

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 20, 2014  
Sermon Title: Prophets for Today  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: A Prophet's Scripture Litany

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## **A Prophet's Scripture Litany**

(from the Prophets Isaiah, Micah, and Amos)

**Reader 1:** In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord, high and exalted ... then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, who will go for us?"

**Reader 2:** And I said, "Here I am. Send me."

**Reader 1:** Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, and who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine.

**Reader 2:** Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done. They grind the faces of the poor. Woe to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent.

**Reader 1:** Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

**Reader 2:** Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed, making widows their prey and robbing the orphan. What will you do on the day of reckoning?

**Reader 1:** Is this not the kind of worship I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to share your food with the hungry, to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?

**Reader 2:** I hate, I despise your religious feasts. I cannot stand your church gatherings. I will not accept your offerings. Away with your songs. I will not listen to your music.

**Reader 1:** But let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream ... You know what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

**Reader 2:** O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, like a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you were not willing.

**Reader 1:** For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

**Reader 2:** Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord," and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

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Back in the early '80s, we were vacationing on the ocean up in Maine, when the old Soviet Union shot down a Korean commercial airplane, killing everyone on board. We went to the nearby church that Sunday, and there wasn't a single mention of that terrorist horror—not in the prayers, not in the sermon, nowhere. I guess they didn't want to ruin a summer Sunday.

We are not doing that here today. The world is screaming for attention. I realize nobody comes to church in the summer to get hammered. We want nice, gentle, breezy; something light and easy, just like our summer clothes.

The music world is always looking for that big summer hit, something bright and bouncy. And the publishing world pursues the perfect "beach read," something that doesn't require a lot of concentration. But we live in the real world, in real time, and the Biblical prophets speak to us, even uncomfortably.

With the immigration crisis along the Texas/California border and with the Middle East literally exploding, we have perfect illustrations of why the prophets are in the Bible in the first place. We just went through our Scripture litany for today, a pretty good summary of the prophets, so you

have a good idea of what they were like. They were grumps. Critics. Pundits. Let's say you took Rush Limbaugh, Maureen Dowd, Glenn Beck, and Bill Maher, and took their views of America and the president and the government today and wrapped it all up in religion. Well, that would be a modern version of the Old Testament prophets. They didn't like things the way they were. They wanted to "take back" the country to the way the founding fathers planned it. Their message was simple and consistent: God is not happy. "You stink," the prophets said repeatedly. "Your country stinks. Your king stinks. Your religion stinks. Your people have no morality. Your businesses have no ethics. Your leaders have no clue. Everything is rotten to the core." The prophets weren't happy, *and* they were quoting God.

They were also attention grabbers. One went around naked to get people's attention. Or they smashed pottery. Or they walked around measuring everything. They killed the competition. Or they did magic tricks. Or sang songs. Or wore a gigantic ox yoke around their necks, hoping somebody would ask about it. Anything to get people to pay attention to their message. Maybe nowadays we need a new approach to be a prophet.

We love seeing cartoons of prophets dressed in scraggly clothes with scruffy beards, holding doom-and-gloom signs that declare, "The end is near!" When your profession and your message have become a cartoon, it's time for rebranding.

You remember when President Obama was running for president the first time, and reporters found old sermons by his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, saying some harsh things about America? People went through the roof! Interestingly, Jeremiah Wright was named for the Prophet Jeremiah, who mostly said the same things to his country that our Jeremiah said to our country. And now, six years later, all the critics who were up in arms against Jeremiah Wright sound just like him.

Look up some of Jeremiah Wright's sermons, and listen to Sean Hannity and Michael Savage today, and tell me the difference. I actually listened to Michael Savage this week, and he was crystal clear. He called himself a prophet; he said he gets direct messages in dreams and visions, and he went on to outline a huge conspiracy, linking Pope Francis, Glenn Beck, the Mormon church, and Obama, all conspiring to destroy America. He even mischaracterized Scripture.

So that's our dilemma. Nowadays, prophets are a joke, cartoon characters, talk show hosts. It's a shtick, a moneymaking machine. And yet, and yet, some of the best stuff in the Bible comes from the prophets. Handel's "Messiah," the centerpiece of Christmas and Easter music, all lifted from the

prophet Isaiah. Our whole Christianity, with Jesus at the center, is based on the prophecies of the prophets coming true in Jesus. We Christians look at what the prophets said the Messiah would be, and we look at what Jesus turned out to be, and we say, "Aha! Perfect match."

And our kind of Christianity, a sort of evangelical/progressive Christianity with our emphasis on love, compassion, making a difference, our kind of Greenfield Hill Christianity is actually made up of equal parts Jesus and the prophets. In fact, some of Jesus's bluntest statements about his purpose and our ministry he took straight from the prophets. The poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the needy, the victim, the vulnerable, all that "Jesus talk" began as Old Testament prophet talk. Jesus said it nicer. We see the prophets through the prism of Jesus. That's how we end up with a Mother Teresa or an Alida. They both echo the prophets, but they do it nicer.

Take Appalachia, for example. It's a mixture of a whole lot of bad. Bad economy. Bad mines. Bad drugs. Bad roads. Bad booze. Bad choices. Bad luck. If Alida wanted, she could go down to Appalachia each summer alone, put an ox yoke on her back, smash pottery in front of the local town hall or police station, and sing a bluegrass song about everything that's bad: people, places, businesses, government, the whole kit and caboodle. That would be very Biblical, very "prophetic." Or, Alida could go down there each summer, take 200 friends with her, and embrace everyone they meet with God's law. That is Biblical and prophetic. Which one do you prefer? Michael Savage? Or Alida?

