

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: November 30, 2014  
Sermon Title: The Advent of What, Exactly?  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-17

## Isaiah 9:1-17

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.*

*You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named*

*Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.*

*He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness*

*from this time onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

*The Lord sent a word against Jacob,  
and it fell on Israel;  
and all the people knew it—  
Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria—  
but in pride and arrogance of heart they said:  
'The bricks have fallen,  
but we will build with dressed stones;  
the sycamores have been cut down,  
but we will put cedars in their place.'  
So the Lord raised adversaries against them,  
and stirred up their enemies,  
the Arameans in the east and the Philistines in the west,  
and they devoured Israel with open mouth.  
For all this, his anger has not turned away;  
his hand is stretched out still.*

*The people did not turn to him who struck them,  
or seek the Lord of hosts.  
So the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail,  
palm branch and reed in one day—  
elders and dignitaries are the head,  
and prophets who teach lies are the tail;  
for those who led this people led them astray,  
and those who were led by them were left in confusion.  
That is why the Lord did not have pity on their young people,  
or compassion on their orphans and widows;  
for everyone was godless and an evildoer,  
and every mouth spoke folly.  
For all this, his anger has not turned away;  
his hand is stretched out still.*

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## **Introduction**

The season of Advent is the four weeks leading up to Christmas. So Advent refers to the coming, the anticipation, the arrival of the Messiah. Most religions look to a Messiah, someone who will "save" them in some way. Save them from an enemy. Save them from death. Save them from sin.

Islam, particularly, is waiting for the Messiah. Christians and Jews split 2,000 years ago over whether Jesus was the Messiah. For Christians, Jesus fit the bill. For Jews, Jesus did not fit the bill.

Preparing for today, the first Sunday in Advent, has been tough, with all the sorrows of Ferguson, Missouri, hanging over us. I'm guessing 80, 90 percent of everybody involved in Ferguson is a baptized Christian. Police. National Guard. The victim. The protestors. The rioters. I'll bet on Christmas Eve 60 percent of them will be in church somewhere. The challenge for us is to see where's the Messiah in all that? Where's Advent?

The larger question is whether the Messiah makes any difference. Is the world a better place because our Messiah has come? Pessimists—atheists among them—would argue that religion is at best worthless and at worst dangerous. We actually make things worse. Christians would argue that the Advent of the Messiah provides us a way through and past the worst. I think the problem is that people thought the Messiah would make things better. Wrong. The Messiah offers to make US better. Not things. Us—if we're willing.

Alida found two answers for you that we want everyone to take home and read.\* One I'm going to talk about in my sermon. The other really is a sermon, an incredible Bible story that turns the old story of Cain and Abel on its head, gets us to see it straight from the Bible in a whole new way. And both are jam-packed with hope. Absolute, Christmas-style, church-based, Advent hope.

He dares us, talking straight from the streets of Ferguson, he dares us to believe we really are "our brother's keeper" and that God's love is stronger, better, greater than any badness.

## **Sermon**

Here's the truth. Charles Dickens was right. Everybody lives in "the best of times" and "the worst of times." In every generation, we walk around moaning and groaning, complaining and criticizing, then 40 years later we tell everybody we lived in "the good old days." I grew up in the '50s. You know: "Father Knows Best," "Lassie." "Do-wop," "I Like Ike." The good old days when black people went to the back of the bus and little kids had regular air raid drills, where we hid under our tiny desks to prepare for the atom bomb attack from the old Soviet Union. Yes, one person's "good old days" are someone else's nightmare.

It's also true that my good day is someone else's bad day; and when I'm having a bad day, other people are celebrating and rejoicing something wonderful in their lives. I guess the bottom line is sooner or later, we all need a lift. We all need hope. We all need . . . salvation. That's what Advent is all about.

Another truth is that we don't all look at the world through the same prism. Look at the horrific sorrows of Ferguson, Missouri. CNN found a lot of people who felt bad about the killed teenager, Michael Brown. FOX News found a lot of people who felt bad about the police officer, Darren Wilson. The same week, a young black man in New York City, unarmed, was killed in a stairway coming out of his friend's apartment by an equally young policeman. "A tragic accident," said many. Too bad, so sad. Last Saturday a 12-year-old black child was killed by a policeman in a park in Cleveland. He had an air pellet gun. Too bad, so sad.

People don't even agree on history. Every couple of years, a movement pops up in Japan to glorify and rationalize Pearl Harbor and the massacre at Nanking and the whole of World War II. The new history books in Texas have minimized the role of slavery in the Civil War. Attacks on Jews are on the rise in Europe, on Christians in Asia, on everybody in ISIS, on the poor and the sick and the elderly all over the world.

