

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: September 15, 2013
Sermon Title: The Damascus Road
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: "Syria Scriptures" (below)

A couple of weeks ago the president told the nation that we were likely to send an attack on Syria, after Congress debated, and he said this just after the British Parliament refused to help. Literally the next minute, I turned my TV to channel 76, the Turner Classic Movies channel, and there was a movie about King Richard the Lionheart, a movie from the 1950s about a war in the 1100s, where he's trying to attack some Muslim countries in the Middle East. But his allies are waffling and pulling out, his opponents are plotting, and the Muslim dictator is taunting him. As Yogi Berra says, "Déjà vu all over again." Or, as the Bible says, "There's nothing new under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

In some ways, this is delicious, ironically delicious. I don't like war. I don't like its side effects and after effects. We've just had our summer's "Field of Flags" outside our church, 6,600 flags representing all the men and women killed in this decade-long war. I don't want us to be doing it for 7,600 and for 10,600.

I fear war. But forgive me. Some of the stuff going on in the last couple of weeks is just too delicious! I'm not using any names today — for the most part, it's way too easy. It's like ... (what's the expression?) it's like "shooting fish in a barrel" to make fun of flip-flops and pandering and hypocrisy. But it's been fun seeing some of our country's biggest war hawks suddenly concerned about collateral damage and civilian casualties and "boots on the ground." And then to see antiwar doves hankering for a fight to believe in.

It's as though some mystery ailment took over America in the middle of the night, and all the left-wingers woke up one morning and had become right-wingers, and all the right-wingers woke up singing "Kumbaya." And I like "Kumbaya"!

The shoe is on the other foot for a whole lot of people, and I think that might be good for the whole country. Aside from the deliciousness of watching some of these strange bedfellows work together, while watching

others turn themselves into pretzels to explain themselves, there are two things right off the bat I have liked. I like giving America and Congress time to think it through, argue about it, discuss. For a moment at least, we feel like adults, as though we are being trusted, as though thinking and discussing are good. I like that.

And I like that Michelle Obama disagrees with her husband. Regardless of one's politics, I think people see the Obamas as having a good marriage, as a loving couple, and yet, on one of the biggest decisions of his presidency, of any presidency, about going to war, they are able to disagree. That's pretty cool.

I'm a child of the '60s, and if there's one lingering memory of that time, it is of a nation torn apart by war. Don't hear that sentence lightly, so let me repeat it. *In the '60s our nation was torn apart by war.* And when I say "nation," I don't mean Republicans versus Democrats or blue states versus red states. I mean families, churches, friendships, torn apart; classmates, teammates, siblings, torn apart. Riots in the streets. The cities burning. Colleges shut down.

I always say to people, if you think the '60s were the "good old days," you weren't there. So I take some comfort in a president's sitting in the White House, his finger on the trigger and his wife's saying, "Not so fast," and they still like each other! I take some comfort in Republicans NOT in lockstep with other Republicans, and Democrats NOT in lockstep with other Democrats. I take some comfort in people valuing caution and talking about peace without sneering. I take some comfort in the idea that two really old-fashioned verses in the Bible, much maligned, much mocked, verses like "Blessed are the peacemakers," (Matthew 5:9) verses like "Seek peace and pursue it," (Psalm 34) and verses that make it sound as though peace is noble and worth the effort. I take some comfort that peace is suddenly a work ethic, a value, not some "commie-hippie" conspiracy.

Now let's look at Syria ... in the Bible. See if we can learn a thing or two. I'm a proud graduate of the Mount Hermon School for Boys, now Northfield Mount Hermon School, named after a mountain in the Bible. Founded by America's greatest evangelist, D. L. Moody, it was a Christian school then, very Bible oriented, but no one told me that Mount Hermon is in Syria! America's greatest evangelist had one chance to name a Christian school, and he picked a mountain in Syria, whose rivers nourish Damascus. It's a reminder that the Biblical world we all treasure is quite a hodgepodge. Most of the churches mentioned in the New Testament are now in Muslim countries. The great Mosque in Damascus used to be a church.

Two Bible stories feature Syria, and we're going to go through them in a different way. We are going to tell one another the stories, together, using the insert you were given by the ushers:

*** Syria Scriptures ***
(from 2 Kings 5:1-15 and Acts 9:1-19)

Leader: Once upon a time Syria had a great general, Naaman, highly regarded. The Lord gave Syria great victories, even over Israel.

People: But Naaman was a leper!

Leader: Naaman had a Jewish slave girl who told him that Israel had a great prophet, Elisha, who could heal him.

People: So Syria's king wrote a letter to Israel's king, accompanied by a lot of money, and asked him to help the very general whose army bedeviled Israel.

