

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: If a Tree Falls in the Forest: Ignorance
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The cardinal sin of preachers is to preach a sermon directed at people who aren't there. So, for example, a 20-minute harangue against people who choose to be on the golf course instead of church is a silly sermon, since you are here!

Today's sermon is meant for you and me because we are here. And the problem I'm getting at affects us. As I wrote in that "Today's Question" printed in your bulletin, "With competition for time, Christianity is in decline, more and more people declaring as 'None' when it comes to their religion; with faith in doubt, fewer in worship or Bible Study across the nation . . . what is the future of Church? How can people have shared values without shared lessons or experience? Who will know what we're talking about? Who will care?"

Once upon a time I could say something like this and most people would know what I meant. You know, "I was the original *Prodigal Son*. But thank God I had enough *Good Samaritans* in my life, a whole *cloud of witnesses* who steered me through the *Narrow Gate* and headed me toward the *Promised Land*. That *Amazing Grace* has planted my feet on higher ground, and with that *Blessed Assurance*, I am ready to serve the *Risen Christ* to

redeem a *Lost World* before *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* lead us to *Armageddon*, bringing about a *Second Coming*, the *final defeat of Satan*, the *resurrection of the saved* into eternal life in the *New Jerusalem*." Twenty-two Biblical doctrines in two sentences. In another generation nobody will know what I'm talking about, even in church, and even some of you are shaking your heads! We are losing our pride of place. Our language is forgotten. Our Bible, unread. Or worse, our language is twisted. Our Bible is misread.

If you don't believe me, listen to David Brooks, writing in *The New York Times*:

"Many American universities were founded as religious institutions, explicitly designed to cultivate their students' spiritual and moral natures. But over the course of the 20th century they became officially or effectively secular.

"Religious rituals like mandatory chapel services were dropped

"Administrators and professors dropped spiritual language and moral prescription The humanities departments became less important, while parents ratcheted up the pressure for career training.

"Universities are more professional and glittering than ever, but in some ways there is emptiness deep down. Students are taught how to do things, but many are not forced to reflect on why they should do them or what we are here for"
(Brooks, David. "The Big University." *The New York Times* 6 Oct. 2015: A31. Print.)

A lot of things got me thinking about this. It began, as so much of my life does, in a coffee house up at Yale. On the bulletin board was this gigantic flyer. It read

Humanist Haven,
A Nonreligious Community

It then lists all their activities in the weeks ahead, special classes, and guest lectures. They even have a sort of Sunday church service called The Gathering, and yes, a Church First Sunday, when all the kids join in. Here are some of their upcoming lectures:

"Addiction recovery without the 12 steps or a Higher Power"

"Mommy, who is God? How to talk to your kids about religion when you're not religious"

"Belonging without believing: building community outside of religion"

And here's a good one:

"Lunch for 'Nones' at Yale Divinity School"

And one of special interest to us: On the first Thursday of the month, "Undergraduate Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics: dinner at—catch this—Timothy Dwight Hall"!

Yes, *our* Timothy Dwight, the pastor who was so popular at this church, so successful, so evangelical in faith that Yale stole him away from Greenfield Hill to become Yale's president. Two hundred years later, the center at Yale that bears his name hosts a monthly dinner for students who don't believe in God.

Now, please understand my point: neither Yale Divinity School, nor Timothy Dwight Hall is hosting those atheists and agnostics; these are not sponsored by them as a way to enrich and deepen faith life. They're letting out space. We're not engaging them, we are not challenging or befriending them, we're just missing. My point in pointing this out is not to mock or criticize. I'm actually impressed and envious and depressed by the Humanist Haven because there were no flyers at the coffeehouse for Bible Studies, church services, the Yale Chapel or Campus Christian Ministry.

We are absent, but the Humanists, the atheists, they're organizing, advertising, evangelizing, and they are even using our seminary and our Timothy Dwight. The foxes are in the chicken coop, and we're feeding them. They are doing their job, they say there is no God, they know it, they are confident and committed and creative; they teach and outreach and promote and adapt.

Meanwhile, Christianity fades into the background. Maybe someday we'll be like Sturbridge Village or Plimouth Plantation and have worship re-enactors, where people can "play" church and remember some vestige of early Americana. We could do it right here at Greenfield Hill, an idyllic spot, a quintessential New England church, a lovely reminder of nostalgia. And if we had a sense of humor, we could put a sign of the Green, a quote from the Book of Lamentations, "It is nothing to you, all ye who pass by?" (Lamentations 1:12)

Something else that got me thinking about this is the baseball season. I was driving my car this week listening to "The FAN," a popular sports talk radio station. And with the Mets doing so well in the playoffs, it was nonstop baseball talk. All the callers were knowledgeable old baseball fans; they knew all the intricacies, talking about strategies, filling the airwaves with expertise:

"We need more hit-and-run." "You gotta paint the black." "That 2-seamer is really good." "We need to take the extra base." "Nobody bunts anymore."