Now, please believe me, I'm not trying to kick off the Advent season by depressing you! I'm trying to say the world is always a mix—a mix of good and bad, a mix of sorrow and joy, a mix of triumphs and defeats, a mix of positive and negative. I'm just saying that left to our own devices, the world's a mess much of the time . . . and we need help. That's why there's Advent.

"Advent" means "coming." The "advent" of something is the start, the beginning of something. For Christians, Advent is the start of the Christmas season, the lead-up to Christmas. Advent announces the "coming" of Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the World.

The world has a Savior because . . . the world needs saving. Otherwise, who needs a Savior? When you go to the beach in the summer, what do you see? Lifeguards. Why? Because lives are worth guarding, worth saving. And experience has taught us that left to our own devices, we'll do things in the water that are risky, dangerous. We'll do things in the water that require lifeguarding, even lifesaving.

Religion says life in general needs guarding, even saving, that left to our own devices we too often make a mess of things. That's why Adam and Eve

are told not to eat the apple. That's why there are the Ten Commandments. That's why there's the Sermon on the Mount. That's why the Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That's why Jesus said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what's they're doing." In other words, you can take that whole Bible right there in front of you and summarize it this way: we need help. That's why we have Advent.

Like everyone else, I've been following the events in Ferguson, listening closely, trying to comprehend it all. Perhaps the best summary I've heard is this quote: "Everyone on all sides has had their worst suspicions confirmed." *"Everyone on all sides has had their worst suspicions confirmed."* Think of the sides there are to the Ferguson story: black people, white people, cops, teenagers, rioters, media, government, protesters, family. *"Everyone on all sides has had their worst suspicions confirmed."*

We can change that quote just a bit: Everyone on all sides needs saving. That's why we have Advent. Advent is the coming of God's plan to save us from the messes we create. That's why I chose today's Scripture:

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish . . .  
The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined . . .  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace . . .  
And he will establish his kingdom . . .  
Upholding it with justice and righteousness. (Isaiah 9)*

That's Advent. That's God saying, "Wait till you see what's coming! Wait till you see what I have for you!"

Advent is really, really big in America. You may not think so, but believe me, Advent is really, really big. It's just not about Christ anymore. What we've done is we've taken that whole spirit of anticipation, the Advent idea that something wonderful is coming, and we've turned into shopping. Black Friday, Black Thanksgiving, Black Thanksgiving week.

I'm not going on an anti-commercialism rant. I'm actually envious. Just hear me out. Why is Christmas shopping sooooo huge that we now start it on

Thanksgiving Day? Why do we have a whole economy built on the success of four weeks leading up to Christmas? Why has Advent become shopping? The excitement of anticipation! We all want to dig under that Christmas tree, open up those packages, see what gifts are waiting. And we want to see the delight on other people's faces when they open their gifts.

Advent is four weeks of everybody shopping for just the right gift, everybody hoping for just the right gift, everybody waiting for just the right gift. Once upon a time, Jesus, the Savior, was just the right gift. Now, it's the right gift that's the right gift.

So, we still have Advent. We still have waiting and anticipation and the coming, we still have "joy to the world," but now it's for XBOX, iTunes, L.L. Bean sweaters, gift cards, toys, jewelry, technology. Advent is about the coming of presents. That's what we get for Christmas. However, if you'll forgive me for sounding like a preacher, what our world really needs is saving. Really, really, really, really needs saving.

I've got it easy. I'm a pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church. All heck could break loose all over Fairfield, and I'd still be just a pastor of the quaint little Greenfield Hill Congregational Church. But how'd you like to be pastor of "The Peace of Mind Church of Happiness" in Ferguson, Missouri? There really is such a church, and the pastor has been on TV quite a lot this week, a very impressive and inspiring person, and on the TV scroll, it always says, "Peace of Mind Church of Happiness, Ferguson."

Imagine answering the phone this past week. "Peace of Mind Church of Happiness, how may we help you?" What's that like, being a church where reality contradicts your whole name? Where the whole world around you mocks the very idea of you? And yet, that pastor of Peace of Mind Church of Happiness has been the most gentle, the most hopeful, the most reasoned, the most, well, the most "peace of mind/happiness" person on TV! He was actually living what his church was proclaiming. He actually sounded as though maybe Advent leads to Christmas, as though Advent announces a coming of something worth believing.

