

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: January 5, 2014
Sermon Title: Thank You, Lord, For Waking Me Up
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Exodus 14:5-12

Exodus 14:5-12

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, 'What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?' So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon. As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.'

In my old days with Habitat for Humanity, I preached in a lot of African-American churches across America, and among the many things I admired there was one expression I always heard that never failed to sit me up straight and make me think. At some point in the service, sometimes early, some times later, during one of the prayers, somebody would get up to say, "Thank you, Lord, for getting me up today. You didn't have to get me up today. You could have left me in my bed, but you got me up, you gave me breath, and so today, I have life!"

What a humbling and interesting thought as we begin the new year. "Thank you, Lord, for giving us breath in 2014. Thank you for getting us up, for giving us life for 2014. We're here. Now what?"

I went to see the movie "Inside Llewyn Davis," the latest movie by the Coen brothers, the guys who did "Fargo" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" This one is a sort of tribute to folk music, to 1961 Greenwich Village, where I used to hang out a lot. My musical journey started with doo-wop, went to folk, to rock 'n' roll, to Green Day to the cello, and now I'm back to folk music. Ever since seeing the Llewyn Davis movie, I've been finding my old folk music: Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Dave Van Ronk, Phil Ochs. I found myself singing along with an old John Sebastian song from his days with the Lovin' Spoonful, as he sings beautifully,

*A quarter of my life is almost past,
I think I've come to see myself at last ...
It's O.K. to shoot the moon!*

A quarter of his life is almost past? What was he, 20 at the time? Of course, that was back in a time when we used to say, "Never trust anybody over 30!" So maybe 20 did feel old. But he is right. It is O.K. to "shoot the moon," or better said, "shoot FOR the moon." Big plans. Big hopes. Big dreams. Big ideas. Why not? It's only January 5th, and other than some snow, 2014 hasn't done anything to turn us sour or make us cynical. This is a good time to be positive. If we can't be optimistic on January 5th, we're all in trouble! The question of endings and beginnings is always with us. The football Jets and Giants have ended their seasons. The Yankees and Mets have not yet begun their seasons, and interestingly, there's hope for all of them.

It's different in the middle. If you're a basketball Knicks or Nets fan, the joy is gone for both teams, there's bickering and finger pointing, and lots of losing. The middle can be tough, that's stark, brutal, eyes-wide-open reality. But the endings are good for reflection. Beginnings are good for hope.

On Thursday I took the train to D.C. to preach at the funeral of Kedron Simon, Adam and Wendy's sister-in-law. Forty-one years old. A 14-year marriage. Two young kids. A Harvard grad. A navy veteran. A woman of great accomplishment. My challenge as a pastor was to take that family, take that church, and walk them from her ending to her beginning. I reminded them of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In fact, that reminds me, our Adult Ed is sponsoring "Movie Night" in a couple of weeks. The movie is "Bonhoeffer," an excellent movie. Bonhoeffer

was a great German theologian and a committed anti-Hitler Christian pacifist. He left the safety of Union Seminary in New York City, where he was teaching, to return to Germany to face whatever Germans would have to face under Hitler. Despite his pacifism, he chose to join the famous assassination attempt against Hitler. It failed. Bonhoeffer was caught. And one of the last orders Hitler gave before he shot himself was for Bonhoeffer to be executed.

As Bonhoeffer stood before the gallows, he said, "This is the end. The beginning of life for me." That is the wonderful paradox of Christian faith. We dare to stand at the entrance to the end and declare confidently, "This is the beginning of life for me." At every funeral, that's what I want the family to know.

That's the boldness that gives us the courage to "shoot for the moon." Our ultimate future is set. On January 5th, all we have to do is take charge of the immediate future. The now.

As you've heard me say nonstop, our Bible study this year is geared toward knowing the basics, covering the stuff that any half-way Biblically literate trying-to-be-a-Christian person should know. It may take us 40 years. We've only made it to the Israelites escaping Egypt after 400 years in bondage. For Israel, something big was ending — slavery. Something big was beginning — freedom. The past had been horrific. The future was uncertain. But one thing was certain. For Israel, the past was over. The future was here. They were out of Egypt. They were free. A "Promised Land" was promised. Now what?

It's the "now what?" that excites us at every beginning. A trip. A new baby. A new job. A new year. Now what? Moses got the Israelites to freedom, thanks to chutzpah. He walks into Pharaoh's palace, tells him, "Let my people go," quoted God, did some magic tricks, annoyed, begged, threatened ... AND delivered, delivered on his threats, and delivered on his promises. Pharaoh let them go. Now what?

The "now what? Like every "now what?" was filled with potential and fraught with danger. I told you I just took Amtrak to D.C. and back. Alida booked the ticket for me from India — what a world! She even got me train travel insurance. Seriously? I need insurance for my train ride to D.C.? What could possibly go wrong on a train ride? It's on tracks, right? And yet, the moment I sat down on the train, my "now what?" beginning was, yes, filled with potential, but also fraught with enough danger to require a 12-page, yes, a 12-page, instruction printout on what my train travel insurance covered. Evidently new beginnings CAN BE fraught with danger!

