

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 14, 2014
Sermon Title: Moses and the God-Child
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-6, Luke 2:6-7

Isaiah 11:1-6

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

Luke 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

You're the folks who are stuck with me and stuck with a sermon.

Every year two weeks before Christmas, we have our Sunday School Christmas Pageant. Generations, maybe centuries of kids have grown up performing in their churches' Sunday School Christmas Pageants. It's a rite of passage with several passages along the way. Little kids start off as farm animals, sheep and cows; some even start as the Baby Jesus! They graduate to being angels, then shepherds, Wise Men, until they get the role of a lifetime: Mary or Joseph, the church equivalent of Clara in "The Nutcracker."

At our church, the kids do a Saturday night performance. We had almost 200 people here; and they just did it again at our 9 o'clock service this morning. We always tell the kids to remember THEY are the sermon. Their pageant is the Gospel message for the day. Four hundred people have already come to worship at Greenfield Hill Church this weekend, and for them, their Scripture, their music, their pageant IS the worship AND the sermon.

Unfortunately, you're stuck with me and an actual sermon. But fortunately, this old-fashioned sermon is inspired by the kids. Christmas is a baby story, isn't it? No wonder kids love it so much! It's not just about getting lots of gifts; kids love Christmas, first and foremost, because it's a kid story. It's about a birth. Christmas stars a baby! Kids get that. That's why one of our Scripture lessons is Luke's Christmas story:

While Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, the time came for the BABY to be BORN, and so Mary gave BIRTH to her firstborn, a son. And she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.

"Baby," "born," and "birth" feature prominently in the story, the "foundation story" of our religion. "Foundation stories" tell us a lot. They are the stories we remember when we think of them. George Washington's foundation story is what? Probably Washington at Valley Forge. Lincoln's foundation story is probably Gettysburg. They arrive full-blown on the stage of history. Buddha and Mohammed capture our attention as adults. Mother Teresa, all the saints, all the greats, they come to us as adults. It's rare for a child to lead the way. That's what makes the Christmas Story, even Christianity, so unique. We start with a baby, we put our faith in the hands of someone who went through infancy and toddlerhood and childhood, and we like that.

On Friday I went to see the new "Exodus" movie. Since we all know the story, I won't be ruining it for you by telling you that Moses still wins. Pharaoh still loses. The plague of frogs is still funny. The Red Sea still parts. And the Commandments, well, there are still just 10.

For most of us here today, the book of Exodus and the story of Moses are forever linked with Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 classic. Charlton Heston as Moses, Yul Brynner as Pharaoh, and special effects that seemed really special way back then. One of my favorite childhood memories was my Sunday School teacher, a former Rockette, taking our class by subway into Manhattan to see "The Ten Commandments" in one of those legendary grand Times Square movie theaters. Afterward, she took us to Rockefeller Center and then into St. Patrick's Cathedral, where I got into BIG trouble.

Back behind the main altar are those banks and banks of votive candles, too much for a 9-year-old boy to resist. After I lit about 150 of them, this nun came out of nowhere, grabbed me by both ears, pulled me and tossed me out onto 5th Avenue, with a swift kick to my you-know-where. Oh, well, that's what memories are for! And I've never forgotten that movie.

The new Moses movie plays with the straight Bible story a bit. But all in all, I liked it. There is a grittiness and a reality to it. There are still plenty of miracles and faith, and God has an even bigger part to play than in the old Hollywood version. That's precisely where the movie gets controversial. You know the story. Moses, born a Jewish baby, a slave, yet he grows up in Pharaoh's household like one of the family. As a young man, he discovers his Jewish roots, murders an Egyptian, and escapes to the wilderness. There he gets married, has a family, and settles in for a nice life.

Until . . . until the burning bush. Moses is confronted by an inexplicable, supernatural, mysterious miracle: a bush, on fire, that does not get consumed. Moses is intrigued, checks it out . . . and finds God! God starts speaking to him . . . from within the burning bush, telling Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him, "Let my people go!"

That's how it is in the Bible, that's how it happened with Charlton Heston. That's NOT how it happens in 2014. In 2014 Moses gets knocked about in a rock slide, hit in the head, stuck up to his neck in mud, wakes up, sees a burning bush. And then God appears before him, God as an 11-year-old boy, very cute, very precocious, very petulant, even a bit obnoxious. Our pre-teen God reappears throughout the movie, a comforting presence, a disturbing presence, a commanding presence . . . guiding Moses, provoking Moses, scaring Moses, inspiring Moses.

There's a lot of controversy about depicting God this way, as a physical being, especially in a child's body, and I went to the movie aware of the controversy and prepared to dislike it. Instead, it was O.K. It got me thinking.

