

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Here I Am, Lord  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

## **Isaiah 6:1-8**

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'*

*The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'*

*Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'*

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I was the perfect example of the famous *New Yorker* cover that showed a world map from the perspective of a New Yorker. There's a gigantic New York City front and center, then off in the distance is the rest of a rather nondescript America, and beyond that, almost as an afterthought, is the rest of the world.

So it was quite something when I started getting involved in the world of mission. Before I knew it, I was in Zaire and Uganda, Haiti and Nicaragua, India and El Salvador. I was at work in places called Dar es Salaam, Chihuahua, Lake Titicaca and Arequipa, Bombay, Calcutta, and Khammam.

When we talk about "Christian Mission," we're talking about taking the Christian message, the Gospel, what we call "Christlikeness" to the whole world, to anyone anywhere. We get the idea from the Bible. Just about the last thing Jesus said was, "Go ye into all the world, teaching all that I have commanded, making disciples of all nations ... be my witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Jesus's disciples took that challenge seriously. One by one they headed off, this way and that, including St. Thomas, who went to India. Remember, Thomas is the disciple who is most remembered for doubting the resurrection, "doubting Thomas," we call him. People forget that Thomas may have doubted, but he never gave up. He kept putting himself in a position to be confronted by faith. That's how he ended up in India, full of faith, no longer "doubting Thomas," but "believing Thomas," traveling around India, telling people about Jesus, starting churches, ending up in what we used to call Madras, now Chennai.

Two thousand years later, 1983 to be exact, I stood in a church right next to the ocean, just outside Madras, staring at the bones of St. Thomas and the spears that killed him. That summer of 1983 I traveled to India as president of Habitat for Humanity, looking for the best place to start Habitat in Asia, building houses with the poor.

There's a great old movie about India, "Heat and Dust," and that title captured perfectly my first experiences. *Heat and dust*. Grinding poverty. Overwhelming need. And yet, everywhere I went was dynamic evidence of St. Thomas. He had been killed for his faith, but he had not failed. The churches he began, the "Christlikeness" he taught took root in the fevered "heat and dust" of India, and everywhere I went, the resurrected Christ was alive and well, churches were packed, church leaders were dynamic and visionary.

Many of you know the rest of the story. One night God spoke to me, very verbally, very unforgettably, very really. And God told me to start a mission, call it "Friends of Christ in India," which comes out as "F-O-C-I," the plural of "focus." To focus is to zero in on one thing, but FOCI, from the beginning, was to be more than one thing. St. Paul once said, "I am all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some." (1Corinthians 9:22)

Unfortunately, Christianity for most of its history has been divided into two camps: evangelism and social action. Evangelism is telling people about Jesus. Social action is doing what Jesus tells us to do. FOCI would dare to do both.

By the end of that trip, I had met Azariah, a humble, delightful Indian Christian. He lived a life of service and faith like no one I had ever met in my life. He lived in a little nowhere town, out of the limelight, no support from anywhere, just spending every waking hour bringing God's love in Christ to everyone he met. It really was that simple. It was clear to me that if God was serious about this FOCI thing, and if Habitat wanted to succeed, Azariah was the one to work with. Thirty years later, I am amazed at the results. Habitat is one of the most famous Christian projects in the whole world, and FOCI is one of the most grassroots no-frills little missions you could ever imagine.

I leave for India tonight, and by Tuesday afternoon, I'll be at one of our newest projects, which we call the "Lotus Center." Every afternoon after school, 72 children come to our center. For several hours we embrace them in a living, loving learning community. We have trained teachers to support and expand their education. We provide a nutritious meal. We give them a true foundation on which to build their dreams. During the day, before the kids arrive, we use the same center for the moms. Health center. Clinics. Classes. Programs for the neighborhood. This is all part of an expanding effort to empower girls and women to be all that God created them to be and all that the world needs them to be.