Leader: *"What a lousy trick,"* whined Israel's king, *"Syria is just trying to make me look bad."*

People: But God's prophet, Elisha, said, "Don't worry, let's trust God, we'll help."

Leader: Elisha told the Syrian leper general to go dunk himself in the Jordan River seven times.

People: "That's ridiculous," the leper said, "silly, beneath my dignity."

Leader: Then Naaman's own servants said, *"Why not try this simple solution?! Everything doesn't have to be a big deal."* And he did. And he was healed.

People: A thousand years later, before Saint Paul became a saint, he went to Damascus, full of murderous threats, to hunt down Christians, persecute, intimidate. Kill them. In Damascus!!

Leader: As Paul neared Damascus, he was blinded by a flash of light and heard Jesus shout at him, *"Why are you hating me and my people?"*

People: Shocked, scared, Paul hid out on a street named Straight. God made him think for awhile about the violence he was doing.

Together: Then God sent a friend to heal Paul, giving Paul a fresh life, a new faith, and a great purpose as God's chosen instrument to carry Jesus's name to the world. First a Syrian healed in Israel. Then an Israeli healed in Syria.

Delicious.

That's a pretty fair rendering of Scripture. Check it out for yourself, except maybe the word "Delicious," but come on! We live in a world where Lindsey Graham was first on board to back the president, where Russia's Putin has stepped in to defang Assad. Where England won't help the U.S., but France will. I don't know how long it will last, but there's a delicious craziness in the world that is worth at least a smile.

And that's true in those two Bible stories. A Jewish Israeli prophet helping an enemy Syrian pagan general. A Syrian Christian helping a Jewish terrorist. God crossing boundaries and culture and religion, knocking down prejudices and assumptions, just to help somebody. The stark simplicity of faith stronger than ancient hatreds.

Surprising things going on in those old Bible stories, surprising things going on today. Admit it! There are a few on the right you would pay good money to see in a tie-dye T-shirt, wearing granny glasses, flashing the "peace sign." And some on the left you'd love to see wearing camouflage and shouting "USA! USA! USA!"

I think I'm having too much fun with this sermon for such a serious topic. So let me get serious. We are Christians, and this is your church. You come here to get a perspective based on Christ. That's what we have to offer. Nothing else. You all have your political leanings, parties, and candidates you support. They're telling you what they think. No doubt you're letting them know what you think. You don't come here for any party line. Furthermore, the issues themselves defy my expertise, and I've tried to understand them. I read voraciously. I listen across the spectrum. The debate about attacking Syria encompasses almost every issue bedeviling the world today. Let me list them:

- Chemical weapons
- Terrorism
- Hezbollah
- Iran
- The United Nations Security Council
- Israel
- Sequestration
- Just War theory
- Limited war
- Undeclared war
- Executive authority versus Congress.
- Russia versus United States
- Islam versus Christianity
- The price of oil

I'd be glad to comment on St. Augustine's "Just War theory," but you didn't come to church to hear my thoughts on any of the rest of that. "Just War" basically means three things: first, sometimes you do have to fight. Second, a "Just War" is a proportionate response to threat. You don't take a sledgehammer to get a fly. Third, don't hurt the innocents.

But even "Just War" begins with the premise that war isn't Christlike. That's why we say, "War is hell!" By its very nature, war is anti-Gospel anti-Good News, anti-Christ. That's why it needs some rules, some guidelines. That's what the world has tried to do by outlawing chemical weapons. You've seen the videos of the mass slaughter of Syrians. Over a thousand people killed, including 400-plus kids, murdered in their beds by chemical weapons. By definition, chemical weapons are indiscriminate, they can't be contained. Once let loose, they go where the winds carry them. When Assad shoots chemical weapons into neighborhoods, it's neighbors who get killed.

The 20th century was an ugly century. World War I was industrialized slaughter. World War II gave us the Holocaust and Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima and the mind-numbing deaths of tens of millions in every imaginable — no, let me change that — in UNimaginable ways. It's not for nothing that one of the most popular slogans to emerge from World War II was "Never Again." We haven't succeeded but it's a worthy goal: "Never Again. *Never again* industrialized death. *Never again* genocide. *Never again* the mass slaughter of the innocents. That's why the world came up with various solutions, imperfect as they are: the United Nations, NATO, the International Court. Treaties against genocide. Treaties against chemical weapons. Treaties to contain, catch, and punish war criminals. Those are humanity's little steps toward real civilization.

