

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 4, 2015  
Sermon Title: The Force Is With You  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

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## Matthew 13:31-33

*He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'*  
*He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'*

## Matthew 13:44-46

*'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

*'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

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There are two poems printed near the back of your Sunday bulletin. One is pretty good. The other is shamelessly stolen from an old song by The Police, "Every Breath You Take." They both touch upon today's sermon theme, "The Force Is With You," the idea that there is something within you, something that guides you, strengthens you, uses you in ways greater than you thought possible, something that paradoxically can be both internal and external. God with you, inspiring you; God outside of you, holding you. Either way, "the force is with you." You are more able than you think.

I'm going to read the shamelessly stolen one, "The Magnificat":

## **The Magnificat (Luke 1:46 ff.)**

*Every word you speak,  
every dollar you spend,  
gift you wrap  
or card you send,  
hurt you soothe  
or hope you give  
to show the world  
a bit of God –  
you, YOU ... magnify the Lord.*

*Every song you sing  
every verse you learn  
every touch you bring  
to a wounded, hurting world –  
you, YOU ... magnify the Lord.*

*Every love you share  
every person you befriend  
every truth you care  
to defend, by deed or word –  
you, YOU ... magnify the Lord.*

I ended last week's shorter-than-usual sermon by saying, "I am too tuckered out from our Christmas services to preach longer." With today's sermon title, "The Force Is With You," I am obviously still too tuckered out to be very original. The origin of the title, of course, is the old "Star Wars" movie, and the origin of this sermon is also the movies.

I am a movie nut. I love movies. I love going to the movies. And I do believe that film is a very powerful medium, a great way to get folks to think. The same with books. They are both powerful mediums, and great ways to get us to think.

John Fallon is one of our Deacon co-chairs. He is serving in the chancel today, concluding three years of wonderful guidance to us as a Deacon, and there's nothing he likes better than to talk books. We had Ed Weir's funeral a couple of weeks ago. He was great fun to visit because he also was a lover of books. It seems to me that movies and books are really wrestling with the role of faith, of religion, of spirituality. God is

supposed to be “dead,” or never was, according to the popularity of atheism. Religion has lost its influence, churches are in decline, faith is irrelevant. Supposedly.

And yet, we can't let go. Faith keeps popping up. Is faith built into our DNA? Our collective memory? Is it wish fulfillment? Is it a vestigial organ that we don't need anymore but we still have? Is it like a bad cold we just can't shake? Or is it real, so deal with it?

Books and movies are dealing with it. I just finished one about a cranky self-absorbed dentist—sarcastic, acerbic, wandering between faith and doubt. Let's just say you wouldn't want him as your dentist.

Another book is about the first missionary to outer space, pretty good, as it looks at good questions: is faith universal, truly universal? Is our faith universal or specific just to us earthlings?

On the movie front, religion pops up overtly and subtly. The “Noah” movie and “Exodus” give us popular Bible stories told like action movies, with computer-generated armies and strange villains. A mediocre “Son of God” and a fairly interesting “God's Not Dead” filled movie theaters.

The new movie, “Unbroken,” the true story of a true World War II hero (and a really good movie, by the way) is drawing criticism for skipping religion. The hero returns from World War II a mess, a raging alcoholic, a broken man. Until he is “saved” . . . saved in the very Christian sense of the word, saved by the Baby we just celebrated on Christmas Eve, saved by Jesus at a Billy Graham crusade. But that part is not in the movie, and people noticed.

But it was two more subtle movies, spiritually subtle, that got me thinking. The excellent Stephen Hawking movie, “The Theory of Everything,” tells the story of one of the world's greatest physicists as he is devastated by Lou Gehrig's disease, ALS. Yet, ever so subtly, the movie contrasts Hawking's pronounced atheism with the almost Christlike love of his churchgoing wife. You almost sense Stephen Hawking's thinking it through.

Then there is “Interstellar,” more physics and sci-fi and space exploration. The earth is devastated by climate change and crop failure, but secretly, NASA is looking into space for a new world, drawn by an unnamed nonspecific “force.” Amidst all the science and all the astrophysics, the movie continuously shows this “force” at work, pushing and pulling to save humanity.

You get the sense that the "force is with you." That "force" is not named, but you still get the idea, not named by the names we use. You don't hear "God" or "Allah" or "Dios" or "Yahweh" or "Jesus" or any of the other religious-type names: Lord, Savior, Heavenly Father. But you still get the idea. There is Something with a capital S, Something greater, Something wiser, Something that cares and acts in a cosmic way that is interested in us. Something that is a "power," a "good," a "force."

I'm not put off by lack of a name. Our religion has struggled with what to call God for ages. When I was in seminary, big theologians were looking for new names to break our old assumptions in order to get us thinking deeper. So God was "the Ground of All Being," "the Ultimate Reality."