Moses could have used some insurance for his “now what?” beginning. What, you ask, could possibly go wrong with a God-led emancipation of several hundred thousand escaping slaves? Well, let’s see. What if Pharaoh changes his mind and wants all that cheap labor back? What if the Egyptian army chases the escaping Israelites? What if the Red Sea really is filled with water? What if people on the other side of the Red Sea aren’t happy to see hundreds of thousands of ex-Egyptians walking through their meadows? What if the Israelites get hungry and thirsty? What if they get scared? What if they want to go back?

All that happened. The only insurance they had was faith. So the Egyptians chased them but couldn’t catch them. The Red Sea parted. The enemies were defeated. They got water from a rock and manna from heaven. But of course, they wouldn’t have known that would happen, that God would work everything out, just so. They wouldn’t have known that. Not at the beginning. At the beginning, they had to step out on faith.

Will you forgive a loosely connected silly story that might make my point? Last week, you let me preach about “Duck Dynasty” and “White Santa,” and now I’m asking you to let me begin and end a sermon with movie stories.

I was going to end with “The Wolf of Wall Street,” but all of you who have seen it forbade me, as your pastor, to be seen going into the theater! So you’re left with “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” based on a lovely story by James Thurber.

Walter Mitty is sort of a nebbish, a hard-working, dependable, quiet, alone sort of guy. Suddenly he has an extremely important job that requires a lot of courage and boldness and derring-do, which he does boldly, courageously, and daringly to great success. But how did this quiet, sheepish wisp of a fellow become emboldened? How did he move from wimp to hero? He practiced. In his mind, in his imagination, he would try out that other persona, he would imagine what he could be if he would just try. In his imagination, he took risks. He stood up for himself and others. In his imagination. But at some point, like all of us in life, he was pushed to choose. He could either imagine the life he wanted to live OR start living the life he imagined. To start living the life he imagined, he is guided by a mantra, a proverb given to him by a friend. Just three phrases, three goals. Draw closer. See each other. Feel. *Draw closer. See each other. Feel.*

In other words, Walter Mitty had been living his life at a distance, from everything and everyone. From reality, from coworkers, from love. He kept a nice safe distance.

A new year, a day like today, a January 5th, is a good time to take stock of yourself and decide what needs changing, what needs fixing, what needs to stop, and what needs to start. We all need something, and if you can't think of something, you need to go back to, say, mid-October and keep careful track of yourself till you come back to January 5th, and by then, you should have a whole list of New Year's changes. If you can't think of any, talk to your spouse or your kids or your boss. But it will be easier if it comes from you. Each new year is a wonderful opportunity to reimagine yourself.

For the Israelites, getting out of Egypt was a process. Everything didn't click overnight. You'd think it was scary. If you had been a slave for 400 years, and suddenly you were free, you'd jump up and down, shouting, "Yippee!" and start living the "life of Riley" on the proverbial "bed of roses."

Instead it was a process. It's not easy being free. It's not easy starting over. It's not easy making changes. It's not easy to make it to the Promised Land, whether at work, in marriage, or family. Start by practicing. Like Walter Mitty, start imagining the life you want to live, then start practicing the life you imagine. Little by little, you'll be living that life.

For Moses, it really did begin with practice. He practiced speaking. He even practiced his tricks! He practiced acting like a free man. He practiced taking responsibility, showing leadership, exercising authority. Come to think of it, Moses was a Walter Mitty sort of guy, all "Aw, shucks, I couldn't do that!" But before he knew it, God had him doing what he couldn't do. For the Israelites, they, too, were tentative, nervous, risk-averse. But they tried. And that's how you make the most of January 5th. You try.

Preaching the funeral for Adam and Wendy Simon's sister-in-law was a privilege. Their sister-in-law, Kedron, was quite a person. She was a Mexican-American girl from Arizona who made it to Harvard. She wanted to be a naval officer, and Harvard didn't have ROTC, so she joined the ROTC at MIT.

When she joined the navy, the navy didn't allow women in combat, but the minute the law changed, Kedron signed up for a combat fleet. When she entered the world of business, she excelled. And when her friends spoke, and her husband Noah spoke, they all emphasized her will, her determination. She not only pushed herself to try, but she also pushed her friends to try. To believe in themselves, to believe in their capabilities, to believe in their destiny.

Why not take a lesson from Kedron's life, as we start the new year, from Walter Mitty's life, from Moses's life? Why not live the next year as if there are no limits on us, no bounds, just possibilities? Great phrase, isn't it? I stole it from the funeral. One of Kedron's friends said, "No limits. No bounds. Just possibilities."

That's a pretty good New Year's resolution for me. For you. For our church.