

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 27, 2015  
Sermon Title: Say What You Mean  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Psalm 23

## ***Psalm 23***

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

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## **The Apostles' Creed**

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
and born of the Virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,*

*the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

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"Blah, blah, blah." Isn't that a euphemism for "Hey, nobody's listening . . . it doesn't really matter . . . in one ear and out the other . . . they're just words, they don't mean anything"?

I told you two weeks ago that I'm a news/politics junkie, so I'm in seventh heaven now with all the presidential election stuff. It's entertaining, absolutely; it's interesting, it's actually really important. But the words don't mean much. You know how it goes: a candidate says something on Monday. On Tuesday s/he has to walk it back, fix it, explain it, even deny it. In other words, the words on Monday are just "blah, blah, blah." Even in church, we can say things so often or hear things so often that they lose their meaning. It becomes rote, ritual, "blah, blah, blah." It doesn't really touch us in here, in our gut, in our soul. We don't really take it in in a deep way, a personal way.

Already today, we've spoken the words of three of the great readings of Christianity: we started early with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, then The Lord's Prayer. And just before the sermon, we recited The Apostles' Creed. And it's *all* great stuff.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me . . . and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

What wonderful *bold* words, full of confidence and faith. And Jesus really got it right when he gave us The Lord's Prayer: it shows respect, "hallowed by thy name"; it outlines our needs for daily bread and forgiveness; it declares our hope with that joyful conclusion, "for *thine* is the *Kingdom* and the *power* and the *glory* . . . forever."

You walk away from both of them thinking, "You know, whatever is coming my way, I can handle it, I'll be O.K. It'll all work out. I'm in good hands."

When the pope visited a school on Friday, one of the students, a 7-year-old Muslim girl, said, "He made me think I am really, really special, like I was someone he always wanted to meet!"

I was listening to a Catholic priest from the Bronx explain why the pope's visit is such a big deal. He serves a poor parish in a poor part of town, and

it's a *big deal*, he said, because all of a sudden a *big* person, a real VIP, somebody on the world's stage is tuned into his people and their world.

Because we all know what it's like nowadays, with everybody so divided. Who cares about climate change? Left-wing idiots. Who cares about the death penalty? Old hippies. Who cares about the unborn? Right-wing kooks. Who cares about marriage? Old fuddy-duddies. Who cares about immigrants? Bleeding-heart liberals. Who cares about income equality? Spoiled brat/Occupation Wall Street types. Who cares about ISIS? War-monger neocons. We talk like that in America as though everything must be like "Game of Thrones."

But then this old grandfatherly figure dressed in white brings Washington, D.C., to a halt, New York City to its knees. Why? Because it feels as though somebody special has our backs. The little guy, the overlooked, the poor, the vulnerable. It's as though they have a champion, a voice, an advocate, a friend . . . a prayer. Suddenly, religion isn't just "blah, blah, blah, yadda, yadda, yadda."

Listen to this next sentence carefully because it's the only time you'll hear it: Rush Limbaugh, Pope Francis, and David Rowe are in agreement. Words have meaning. I grew up that way. My father was, is, a stickler for words. Their Latin roots, their Greek roots, their real meaning. Keep your word. Your word is your bond. Honor your word. No empty words. Then, one day, I heard Rush Limbaugh say, "Words have meaning." I couldn't believe it. We agreed about something! And now the pope is saying to the world, "Words have meaning." The Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount, they mean something.

That's the way we'd like life to be, isn't it? Where words count for something, where a promise is a promise. Jesus put it this way: "Let your yea be yea, your nay, nay." The Ten Commandments put it this way: "Thou shalt not bear false witness." God was laying out the Top 10 Rules for a healthy society. And Rule No. 9 is "Keep your word, tell the truth, words have meaning." When you open your mouth, no "blah, blah, blah."

Think back to the words we already said today: "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . . He restoreth my soul.*" Plus, "*Our Father, who art in heaven . . . thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . .*"

Those Scriptures, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and The Lord's Prayer, they promise us restoration, peace, forgiveness, victory, eternal life. That's big stuff. I wonder what happens when we really mean it, or need it.

What triggered today's sermon was my Uncle Lester's funeral. My Uncle Lester was my mother's brother. He died a couple of weeks ago in Brockton, Massachusetts. He'd had a good life, a long life, 88 years old, 65 years of marriage, great kids and grandkids, lived 60 years in one house, worked for one company his whole career, had a nice retirement. But he was still dead. We were still heartbroken, sorrowful. There were tears.

Yes, there was much to celebrate, much to give thanks for. I would say he even lived a charmed life. He managed to live his whole life near Boston yet spent his whole life rooting for the Yankees and still loved Ted Williams. So the funeral had laughter and gratitude and wonderful memories and sweet moments. And still, sorrow. Real, deep sorrow.

