

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: August 10, 2014
Sermon Title: Religion in the News
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Psalm 122

Psalm 122

*A Song of Ascents. Of David.
I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.*

*Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
‘May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.’
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.*

When I was training to be a pastor, I was taught to “preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.” In other words, the world and all

its affairs are our business. We'd better know it. That's what leads to today's sermon, "Religion in the News."

The New York Times had a major article on June 22 titled "A Christian Convert, on the Run in Afghanistan," the harrowing story of a young man from Afghanistan who chose to follow Christ. He was converted to Christianity in a German church of Protestant Persians from Iran. Denied asylum in Europe, he's back hiding in Kabul, hiding from his brother-in-law, who told *The Times* reporter, "If I find him, once we are done with him, I will kill his son as well . . ." That's a whole lot of "religion in the news" in one story. A Muslim from Afghanistan converts to Christianity in a German church of Protestants from Iran. (Ahmed, Azam. "A Christian Convert, on the Run in Afghanistan." *The New York Times* 22 June 2014: A5. Print.)

The New York Times also had a prominent article about a block on West 121st Street in Manhattan being renamed for the acerbic comedian George Carlin. There's a little brouhaha because on that block sits the Corpus Christi Catholic Church, which Carlin both attended and skewered in his comedy career. The church isn't happy. (Grynbaum, Michael M. "An Error Puts a Church on George Carlin Way." *The New York Times* 10 July 2014: A20. Print.)

Such is the world of "religion in the news," which has been one of my pet projects for decades. I had a radio show on that topic for several years, and here at our church we have a popular "Religion in the News" discussion class on Sundays from September through June. So once a year, I preach a summer sermon designed to get you in the habit. Listen to the news. Read your papers and magazines. Go online. And look for "religion in the news."

There are all kinds, from the ridiculous to the sublime, from the obvious to the subtle, from the positive to the negative. *The Boston Globe* had a huge front-page feature on Cape Cod Congregational churches using summer-long, weekly lobster roll luncheons to balance their budgets. (Radsken, Jill. "Praise the Lord and Pass the Lobster Roll." *The Boston Globe* 8 July 2014. Print)

Two weeks ago, *The Times* had a front-page story about scrounging church attics to preserve the history of early America," about college professors hunting the archives of old New England churches to better understand the America of the 1600s and 1700s. (Paulson, Michael. "In Church Attics, Clues to the Private Life of Early America." *The New York Times* 30 July 2014: A1. Print.)

“Religion in the News” is a discipline, and like any other, it is designed to get you in shape, to get you ready. These stories can do two things for you: one, they show the world of religion around you—what’s going on, what people are paying attention to. Two, they make you think not only about the story itself but also about the ideas and topics raised in the story.

There have been a bunch of stories about Christianity in China lately, as the communist government has started cracking down on churches. China has long oppressed religion, and Christianity itself is divided into two camps. There are the officially recognized churches, registered with the government, fully sanctioned. And there are the so-called “underground churches,” the churches that don’t want any connection to the government. These churches have long been oppressed, harassed; their pastors arrested, members lose their jobs, under constant surveillance. But now China is going after even the recognized churches, tearing down crosses on over 300 churches, even demolishing whole churches. Now they’re going a major step further. The government-run newspaper, *China Daily*, announced that Christianity in China must “construct a Chinese Christian theology adapted to China’s national condition and integrated with Chinese culture.”

This is fascinating stuff on every level; it makes us think about all sorts of things. Like the role of government in religion. The separation of church and state. The role of culture in religion. The plight of Christians in oppressive countries. And we start to apply it to ourselves. If our government started to meddle in Greenfield Hill Church, where would we draw the line? How would we respond?

The last month has brought that question front and center right here in America: the Hobby Lobby case. Religion, government, business, all tied up in one story. Let’s see if I can summarize it. President Obama creates the Affordable Care Act, known as “Obamacare,” health insurance for all. Hobby Lobby is a family-run business of nationwide arts and crafts stores that is run as a Christian company. The company is anti-abortion and does not want to provide certain kinds of contraception covered by the Affordable Care Act. In short, the Hobby Lobby company wants to be exempted from U.S. law on the basis of their religion. And in July, the United States Supreme Court agreed with Hobby Lobby.

Within hours, a whole host of Christian organizations applied to be exempted from U.S. law, especially laws against discrimination. They want the rights as Christian groups to receive government funds *and* to discriminate against gays in hiring. But the government says if you take government money, you need to obey government law. Stay tuned!

All of this has been played out on the front pages of all our papers, on the editorial pages and in op-ed pieces, on the evening news and talk radio. Religion played out in the news, forcing us, allowing us to think through a lot of big issues: individual freedom, corporate responsibility, personal faith, law, rights, discrimination.

If you take this description of "religion in the news" seriously, you'll see very quickly how the whole spectrum of life intersects with faith *and* the whole spectrum of faith intersects with life. Sometimes we think the world of faith is here inside this church and the world of life is out there, but that's not how it works. Think of our baptism today, a perfect example of faith intersecting with life, of the world of life out there coming into the world of faith in here, and we love that! We enjoy it, we welcome it, we want more of it.

April, Michael, and Madelyn live out there. She was born out there. Most of their life, their work, their world is out there. But today they are in here. Almost every Sunday since she was born, Madelyn and April have been in here. Life intersecting with faith.