Let me confess my personal crisis of conscience regarding Syria. I was born after World War II, and I have been haunted all my adult life, all my pastoral career, by this question: "What would I have done if I had been a pastor in 1937, 1939, 1942? If I had been a pastor in Germany as the Nazis came to power and their master plan was enacted, step-by-step? If I had been a pastor in America as the winds of war blew our way, mild at first, then gale force? What would I have done? Would I have stood up? Spoken up? Would I have pointed to the handwriting on the wall? Would I have urged action or caution? Isolation or engagement? War, at any cost? Or peace, at any cost? Would I have enlisted or protested or remained silent?"

And so, I have to admit, when I heard stories of chemical weapons, when I saw the videos of people, families, kids, gasping for air, convulsing, dying, that touched something deep inside of me that pushed me, frankly, in the

same way that 9/11 pushed me, and I said, "Here is a great evil. We have the power to confront that evil. Do it." That's a visceral, emotional, personal, gut response.

If I were Michelle Obama, I would have cheered on my husband. If I were the president, I would have given the order, if I were a soldier on one of our Navy ships off the Syrian coast, I would have cheered. But thankfully, the world doesn't turn on my emotion. Instead, we've had a week of deliciously crazy little flurries of peace. Frankly, I don't care if they're brilliant maneuvers or lucky stumbles. I've spent my life stumbling luckily. I've stumbled across good restaurants. I stumbled into India. I stumbled into becoming your pastor. So I welcome a good stumble. Once you start stumbling, you don't have much control over where you land. Maybe you land on the pavement. Maybe you land on the grass. Maybe you land on your feet. Maybe you land on your head. Maybe you land to your right ... or to your left. But somehow, if we end up stumbling toward peace, stumbling toward strange bedfellows, stumbling toward fewer chemical weapons, that's a good way to stumble. With my two artificial knees, I stumble all the time. I stumble off curbs, into traffic, and down the stairs. And whenever I stumble, and nothing is broken, I thank God ... the God of stumblers.

In this place, in this tiny little church in this, what, 150' x 50' room, we are governed by a strange fellow, maybe the strangest of all fellows. Sometimes we call him "Jesus of Nazareth" or "Christ" or Savior, Messiah, even "Son of God." And sometimes, sometimes, usually when it is unpopular, and inconvenient, or it's Christmas, we call him "Prince of Peace." I don't even know what that is. We might as well call him the "Prince of Narnia" because that doesn't exist. Or the "Prince of Oz" or "Atlantis" because they don't exist either. And yet, Jesus is the "Prince of Peace." That's his loyalty, his priority, his domain, that's what makes him tick, that's what drives him, motivates him, pleases him.

It made be that caution and warning and threat, diplomacy, saber-rattling, debate, delay, strange bedfellows, war weariness, surprising hawks and sudden doves, the pope, and our own denomination, all worked together for peace. And I can't explain it. And I don't know if it will work or last. But I agree with Obama, who agrees with Reagan, "Trust but verify." I agree with John Lennon, who agreed with Jesus, "Give peace a chance."

Every year I teach a course on "Literature That Feeds Our Faith," mostly novels that make us think about the big issues: life, faith, doubt, good, evil, war, and peace. I've taught three novels by Kent Haruf, a beautiful writer, a powerful spiritual writer, whose latest is called *Benediction*, a painfully lovely story about a dying man and the folks around him. Including a preacher. I

picked the book a year ago, and wouldn't you know it? I taught it in my class on Friday. Two days ago. I couldn't have planned it any better, or worse. The climactic moment for the preacher is a sermon he preaches just as America sets off to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The preacher bases his sermon on Jesus's great "Sermon on the Mount," where he says things like "Love your enemies ... do good to those who hate you ... turn the other cheek ... be merciful." After quoting all that, the preacher says, "What if Jesus wasn't kidding? What if he really did mean what he said? What if he was so thoroughly wise to the world and knew first hand cruelty and wickedness and evil and hate? Knew it all so well from first-hand personal experience?"

And what if, in spite of it all, he still said, "Love your enemies," "Turn your other cheek"? What if he meant every word? What if we said to our enemies, "We are the most powerful nation on earth. We can destroy you. We can kill you. We can make ruins of your cities. We have the power." And instead we say, "Listen. Instead of any of these ... we are going to love you. We have set our hearts to it."

I like that. "*We have set our hearts to it.*" Oh, well, his church didn't like it. He was looking for another job a week later. But I got my comeuppance just reading that fictional sermon by a fictional preacher in a fictional book that isn't even about war. It's just about life.

Well, that's what you get for coming to church today. You don't get anyone's "party line." You don't get "talking points." This isn't "Meet the Press" or even the Op-Ed page. This is Church, where Jesus is the "Prince of Peace." And we keep trying to stumble in the right direction. And sometimes we get it right, even when I don't get what I thought I wanted. Maybe I need to heed our final hymn today, "Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with ME."