We all pick and choose, don't we? We pick and choose our issues, we pick and choose who is to blame, we pick and choose our facts, we pick and choose our prophets. In all the picking and choosing, we end up missing the central message of the prophets. And the central message is hope. Not doom and gloom. Hope. Almost every angry prophet ends with hope. Yes, indeed, they rant and rave, point fingers and stomp their feet, they threaten and provoke and insult. But within every prophet is a kernel of hope. And that hope is always the product of what the Bible calls "justice" and goodness. "You know what God wants," says Micah, "do justice, love mercy, be humble." And Amos says, "Let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." And that justice, that Biblical rightness, is always measured by how we treat people who are hurting. In Biblical times, that is always defined as the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed, the stranger. Today, we could just say "the vulnerable." Who is it that is hurting and vulnerable?

We have a bunch of church girls this summer raising 600,000 pennies for elderly poor women in India. Why? Because these elderly women have

nothing and nobody. They're hurting and vulnerable. In our country it might be Iraq's war veterans, the jobless, child immigrants on the Texas border, the mentally ill, the rural poor, the brokenhearted, the elderly.

Of course, right now, what's got everyone's attention is the immigration crisis on the southern border, a humanitarian nightmare that is tailor-made for the only sport bigger than soccer's World Cup—that would be American politics. But if you take the politics out of it, we're left with figuring out what's just and right. Who is hurting and vulnerable, and what is the good we can do?

If we start from there and work our way back, we find an answer, short-term and long-term. The prophets were right. Justice and mercy doing things the right way, the good way—that is both the solution and the prevention. The solution is goodness here, justice back in Central America. Just and good leaders, just and good government, just and good people don't create a flood of immigrants, don't shoot down commercial airliners, don't keep the Middle East a burning cauldron. It's injustice in the old Soviet Union, injustice in Central America, injustice in the Middle East that creates the mayhem of today.

If an Israeli Jew walked 200 miles in any direction, what would be his fate? When an 8-year-old girl wakes up in Gaza, what are the prospects for her life? And a teenage boy walks down the street in Honduras or Guatemala, what are his chances? How does anyone who's a neighbor of Putin's Russia feel safe?

I was in Greenfield, Massachusetts, on Friday, on the way to my uncle's funeral. I went for a walk and came across a Moldovan Baptist Church. What are Baptists from Moldova doing in Greenfield, Massachusetts? No doubt looking for a little justice and fair play, something not guaranteed in Putin's shadow. So the prophets say to us we need to be that place, we need to be that people where God's goodness reigns.

Now I'm not standing up here trying to set government policy on immigration. I'm simply looking at the reality through the prism of the prophets as expressed through Christ. We are in the just, loving business. And there is a just, loving way to welcome even hordes of illegal immigrants. There is a just, loving way to deport hordes of illegal immigrants. There's a just, loving way to engage their home countries. We have to stop letting our politics confuse our faith and instead let our faith confuse our politics.

I've been watching the whole mess. One protester yelled, "Go back, you are not our problem." Where do we begin with that one? The very fact that

you're out on the street corner in the hot sun screaming at strangers would seem to show they *are* your problem! Another protester yelled, "Jesus didn't break the law." Well, actually, Jesus broke a lot of them. Take your pick: blasphemy, sedition, disturbing the peace, holding a parade without a permit, practicing medicine without a license. He broke the Sabbath, he broke custom, tradition, and law!

And here's a guy I wouldn't want to be: a priest on national TV saying, "They need to be sent back." That may even be true, but if you're going to dress like a man of God, you might want to at least mimic God a little bit; maybe just a hint of mercy, compassion; maybe just a glimpse of recognition of justice or goodness. Heck, Glenn Beck sent truckloads of soccer balls, stuffed animals, and water. You'd think the clergyman could come up with something that sounded like Jesus. Jesus was actually startlingly clear: "Let the children come unto me," he said, "whoever hurts one of these little ones . . . well, it would be better if they hadn't been born," he said.

I'm almost done, so here's my point. We are all focused on torrents of illegal kids swarming the border, crazies in the Middle East, and Putin's puppets. The prophets challenge us to go deeper. Isaiah says our job is "to loose the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free." Politics is focused on the symptoms. The prophets focused on the cause. Our job is to focus on Christ.

That's not a national immigration policy, but it's a fairly broad hint about how we should treat those kids. In America we say we love the U.S. Constitution, we want it adhered to. And we love to say we are a Judeo-Christian country founded on Judeo-Christian values. Well, key to those values are the teachings of the prophets, and they tell us loud and clear to be humble, to be merciful, to be just, to be good.

Listen. Everyone here, we've all had people show up at our house unannounced, expecting a warm welcome and gracious hospitality, testing your good will, overstaying their welcome, and we figure it out. We don't kick them out into the street. We don't scream at them. We try to figure out what we owe them and actually do a little bit more. That really is "The American Way."

I went through a red light about two weeks ago (or a yellow, *almost* red light). Let's just say it was red enough that the police car on my left had stopped. But I went merrily on for about 50 yards till the police siren went off. The cop, she asked me for my registration, which of course was expired.

So I passed a cop, on the right, through a red light, with an expired registration. Whatever I got, I deserved. Put the cuffs on me, drag me away, impound my car, take away my license.

Now to be clear, the prophets had done their job. The speed limit was posted. A gigantic red light hung above me. An obvious police car was sitting next to me. The DMV had sent me a renewal notice. The prophets had done their job. I was amply forewarned. The cop could have just stood there with a sign, "Repent. The end is near!" Instead I was gently reminded, not reprimanded. I was carefully instructed, not threatened. I was set free, not punished. She took me carefully through what I needed to do, how to do it, and why. She appealed to my sense of goodness. She even reminded me of my Christianity.

In short, she got my attention, she warned me, and she left me with hope, daring me to respond with goodness. Maybe we could be like that cop.