

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 28, 2014  
Sermon Title: The State of the Universe  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Various

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*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)*  
*The earth is the Lord's. (Psalm 24:1)*  
*The whole earth is full of his glory. (Isaiah 6:3)*  
*Every animal of the forest, the cattle on a thousand hills are God's. (Psalm 50:10)*  
*We are made a spectacle to the whole universe. (1 Corinthians 4:9)*  
*Lord, you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. (Psalm 102:25)*  
*You spread out the northern skies; you suspend the earth over nothing. (Job 26:7)*  
*You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it . . . You give life to everything, and the multitudes of the heavens worship you. (Nehemiah 9:6)*  
*So, by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command. (Hebrews 11:3)*

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Sometimes I don't know how sermons come into my head. As you can imagine, I've been really focused on Christmas for a long time, and last week I was working hard on all our messages for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. So I was surprised when an old hymn kept popping into my head, totally unrelated to Christmas:

*This is my Father's world,  
and to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings  
the music of the spheres.*

. . .

*Our God has made this world.*

*O let us ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.*

What struck me is that I really believe that in the face of everything that contradicts it. The second half of 2014 did NOT seem like a year when God was in control, the world did NOT function like "This Is My Father's World."

We had religion and enemies and disease and politics, all behaving as badly as possible in a universe that felt as though it was spinning out of control. ISIS and militant Islam and North Korea, Cyber war and Ebola and Boko Haram. And Congress and Putin. We had what felt like an epidemic of police violence, fueling racial tension and protests and widespread anger. And just when this bad old year was almost over, and we were sure the worst had passed, two policemen in New York City and all those kids in Pakistan were cruelly murdered.

This doesn't feel like "My Father's World." Yet, it is. That's what I choose to believe; and it's a good world, that's what I choose to believe.

I'm writing a new book. It's been torturous writing it, so I can only imagine how torturous it will be for you to have to read it. But the basic idea is simple enough: "Worldview." We all have a worldview, and it's our choice which view of the world we pick. Being an optimist or a pessimist is a worldview. Being positive or negative is a worldview. Being a believer or a nonbeliever, a Christian or an atheist, that's a worldview.

I can't prove God. You can't disprove God, so we're left with a choice. We can view the world through the prism of faith, that there is a God, that this is God's world. Or, we can view the world without God. Without hope, without promises, without heaven. Our worldview can be, "This Is My Father's World," and it's a pretty good place; or, you may think, "Life stinks," and that's fine; you may even be right!

But that's not my worldview. I'm not a dummy. I know the life insurance actuarial tables. I know if I'm lucky, I've got another 15 or 20 years left. I have a choice about how to view the world for the rest of my life. Negatively? Depressively? Hopelessly? Despairingly? Frighteningly? Darkly? Forebodingly? Fearfully? That's certainly one choice, maybe even a logical, reasonable choice.

But not for me. My knees give me enough trouble without letting them ruin the rest of my mood. I choose to view the world—and therefore the new year—with the choice of faith. And based on faith, the Bible lays out a fairly

consistent line, which you heard in our Scriptures for today. The Bible begins with this foundational declaration:

"God created the heavens and the earth," the very first verse in the Bible. And it sticks with that theme: "The earth is the Lord's" (Psalm 24:1), "The whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3), "Every animal of the forest, the cattle on a thousand hills, they are mine," says God (Psalm 50:10).

Then the Bible speaks to God, "You spread out the northern skies . . . (Job 26:7), you laid the foundations of the earth . . . the heavens are the work of your hands . . . (Psalm 102:25), even the highest heavens, and all the starry host, the earth and all that is on it, you give life to everything . . . and the multitudes of the heavens worship you" (Nehemiah 9:6).

By the time we get to the end of the Bible, the teachings of the young Christian church, we read, "So by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command (Hebrews 11:3).

I choose to believe that. Now, this isn't a sermon about free will or sin or our ability to mess things up. This is a sermon about what we have, NOT what we do with it. And what we have is a pretty special world, lots of good people, plenty of wonder and delight and opportunities every single day to be amazing. That's my worldview and what I'm offering to you as your approach to the new year.

I tell everybody that Alida is a legend in youth work, which is quite true. Years ago, I was a legend in youth work, on a much smaller scale. One summer I took a bunch of teenagers to Maine. We're speeding through rural Maine, eating junk food, radio way up loud, having a grand old time, rolling down the window from time to time to toss out our garbage. So . . . the police got me, and he was not happy, not one bit. Some hippie pastor with a New York license plate and a dozen piggy teenagers littering his world . . . and he was not happy. I was expecting a ticket, imprisonment, torture. Instead it was much worse.

He told me to get in the back of the car with all the kids, and he got behind the wheel. He drove us around his world, very, very slowly. He showed us his street, his town, his house, his kids' school, his church . . . he showed us his world. HIS world, that we were messing up. We were littering. We were breaking the law. We were stupid and ugly and uncaring and selfish and destructive. But it was still his world. And he wanted us to see his world though his worldview.