The whole Moses/burning bush scene is about God's trying to get somebody's attention, trying to get somebody to stop, look, listen, trying to get somebody to help. So whether it's something unusual, like a burning bush, or a little role-playing, as a child, God will try it. He loves us that much.

After all, we're just two weeks from celebrating our "foundation story," that God came to be with us in the form of a little baby. So it's hard to complain about a movie director imagining God as an 11-year-old.

Here's the theological point: God never tires of trying to get through to us. That's actually a measure of someone's love, someone's dedication, how much effort is put into it. You know what it's like. Maybe you're a parent or you've been a teacher or a coach or a mentor or a really true friend. You know what it's like to stick by someone and to keep trying to get through to that person. People we care about, hey, even some of us, we get off track; we make bad decisions or rotten choices. We know better, we stop listening. Arrogance. Conceit. Stubbornness. Pride. They all get in the way. But if we love somebody, we keep trying to get through. If we're loved by somebody else, that person might be trying to get through to us.

You'll try anything, everything, from the artful and the subtle to the drastic and the dramatic. Carrots or sticks. Punishment and rewards. Threats. Guilt. Pressure. Patience. You try it all. You don't do the same thing over and over again. You vary it up. You go forward. You step back. You press. You stop. You go silent. You speak up, soft, gentle, anguished, loving—always, always loving, even when it hurts.

That's basically the whole story of the Bible. God's trying to get through to us. God shakes his fist and pounds the table, kicks Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, destroys Sodom and Gomorrah, floods the whole earth, pounds the table some more.

No luck. So God tries laws, laws, laws and more laws. Don't do this. Don't do that. Don't even think of that. No luck. God sends emissaries and adversaries, signs and wonders, conquering armies, withering famines, great leaders, great prophets, great ideas. Still no luck.

So God sends a baby. And that baby does what babies do. They disrupt things, they turn things upside down. Which is precisely what Jesus did. Jesus turned the world upside down, he turned religion on its ear, he challenged our perceptions and assumptions and traditions.

Today's not the time to go into it in depth, but in our weekly Bible study, we've been looking at Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Wow. Let me tell you,

nothing is ever the same after you read the Sermon on the Mount. He starts off with the Beatitudes: be nice, welcome persecution, be glad to mourn, make peace. And that's just his opening paragraph; he's just getting warmed up!

Before you know it, he tackles the big stuff. He says, "You know all that 'Ten Commandments' stuff? Forget it. Don't kill? Don't commit adultery? Forget it! That's not the issue, I'm telling you, don't get angry, don't lust, don't control, don't drool. Grow up." And then he adds on, "Don't resist evil, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, even for the bad guys." Oh, and I almost forgot, just one more thing: "Be perfect." At that point everybody's head is spinning or being scratched or about to explode. But he's got our attention. And all that started with a baby born on Christmas. Just as the Bible promised.

The first part of our Scripture this morning comes from Isaiah, Chapter 11, written 700 years before Jesus was born. It's pretty straightforward. Someday, the Bible promises, someday the world is going to be a better place. It's not always going to be messed up. Mean people aren't always going to be on top. ISIS and racism and fear and injustice and sickness and hunger and things that just aren't right . . . they won't be around forever. And it will all change with a "little child." "A little child will lead [us]," verse 6 says. This sea change in the world's history will begin, the Bible says, with a "shoot coming up from a stump, a root that will bear fruit . . . a child who will lead us."

That's our Christmas Story. That's why I don't mind an 11-year-old boy God in the new Moses movie. God wants our attention, and whether it's a burning bush or a bouncing baby boy born in Bethlehem, if it gets some of us to stop . . . listen . . . think . . . consider . . . change, it's all to the good. Our God is a surprising God. He's asking us to be a surprising people.

And isn't that still a major part of the joy of Christmas: surprises? Whether it's under the tree or in a stocking by the fireplace, we treasure being surprised. An unexpected gift. An unexpected kindness. An unexpected visit or call or card. You can be the one being surprised . . . or you can BE the surprise. The Christ of Christmas invites us to be both.

Early this morning, listening to National Public Radio, NPR, I heard a story of surprise. It was about a woman in West Africa. She got Ebola and was put in a center, basically left to die. Most did, but she survived. She's alive and well. What she remembered most from her sickness is that nobody would touch her, nobody would come near her. Some were afraid. Some weren't allowed. Even now, the stigma is so great that her own child won't hug her.

So she is devoting her life to being with kids with Ebola. She holds them, she hugs them, she cares of them. She is . . . a surprise, a wonderful surprise . . . to us, to them.

To love so much that you'll do anything. Yes, that's the Christmas Story.