloading the van, organizing a boy's college dorm room, last-minute shopping trips for forgotten stuff, farewells. Then back up I-95 today to Philadelphia to see Brigitta at Bryn Mawr, then back up I-95, across the George Washington Bridge Monday morning, and then the Cross Bronx Expressway to the Connecticut Turnpike. Let's face it: 72 hellish hours.

There is nothing I just described that sounds remotely attractive except for some blessings along the way and the future. Some parent-child bonding,

seeing your kids in the colleges right for them. Seeing the lights go on as they find a subject, a teacher, an interests, an activity that helps them soar.

Seeing them "grow," as the Bible says, "in wisdom and stature, pleasing to God and to people." Seeing them begin to believe it tomorrow — that makes the journey pretty good. What our Christian faith tries to teach us is the future is a great place. It can be tough sledding getting there, but even the getting there has its rewards. What Christ teaches us is death isn't the end, destruction isn't the end, failure isn't the end, sin isn't the end, disappointment isn't the end. Nothing is the end except the end, and the end is great! So enjoy the journey.

At our early service today, we had Christian Cruz break out our church's journey to the future. Christian is rightly named for this task because he is by nature an optimist about the future. Indeed, that's his profession. He is actually a "futurist" with a master's degree in "Foresight." A few of us began talking a year ago about our future as a church. In 12 years we will celebrate this church's 300th anniversary, and it's always good to have something to point to that draws you proudly into the future. It's best to plan when things are going well, and things are going well at Greenfield Hill Church. Too often folks start planning for the future when it's too late; everyone is in a panic, and someone is painting a "going-out-of business" sign.

Think about your own life. Products you used to like, businesses that were popular, favorite restaurants, bookstores, shops. Closed. Empty. Gone. No planning. No future. That isn't happening here! Under Christian's guidance, through our Church Council, we want you to join us in thinking creatively, critically, boldly, and faithfully, as we head into our fourth century.

This morning Christian asked us two simple questions:

One - what are our values? What do we stand for? What makes this church worth being?

Two - what's going on around us, outside our front door, in our community and society?

The future is not our enemy. After all, we all like to say the future belongs to our children and grandchildren, and we don't think of them as the enemy! The future is their world.

We are closing our worship with an old hymn called "Beulah Land," an old-fashioned name for heaven. It's about the future, filled with classic images of heaven. We'll sing about angels and white robes, flowers that never fade,

and "ever vernal trees" of heaven's mansion and shining glory of sweet communion with Jesus. Of "Beulah land, sweet Beulah land, the land of corn and wine."

It's a great hymn about a great future, and it comes from my family tradition. Our family roots are in a little denomination called Advent Christians, sort of like Baptists with a special emphasis on Christ's returning to earth and the glory of heaven. In other words, their whole focus has been the future. But not planning. The church I was born into doesn't exist anymore. The Bible College my grandfather and father went to doesn't exist anymore. They believed in the future, but not in planning.

A few weeks ago Alida and I were in Vermont, so we decided to visit the old Advent Christian campground in Bethel, Vermont. It's been there for 80 years, on the side of a mountain — pristine, historic, a place preaching God's future for 80 years. Eighty years. But we couldn't find it for hours. There's no sign. Nobody in town knew where it was. Even the next-door neighbor only had a faint idea.

My people are great people, with great faith, a great past, and they believe in heaven for sure. People say when my grandfather preached about heaven and Christ's returning, folks would rush outdoors to see if it had happened! They believe in the future, they await it faithfully. But too many don't plan the way from now to then. The yearning for heaven is a good thing. But so is the journey on the way. And that takes planning.

When I was with Habitat for Humanity in the early days, there were people who were resistant to planning. They said, "Planning shows a lack of faith. This is God's business, and God will take us where he wants. We don't need planning." But there was this one old great gentleman, Sam Emerick. And Sam said, "Planning doesn't show a lack of faith. You plan because of faith." Faith says there is a great future. Planning shows you how to get there, what to do till then!

Let's turn to our hymn. Let's sing out our faith in the future, "O Beulah Land," and then get ready to plan with us.