Uncle Lester was a Swede, through and through, and Swedes are Lutherans, through and through, and he loved his Swedish Lutheran church, through and through, and that's where the service was. Brockton, Massachusetts, is an old worn-down industrial city, without the industry. It's a tough place. Smack dab in the middle of all that brokenness is my uncle's stately Lutheran church, quite literally a haven of hope. In fact, while we had the funeral in the sanctuary, the church was feeding the poor and homeless at the same time next door. Inside the church everything was very formal. The family processed in, the casket was at the front before the altar. Death was very, very real. Later we would go to the family cemetery, where Uncle Lester would be laid to rest among family, a straight line of headstones, from Uncle Lester to Uncle Bruce to my grandparents to my mother, where my mother's headstone has a blank space, waiting for my father.

It was that kind of a day, a day many of you know so well, those days filled with memories, tears, broken hearts. But something happened to me at my uncle's funeral. You see, I wasn't the pastor; I was a mourner. I wasn't leading the hymns or offering the prayers; I was singing the hymns, and the prayers were directed at me. All those words in that one-hour service, all those words were directed at me and my aunt and my cousins, those Scriptures, as if written for us; those hymns, as if written for us; those prayers, as if prayed for us.

It hit me first when we sang an old Lutheran hymn—I don't know that I'd ever sung it before—a hymn both majestic and funereal, somber. There we were, with the casket so close we could touch it, death so real and intimate, with Alida and me and my cousins and my aunts remembering our own and one another's sorrows, and the pastor tells us to stand and sing that old hymn in that old-style English poetry, in that old-style church, the same hymn we sang today, "If You Will Trust in God to Guide You."

*If you will trust in God to guide you  
and hope in God through all your ways,  
God will give strength, whate'er betide you,  
and bear you through the evil days.  
Who trusts in God's unchanging love  
builds on the rock that will not move.*

*God will embrace your pain and weeping  
your helpless anger and distress.  
If you are in God's care and keeping,  
in sorrow will God love you less?  
For Christ, who took for you a cross,  
will bring you safe through every loss.*

*Sing, pray, and keep God's ways unswerving;  
so do your own part faithfully,  
and trust God's word; though undeserving,  
you'll find God's promise true to be.  
God never will forsake in need  
the soul that trusts in God indeed.*

It felt as though that old German composer had sat in his study one morning and said, "I need to write a hymn for uncle Lester's family. I know they are gathering Saturday up in Brockton, Massachusetts, and they need to sing this hymn."

*God will embrace your pain and weeping  
your helpless anger and distress . . .  
For Christ, who took for you a cross,  
will bring you safe through every loss.*

I've been a pastor a long time, done a lot of funerals, and I can tell you how it goes when it comes to music. Let's say there are 100 people at the funeral. When it comes time for the hymn, half the people, 50 percent, won't ever open their hymnbook. Another 25 percent open the hymnbook but don't sing. Nothing, no singing, no reading, no hearing. May as well be "blah, blah, blah." I wonder what people think. Do they think if somebody dies, we sit around like on Dick Clark's "American Bandstand," listening to a hymn, and somebody says, "I like it. It's got a good beat, I can dance to it. I give it an 8!" No. The idea, the hope, the design is to offer words to touch your heart.

I've noticed recently that at more of my weddings, I am being asked to talk about the hymns and the verses and the Scriptures and to tell why the bride and groom chose them. "Words have meaning," they are saying.

As my uncle's funeral drew to a close, the pastor returned to the ancient words of The Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed was written centuries ago. It was an ancient way to sort of summarize basic Christian beliefs. Some of you probably grew up having to memorize it. I did. Some churches recite it every Sunday. Most Christians know part of it, at least that familiar beginning, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." But over time, we may lose the particulars, or we may repeat it so often that it loses its impact. We may stumble over Jesus . . . "descended into hell . . . [he] ascended into heaven, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." As kids, we didn't know what that meant, "the quick and the dead," but it sounded cool. But on that morning at my Uncle Lester's funeral, with the casket and the tears and the grief all right there, so real, when we recited The Apostles' Creed, and when the pastor repeated it in his sermon: "I believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." You could feel the atmosphere change. You could feel hope resurrected from our tears, an energy field of faith all around us.

"I believe in *the communion of saints*,"  
(yes, we will be together again!);  
"*the forgiveness of sins*,"  
(that's right, the past has no hold over us);  
"*the resurrection of the body*,"  
(the body, yes, we shall know and be known once again);  
"*and the life everlasting*."  
(this is not the end).

Words have meaning.

I planned this sermon two weeks ago, when, other than my Uncle Lester's death, life was fairly hunky-dory. Yet I preached this sermon just hours after the death of John Steers, a young husband and father who grew up in our church; just days after the death of Cindy Bradley's dad, Jack; the Bambachs' dear friend, John Musante; and Kathy Rafsky's mom, Jean; and Walt Mebane's mom, Caroline. All this in a few days' time in our little country church.

What to do? Let the words have their meaning:

*"Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . . For I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever; for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory . . . For I believe in the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting . . ."*

May we now believe the words of our final hymn, "Be Still, My Soul,"  
No. 566

*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.  
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.  
Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
In every change, He faithful will remain. I  
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend  
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on  
When we shall be forever with the Lord.  
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,  
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.  
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past  
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.*