Nicholas Kristof, in his stunning book, *Half the Sky*, tells us that in much of the world, half the population, females, is kept down, pushed down, silenced, abused, exploited, undervalued, underutilized, shortchanged, wasted. Our little church is changing that, one girl at a time, one village at a time, one school at a time, 7,000 miles away.

During this trip, I'll visit all the FOCI projects, all the ways that the "Good News" of Jesus Christ is lived out personally, clearly, powerfully. When I go to the rural area, my first stop is our leprosy village of 250 people. When I first met them, they lived under a bridge. They had nothing except the disgust, the fear, the repulsion, the rejection of everybody — their own families, society, the world.

The next day I'll be with a wonderful lady, Sister Mary, 80 years old. She was married as a child and widowed while still a child. Her own life came to a crashing halt — isolated, an outcast, a bad omen, hidden away in a mud hut.

As a young woman, she came to know about Christ and the work being done by Christ's followers, Azariah and his team. The "Good News" liberated her, set her free, and she has spent the last 60 years caring for the poorest of the poor. When I am with her, we'll do a memorial service for a dear friend, Santamma. Santamma was a hunchback, perhaps 4 feet tall, unmarriageable, her family said, a burden to her family, they said, unable to work in the fields, they said. So she came to us as a 16-year-old girl, the very year we started FOCI, and she spent her entire adult life working hard, working tirelessly among the elderly at our Home for the Aged. She just died at age 46, and I doubt there's anyone God has greeted more warmly than that little giant of a lady.

Our work with the elderly is very precious to us. These old folks we care for really are the "throwaways" of rural India. We are their only link to life, to love. We are their faith in human form. God's love right there for them to taste, to know, to believe.

You know, every November we have an "Alternative Christmas Market," a chance for you to buy mission-oriented Christmas gifts that will benefit the poorest of the poor and make your loved ones proud at the same time. FOCI always has a table there, and this year I'm hoping for a miracle. I'm hoping that table raises \$5,000 to provide a year's care for our elderly. It is the perfect form of ministry.

Of course, a lot of my stories about mission are told in my book, *My Habitat For Humanity*, which has become a successful celebration and explanation of mission. If you haven't read it, or don't have a copy, I've conveniently placed a bunch in the Narthex.

I'm not using this sermon to push my Habitat mission book, but let me tell you an interesting story. My Habitat book came out three years ago, but this was the first year I decided to use it with our Confirmation class members. Every Monday night we gather 40 to 45 8<sup>th</sup>-graders in the Len Morgan Barn for Confirmation class, and we work hard to make it experiential, interactive, impactful.

They've been in school all day, so we don't want it to be just another class. So I didn't know what to expect when I handed out my book to each kid with a homework assignment! They had to read either my chapter on India or my chapter on Africa and then write down four things they had learned and one question to ask. Due in two weeks. I was sure they wouldn't do it, not without a lot of prodding. So last Monday, almost joking, I asked, "Who's done the homework?" And to my amazement, almost every youngster had done it! But the bigger surprise was what they wrote. They got it. They got

Christianity. They got mission. They got Greenfield Hill Church. They got what we stand for.

Now, remember, what they had been reading were my stories from years of mission work in Africa and India — all the experiences I've had, good and bad. Would they care? Would they understand? Would they see a connection between mission life halfway around the world AND their life in Fairfield? Let me share some snippets from their writing.

*Good comes out of doing good ...*

*People with nothing are still thankful for everything, and this can change your faith ...*

*When your brain goes blank, say something nice ...*

*Building a church can make a huge difference ...*

*We help people to learn the "Good News" ...*

*God's house should be a place for all ...*

*Even though things seem tough, God is preparing something great for you ...*

*There is a great paradox — the unsettling combination of beauty and poverty ...*

*The great moral of missionary work is that it is not about work or power or tradition, but everything is always about people ...*

*Leading by example encourages others to follow and to further the example ..."*

*Be grateful for every person and thing in your life ...*

*There is a world bigger than what we see every day ...*

*There is always a way to be kind ...*

*Enjoy life in every way possible, and remind yourself what you are thankful for ...*