You heard me mention earlier during announcements some of the comments and thoughts we've been reading. Be sure to pick up a copy as you leave today. One by an NFL football player, one by a pastor in Ferguson, both African-Americans, both Christians. And I use that word on purpose because the word "Christian" means something to them. It identifies who they are, what they stand for, how they think, and why they hope. Let me repeat that, *being Christian identifies who they are, what they stand for, how they think, and why they hope.*

Both, frankly, are brilliant. The football player, Benjamin Watson, wrote on his Facebook page,

"I'M ANGRY  
I'M FRUSTRATED  
I'M FEARFUL  
I'M EMBARRASSED  
I'M SAD  
I'M SYMPATHETIC  
I'M OFFENDED  
I'M CONFUSED  
I'M INTROSPECTIVE  
I'M HOPELESS  
I'M HOPEFUL  
I'M ENCOURAGED"

He said he was angry, fearful, and offended because of the long history of injustice and how people just dismiss the experiences and feelings of others. He said he's frustrated and embarrassed by the looting and violence and the pop culture glorification of stereotypes. He said he was sympathetic, confused, and introspective because he knows it's true, there are two sides to this story, and each side has its own weight of history. And frankly, as a young African-American Christian, he said he is hopeful and encouraged. Hopeful because, seriously, change has come. However slowly, however haltingly, however violently, in his lifetime, in his parents' lifetime, in his grandparents' lifetime, change has come.

And he's encouraged because of Advent. Well, he didn't say that. I said that. What he said exactly is that he's encouraged because he knows "the problem in America is not a skin problem, it's a sin problem." I'm quoting here: "the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot . . . But I'm encouraged," (and this is still the football player talking) "I'M ENCOURAGED, because . . . because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for the Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner tragedies," he declares, "is not education or exposure. It's the Gospel. So . . . I'm encouraged because the Gospel gives mankind hope."

That's Advent thinking. That's the idea that something came on Christmas Day, something worth waiting for, something that could make all the difference in the world—if we just let it.

Hear the promise of our Scripture again: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given . . . there will be no more gloom for those in distress. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned. And he will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Prince of Peace." If we let him.

The NFL player thinks so. The pastor of Peace of Mind Church of Happiness thinks so. That's the side I choose.

\* Two articles mentioned in the sermon are below:

## **Disgrace and grace: our response to the Ferguson grand jury decision**

November 24, 2014



By F. Willis Johnson, senior minister of Wellspring Church in Ferguson, Missouri

***“We worship God through our questions.” – Abraham Joshua Heschel***

In the wake of a St. Louis County grand jury's decision related to the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, we seek strength, direction and resolve through our faith. The decision, in and of itself, brings no resolution for those of us who live in Ferguson, for any particular demographic segment of our nation, or for humanity



as a whole. Two families remain forever changed. A community is left struggling to coexist. The people of Ferguson will continue the hard work of reconciling differences as we strive to understand, trust and listen to each other. And we will continue searching for ways to sustain our hope in systems, leaders and practices.

Yet, whether we acknowledge it (or understand it) or not, every single one of us—inside the city limits of Ferguson and out—remains subject to a series of longstanding historical and cultural problems. Look at the faces of the children in your family, your neighborhood, your congregation. This generation, like yours and mine, is forced to wrestle with the unresolved issues and questions of the generations preceding us. There are more questions than answers.

This is the inherent nature of faith.

One biblical account in particular keeps coming to my mind in these days. It is one that raises suspense and suspicion, and leaves its readers with more questions than answers. It is a story of two brothers, Cain and Abel. As brothers they are linked together in a variety of ways, and are meant to be a community of two. But, for some unexplained and unclear reason, Abel is regarded differently than the other. Animosity exists between them.

These brothers' relationship is representative of humanity. As humans, we too are linked together in a variety of ways. And yet as a community we are irresponsible, inattentive and insensitive toward our very selves—the brothers and sisters in our human community. We continue to mimic Cain's morally reprehensible interrogative, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The rhetorical but relevant question posited by God, "Where is your brother Abel?" remains unanswered. Abel's blood still cries out, along with the blood of too many young men, women, boys and girls of diverse races in near and faraway places. They are cries of retribution,

cries of retaliation and cries of reprisal demanding a response. That is why...

When faced with disgrace, God dispenses grace. God's response to Cain's disgraceful act and remonstrance of Abel's blood from the ground is a powerful witness. It reveals how Christians can exercise grace while grappling with the complexities of unresolved and unjust issues.