He couldn't actually stop us from being stupid and ugly and selfish and destructive. He could fine us, punish us, warn us, but he couldn't stop us. He could, however, influence us. That story happened 35 years ago. And I have never tossed a piece of paper out of a car window since. He convinced me. Maybe I was too stupid to care about my world. But he made me want to respect HIS world. That's what the Bible is getting at.

*This IS our Father's world,  
and let us ne'er forget  
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God IS the ruler yet!*

And that verse concludes:

*God trusts us with this world  
To keep it clean and fair, all earth and trees  
The skies and seas,  
God's creatures everywhere.*

This sermon isn't meant as an ecology sermon or an environmental sermon or a climate change sermon. It's not even meant as a finger-wagging, scold sermon. Think of it as a "clean-slate" sermon. A new year is a clean slate. The fact of the matter is a new DAY is a clean slate. Each new hour is a clean slate, each new encounter, person, task, job, is a clean slate. I will go a step further. Each new crisis, problem, terror, horror, presents us with a clean slate, a chance to face even bad and evil in a fresh way.

I'm wanting to stay positive in this sermon, but let me mention one sad, troubling example. The whole string of events, almost from Trayvon Martin to Eric Garner, and one or two more since then, has revealed deep, deep hurts and anger and injustices, highlighted by wrong choices almost every single step of the way by just about everybody. The most bitter, perhaps, were the protestors who chanted: "What do we want? Dead cops!" "When do we want it? Now!" And they got their wish, with two dead cops.

Was it actually their wish? Probably not. And even if it had been, it was, what, 100 protestors? 10? One percent of the protestors? One-tenth of a percent? But it doesn't matter. It was their worldview, their choice to think darkly, to speak darkly, to want darkly, to mess up our "Father's World," darkly. And that worldview took hold. Maybe it's time for another worldview.

You know me well enough—I'm not sappy, I'm not a Pollyanna, I'm not holier than thou. I get as ticked off at the world as you do. I'll bet I get more ticked off. With our Christmas schedule, I got a bit behind in my news-

papers, so yesterday I read Christmas Eve's and Christmas Day's editions of *The New York Times*. Page after page had my blood boiling, against some crazy tyrant, some evil enemy, some gross injustice, some crass person, some inhumanity against humanity. So I know ranting and raving and righteous indignation and blind fury and revenge. I can do bad attitude. But I'm sure you know that classic definition of "insanity." Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and over again and expecting a better result. A new worldview, a new year allows us to stop the insanity and try doing a new thing a new way.

I'm too tuckered out to preach longer, so let me wrap this up with two stories—one from the Bible, one from Naples. In the Bible, Jesus addresses this idea of looking at life in a new way. He says, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. It will just rip apart. And you don't put new wine in a brittle old wineskin. It will just burst." "Come on, think!" Well that's my addition, but he'd agree. Think, think before you rage. Think before you're stupid. Think, think before you toss garbage all over God's world. Think. Is what you are about to do, say, think, feel, respond, write, text, e-mail . . . is what you are about to do going to patch things up or tear things apart? Going to fit in nicely, or burst it all over the floor? Think.

And the Naples story is just a cute Italian version of "Pay It Forward." They have this concept of "suspended coffee," by which you go to your favorite café, enjoy your coffee addiction as you do, and pay for an extra. The café posts the receipts on the window, and folks—from the elderly to the poor to the homeless—just pop in, pick up a receipt, and enjoy the sweet delight that is an Italian tradition. Now little restaurants are offering "suspended pizza," bars have "suspended sandwiches," and a bookstore has "suspended books." Those are all little ways of admitting, "Hey, a lot of problems are bigger than I am, but let me contribute something good to "My Father's World." Not just be a part of the mess.

I saw a bumper sticker yesterday: "Be kinder . . . than necessary." *Be kinder . . . than necessary.* I'm not saying this is an answer to ISIS or Boko Haram or Ebola, but I am saying it may be an answer to a world where ISIS and Ebola get to run amok. In dealing with our world as if it really is God's world, maybe we can enjoy it better.

Now, let's sing it as though we believe it!

### **"This Is My Father's World"**

*This is my Father's world,  
and to my listening ears*

*all nature sings, and round me rings  
the music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world:  
I rest me in the thought  
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas  
his hand the wonders wrought.*

*This is my Father's world:  
the birds their carols raise;  
the morning light, the flowers bright,  
declare their Maker's praise.  
Our God has made this world  
and shines in all that's fair;  
in the rustling grass I hear God pass,  
who speaks to me everywhere.*

*Our God has made this world:  
oh, let us ne'er forget  
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the ruler yet.  
God trusts us with this world,  
to keep it clean and fair.  
All earth and trees, the skies and seas,  
God's creatures everywhere.*