A tougher example is the Middle East. The Middle East *is* "religion in the news." We are hard pressed to even separate religion and news. Israel, Palestine. The whole horror in Iraq. Sunnis and Shiites. Jews and Muslims. The terrorists ISIS targeting Christians, Yazidis, anyone that's not them. You've watched it on TV, seen their videos, the rockets, the executions, the refugees, the 40,000 Yazidis on a mountain top in Nineveh, waiting for Americans to help.

Here are a few of the headline stories I've kept:

Samaleh, Rula. "A Palestinian Mother's Fear in East Jerusalem." *The New York Times* 10 July 2014: A27. Print.

Allen, John L., Jr. "For Christians, Issues of Survival." *The Boston Globe* 8 June 2014: A6. Print.

Kristof, Nicholas. "Religious Freedom in Peril." *The New York Times* 10 July 2014: A27. Print.

And this one, tying two issues together,

Allen, John L., Jr. "After Hobby Lobby, Time to Face the Real War on Religion." *The Boston Globe* 6 July 2014: A5. Print.

That article reflects that in America, it's popular to use the "war" analogy for everything. There's a war on Christmas, a war on Easter. And if you disagree about contraception, there's a "war on religion." But the article points out "Hey, there's a real war on Christianity with real bullets and real bombs, pay attention to that." And then there's this one:

Carroll, James. "On the Loose Once More: A Killer God." *The Boston Globe* 23 June 2014: A9. Print.

That "Killer God" headline catches you, doesn't it? It's a reminder that once again, people are being killed in the name of God. The list is dizzying, mind numbing, revolting. In Sudan, a Christian woman married to an American is sentenced to death for refusing to renounce Christ. In Burma, Buddhists are killing Muslims. In Nigeria, Boko Haram sets fire to churches, kills Christians, kidnaps young Christian girls. In India, there's an attack on Christians every two to seven days. And in the Holy Land, the good guys and the bad guys both die, both kill.

The women, the children, the soldiers, the civilians, the terrorists, the elderly, the rocket launchers the smart bomb firers, the tank gunners, the tunnel builders, the innocent. It's a living hell for all of them, each side waiting for the worst that the other has to offer. All in the name of God.

And the horrors of Iraq and ISIS defy description. It's 2014, and there are crucifixions and families ordered to convert, pay a tax, or die. And everyone, everyone is targeted.

The Boston Globe has a full-time Catholic writer, John L. Allen, Jr., whose column is "All Things Catholic." He reported, "On June 15, in Iraq, there was no Mass in Mosul for the first time in 1,600 years." From what had been a thriving Christian community, the few still there who were not killed fled the madness of hate.

The "Juden frei/Jew free" promise of 20th century Holocaust is now the "Christian-free" promise of the 21st century holocaust. And the Jewish response of "Never Again" needs to be changed to "Once Again."

For many people this is new news, but if you follow the discipline of "religion in the news," you're not surprised. You've seen it coming. Ten years ago we had pastors from Nigeria here at our church telling us about the killings of Christians and the burning of churches. Seven or eight years ago we had pastors from Burma at our SPF telling us about Buddhist soldiers using Christians as human mine sweepers. One pastor lost 40 church members in one year. Every year, the most popular speaker at our youth group is Anita

Schorr, reliving for us her Holocaust story, as Rachel did for us last week, a forever reminder of Jews targeted just for being Jews.

Again, follow the news. In the aftermath of the latest Israel/Gaza war, what do people target in Europe and America? Synagogues defaced, graffitied, scarred. If it's not about "Jews," why target Jews? And two weeks ago in Brooklyn, a young man kept circling a mosque, blaring Israeli music, waving Israeli flags. If it isn't about "Muslims," why target a mosque? For good or ill, it's about religion. Religion *is* in the news. These are tough times. Those are facts, the realities of our daily life.

Let me close today's sermon on a more optimistic note. This was meant to be a positive sermon, but events have overtaken us. I was going to use a few "religion in the news" articles on hot topics and a few that were lighter, and there are plenty. Religion pops up in the news on every imaginable topic: book reviews, sports pages, the Arts section, features, movie reviews, yes, even the business pages. In every aspect of life, someone is connecting faith to it, sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way, sometimes in a funny way, and always in an interesting way. If you're in this church it's because you choose to connect faith to life in a good way and an interesting way.

This has been my weekend: Friday morning I drove to Yale-New Haven to make some hospital visits. In the afternoon I went to Westport for a wedding rehearsal. Then Alida and I drove to Norwalk Hospital to be with a dying man. On Saturday I went back to the hospital, then wrote this depressing sermon, then officiated at a wedding. This morning I preached my depressing sermon and we did a baptism. So now what? What's our mood? Our perspective? Our spirit?

I often exercise in the early mornings at Fairfield University, where they're building a new sports stadium. All summer I've watched these strong, courageous steel workers and construction workers build it higher and higher, lifting heavy loads, walking narrow girders, looking over dangerous edges, scary as heck to me. But they're up there, calm and happy. I don't know why I didn't see it before, but I noticed it only this week. The guys way up there, walking the narrow girders, looking down over the edges . . . they're all tethered, they're all firmly anchored to something, something unseen to those of us down below, but they are intrinsically linked to something stronger than they are. So even if they stumble or fall off the building, they'll get nothing more than the thrill of a ride at Six Flags. Their confidence comes from being firmly anchored.

That's "Religion in the News."