**God acknowledges a wrong has been committed, yet responds righteously.**

Under no pretense does anyone deserve to lose life. Each of us holds inalienable and civil rights, but they do not privilege us to infringe upon the rights of others. We cannot legislate love or adjudicate right relationship. Justice often is interpreted as what benefits a small group of 'just us', but our interpretations are only interpretations. Neither the world nor systems have final say. What is politically correct, socially conscious, even legally warranted may be *right*, but not be *righteous*—not aligned with God's will. Ultimately, God alone executes judgment. God is the final authority—and may grant judgment or allowance—in all matters of human existence.

**God affirms the sacredness and pain of persons.**

God asserts Cain's significance with an identifying mark. The mark was not a scarlet letter. It was a sign of God's divine affection and Cain's vulnerability. Truth be told, God loves us in spite of ourselves. Confirmation of that love is the willingness to meet each of us in our condition with unconditional love. Affirmation should not be viewed as complacency on God's part. In fact, God's affirmation is an act of assertive compassion, particularly for the disinherited. There is no one manner in which to think or behave. People who are hurting need to be affirmed in their hurt; people who are angry need to be affirmed in their anger. This way of listening and hearing one another is called empathy, a core value of human relationship and community.

## **God advances the cause.**

Cain, representative of the worst in each of us, is given another chance. We are extended opportunities by God to advance the cause. Our words and actions should not turn us against one another. Instead they should draw us closer together. Our words and actions should demonstrate true community, as we search for and expect to find the good in one another, as we lift each other up. This is not only a shared reality, but also a collective responsibility. It is a human imperative that we not act selfishly, but strive towards furthering our collective interest. As Martin Luther King Jr. posited, “We are inextricably connected to each other... caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together into a single garment of resting.”

We must recognize that all lives matter. Our faith assures that peace while it is beyond our understanding is not beyond our grasp. As disciples of Christ we are called to express our hope by means of grace.



[Benjamin Watson](#)

FACEBOOK post  
November 25 at 9 PM

At some point while I was playing or preparing to play Monday Night Football, the news broke about the Ferguson Decision. After trying to figure out how I felt, I decided to write it down. Here are my thoughts:

I'M ANGRY because the stories of injustice that have been passed down for generations seem to be continuing before our very eyes.

I'M FRUSTRATED, because pop culture, music and movies glorify these types of police citizen altercations and promote an invincible attitude that continues to get young men killed in real life, away from safety movie sets and music studios.

I'M FEARFUL because in the back of my mind I know that although I'm a law abiding citizen I could still be looked upon as a "threat" to those who don't know me. So I will continue to have to go the extra mile to earn the benefit of the doubt.

I'M EMBARRASSED because the looting, violent protests, and law breaking only confirm, and in the minds of many, validate, the stereotypes and thus the inferior treatment.

I'M SAD, because another young life was lost from his family, the racial divide has widened, a community is in shambles, accusations, insensitivity hurt and hatred are boiling over, and we may never know the truth about what happened that day.

I'M SYMPATHETIC, because I wasn't there so I don't know exactly what happened. Maybe Darren Wilson acted within his rights and duty as an officer of the law and killed Michael Brown in self-defense like any of us would in the circumstance. Now he has to fear the backlash against himself and his loved ones when he was only doing his job. What a horrible thing to endure. OR maybe he provoked Michael and ignited the series of events that led to him eventually murdering the young man to prove a point.

I'M OFFENDED, because of the insulting comments I've seen that are not only insensitive but also dismissive to the painful experiences of others.

I'M CONFUSED, because I don't know why it's so hard to obey a policeman. You will not win!!! And I don't know why some policemen

abuse their power. Power is a responsibility, not a weapon to brandish and lord over the populace.

I'M INTROSPECTIVE, because sometimes I want to take "our" side without looking at the facts in situations like these. Sometimes I feel like it's us against them. Sometimes I'm just as prejudiced as people I point fingers at. And that's not right. How can I look at white skin and make assumptions but not want assumptions made about me? That's not right.

I'M HOPELESS, because I've lived long enough to expect things like this to continue to happen. I'm not surprised and at some point my little children are going to inherit the weight of being a minority and all that it entails.

I'M HOPEFUL, because I know that while we still have race issues in America, we enjoy a much different normal than those of our parents and grandparents. I see it in my personal relationships with teammates, friends and mentors. And it's a beautiful thing.

I'M ENCOURAGED, because ultimately the problem is not a SKIN problem, it is a SIN problem. SIN is the reason we rebel against authority. SIN is the reason we abuse our authority. SIN is the reason we are racist, prejudiced and lie to cover for our own. SIN is the reason we riot, loot and burn. BUT I'M ENCOURAGED because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus and with it, a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for the Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the Gospel. So, finally, I'M ENCOURAGED because the Gospel gives mankind hope.