*In order to earn someone's respect, you must put yourself in his shoes ...*

*People feel better about things they do for themselves. Our job is to get them started and encourage them ...*

*I learned that you can't give up even when it's hard because when David was living in India, he was tired but kept doing it anyway because it was the right thing to do ...*

*I learned that sometimes you just have to do things you don't want to do and just make the best of it. I think this because I didn't want to read David's book, but I did it because I had to, and I actually enjoyed reading it.*

That's our 8<sup>th</sup>-graders, your kids, reflecting a depth of compassion and faith and mission that is stunning. They get it. They make me excited for the future and optimistic about church.

Now, let's briefly look at our Scripture, "The Call of Isaiah." Isaiah was already a priest. He was hard at work in the great Temple in Jerusalem,

doing all sorts of holy things, leading people in worship, helping people connect with God. Then, one day, Isaiah has this amazing experience of God. A personal, intimate, one-on-one experience, and God talks to him very verbally, very unforgettably, very really. God says, "I need more from you. There's a world of hurt outside the Temple doors, and you need to take what's special in here ... out there! There's a truth in here, a beauty in here, a joy, and I need someone to take it out there."

Mother Teresa had the exact same experience. She was already doing good work. She was already sacrificial and caring and helpful. She left everything she knew to become a nun and a teacher in Calcutta. And on a train ride, God spoke to her very verbally, very unforgettably, very really, and said, "I need more from you. There's a world of hurt outside your convent doors, and your church doors. I need you to go out there."

When Isaiah heard God's appeal, his response was very simple: "Here am I, send me." That's the essence of mission work. Something needs doing. Somebody does it.

I've been a pastor a long time, and I've never known a church where so many people step forward to help, to give, to do. There is a truth in this place, inside these four walls; there is surely a beauty in here and a joy. But there's a world of hurt beyond our doors. Sometimes that takes us next door. Sometimes that takes us downtown. Sometimes that takes us to India.

One last story. Many of you remember Dr. George Longstreth, a longtime member with his wife Betsy. They both sang in the choir. As he neared retirement, he decided to go outside our front door and take his healing touch as a doctor to the world of hurt in India. Sixteen years ago, he and Betsy went to our FOCI mission hospital to provide free surgeries for a month. They took over a failing, aging, decrepit, near-empty mission hospital. Soon they were taking medical teams of six, eight, 10 doctors, nurses, a dentist. With John and Connie DeMattia, they developed a series of rural village health clinics. They're renovated our leprosy village. This January, Dr. Longstreth is leading a 17-person medical team for two weeks of faith in action, of miracle after miracle, of God very much alive in Jesus Christ. All because George, like Mother Teresa, like Isaiah, like St. Thomas, said to God, "Here am I ... send me!"

The next time you hear voices in your head, don't just assume you're crazy. It may just mean that God has something exciting for you to do!

Let's sing our final hymn, "Here I am, Lord."

*I, the Lord of sea and sky,  
I have heard my people cry.  
All who dwell in dark and sin,  
My hand will save.  
I who made the stars of night,  
I will make their darkness bright.  
Who will bear my light to them?  
Whom shall I send?*

*Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord?  
I have heard you calling in the night.  
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.  
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*I, the Lord of snow and rain,  
I have born my people's pain.  
I have wept for love of them, they turn away.  
I will break their hearts of stone,  
Give them hearts for love alone.  
I will speak my word to them,  
Whom shall I send?*

*Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord?  
I have heard you calling in the night.  
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.  
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*I, the Lord of wind and flame,  
I will tend the poor and lame.  
I will set a feast for them,  
My hand will save  
Finest bread I will provide,  
Till their hearts be satisfied.  
I will give my life to them,  
Whom shall I send?*

*Here I am, Lord, Is it I, Lord?  
I have heard you calling in the night.  
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.  
I will hold your people in my heart.*