Three thousand years ago in the Moses story, Moses asks God directly, "Who are you anyway? What's your name?" And God's answer was meant to stop the naming game. God said, "I am that I am. I am." That was the basic Judeo-Christian idea of God: something beyond words, beyond description, beyond a name.

For the same reason, again in the Moses story, God starts Israel off with the Ten Commandments, and one of them says, "Don't make any images of me, whatsoever. Don't try to imagine me, define me, create me. Just stop it. And while you're at it, "Thou shalt not take my name in vain!"

Now, what does any of this have to do with our Scriptures? Or is this just "Movie Review Sunday"? Our Scriptures John read are a series of similes, including one allegory, all together making a big parable. (That's for all you former English majors.) A parable tells the story to make a point. An allegory has hidden meanings in each detail. And similes are comparisons—this thing is *like* that thing.

In today's Scripture, Jesus is explaining "God's Kingdom of Heaven," and he does it in a way that is simple and profound, mysterious and basic. He says, "This thing," heaven, is like that thing: wheat, pearls, treasure, and so forth. On one side we have the Kingdom of Heaven, mysterious and profound, a subject that intrigues everybody. We all want heaven, whether it's in this life or the next. Jesus offers a paradox: heaven is both here and there, now and later, for this life and the next. So, it goes like this. If the Kingdom of Heaven is on one side of the equation, the other is the list of similes: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like" . . . a mustard seed. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like" . . . a hidden treasure. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like" . . . a magnificent pearl. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like" . . . leaven in the bread. And then, as a crowning touch, Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is with you," "in the midst of you." (Luke 17:21)

In other words, you've got this one thing, this incredible thing everyone wants, heaven, and you've got these other things—some simple, some ordinary, each valuable. And they are all possible, all attainable. The Kingdom of Heaven is outside you, but attainable, AND the Kingdom of Heaven is within you, so it's accessible.

God's Kingdom is like a mustard seed, tiny, unimpressive, easy to overlook. When I was a kid, when you got confirmed, our church gave each kid a necklace, even the boys, with a tiny mustard seed under a magnifying glass covering. That's how small it was. But my church's promise, Jesus's promise, is *wait till you see what you can grow into in God's world.*

And God's Kingdom is like leaven; it doesn't look like much at first, all by itself, but wait till you see what it does! You take water and flour, make it into dough, mix it, knead it . . . still doesn't look like much, but when you add the leaven, bake it for a while, watch it grow, smell as the aroma fills the house, put it on the table, watch people grab hold of it . . . Go to Billy's Bakery; see all the delights made possible by that little nondescript leaven.

That's life in God's world—bigger and better and fuller and tastier than we thought possible. And God's world is like finding a hidden treasure, a precious pearl, and it's there for you. You can have it. You can enjoy it. If you're wise enough to take ownership of it. Jesus says if you're smart, you'll take everything you have, every risk, every investment of time, energy, effort, to secure that treasure. God's world, God's blessings, God's assurances are worth it.

But before you start digging in your backyard, or antiquing every weekend looking for that great pearl, Jesus says, "Look inside, my Kingdom is right there, right in the midst of you, within you."

I went to see "Unbroken" this week. The movie is based on the huge best-selling book based on the extraordinary story of Louis Zamparini. Lou was a bad kid who became an Olympic athlete. Then World War II came along. He was a bombardier on one of those old bombers in the Pacific, finally crashing in the vast ocean. Two of the crew survived and lasted 47 days on a raft, then two and a half years as a Japanese prisoner of war, two and a half years of horror.

So with indomitable will he survives, returns to America, gets married, destroys his life with booze, gets saved, turns his life around with Christ, and lives that "amazing grace" life, returning to Japan to forgive his tormentors.

And, in 1980, he returns to Japan to run in the Olympics as one of the Olympic torchbearers.

How was all this possible? "The force was with him." As a no-good kid, the cops told his family he was headed for a no-good life, straight ahead toward prison. Lou didn't know there was an athlete inside of him, he didn't know there was goodness inside of him, he didn't know he had courage inside of him, he didn't know he had perseverance inside of him. Lou didn't know there was a mustard seed of faith inside of him. Lou didn't know there was a precious pearl inside of him, a hidden treasure waiting to be found right inside himself. But God knew all along. God had planted all that treasure, all that goodness and courage and faith, all that he needed, right inside of him.

Yes, there's a heaven. God's Kingdom, later on, when this life is over. But God's Kingdom is just as alive in you right now.

The old hymn proclaims:

*"Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy faithfulness!"  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—  
"Great is Thy faithfulness," Lord, unto me!*

Whether it's Jesus's parables or sci-fi movies or contemporary novels or real-time heroes, they all seem to agree, "The force," by whatever name, "is with you."