“That hook slide on the double play was old-school baseball.” “Did you see that Daniel Murphy tater?”

When I was listening, I realized all the callers—they grew up playing baseball. They played catch with their dads after work, they played in the streets and the sandlots, they lived and breathed baseball—their generation is fading away. You won’t have that level of knowledge. You will have fans, sure; people love to cheer, it’s good entertainment. But entertainment isn’t the same as knowing. And it’s the knowing that is fading away.

I’m talking to you today because you are here, you are the ones who need to think with us, how do we engage our world, heck, our neighborhood, so that the knowing doesn’t fade away? But not everybody is sitting by, disinterested, apathetic, oblivious. Last weekend I was in North Carolina. I was pastor for the wedding of a dear friend. My hotel was right by the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, so each day, early in the morning, I walked the campus for exercise. Suddenly, I saw a long, hand-written message in the center of campus. It was probably 20 feet long. It said, “Surely, the Lord is my Salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation. (Isaiah 12:2)”

I read it several times, trying to imagine what led some college kid, some 19-year-old boy or girl, probably in the middle of the night, to proclaim such joyful faith in chalk for all to see! There’s nothing judgmental, nothing threatening, nothing accusatory, nothing exclusionary. It’s entirely positive. It’s actually rather personal: “The Lord is my salvation! I . . . will trust, I . . . won’t be afraid. God is my strength and my song.” And yet, it’s public, isn’t it? It’s almost like an invitation: “Check this out, Isaiah 12:2, and who knows what else you might find in there?”

I’d like to meet that college kid. I’d like to know what was going on in his or her life or on campus or in the dorm or fraternity house. What drove or inspired the decision to grab a piece of sidewalk in the heart of campus to proclaim a message of such hope?

Religious life on campus, yes, even in the South, is in decline. I heard they even closed the Baptist Student Union, BSU, at North Carolina. Years ago, those BSU houses were often the biggest on campus—bigger, more active, more popular than all the famous Southern sororities and fraternities. And now, it’s gone. But that chalk-wielding, Bible-graffiti-writing midnight artist still believes and still cares enough to share.

Think of all the great, great kids from our church. We love them so much, we miss them so much, it almost hurts us to send them off to college. We have them from coldest, remotest New England to farthest-away California. We even have my good buddy Chase O'Such over in Ireland. I imagine them kneeling on the sidewalk with a bunch of colored chalk, writing a message of faith for their friends. Or reading it one morning on their way to class, and knowing deep in their hearts, "Yes, that's true! I remember it from Sunday School, from Appalachia. I remember Alida's telling us: 'Surely, surely, God is my Salvation. I will trust. I won't be afraid. Because God is my strength and my song!'" And maybe, that afternoon in the quiet of their rooms, they text Rachel or Alida. It's short, not too complicated; it just says, "Hi, thinking of you. School is good. Miss you. Say hi to the church." That happens, you know, the kids who grow up here remember here.

I just mentioned Rachel, and if we are looking for hopeful signs for the future, look no further than Rachel. Rachel grew up in our town, went to Ludlowe High. Her first introduction to us was in the Len Morgan Barn, when so many Fairfield teenagers gathered to remember our beloved Emma von Euler.

Five years later, she was back here, working as our ministry intern, then joining our pastoral staff for a dynamic ministry of deep compassion. And now, off to Yale Divinity School. What happened in between is important. Rachel went to Bates College, a college founded by Baptists. Most of our famous old historic colleges were founded by Protestants wanting to strengthen the church and to spread Christianity: Harvard, Yale; my college, Colgate, founded by 13 pastors. As years go by, most of those colleges have surrendered their church identity. But Rachel went to Bates and began to find her identity and faith. The college Interfaith Chaplaincy welcomed her, and she welcomed it, giving her a faith, a practice, a ministry. That journey continued here as she jumped into church life, pastoral care, and ministry, with a vigor and energy and dedication that brought great joy to all of us.

Rachel couldn't wait to preach. She couldn't wait to teach. She couldn't wait to pray, to visit, to counsel, to open her heart; she couldn't wait to jump into the Bible, wrestle with a Scripture, tackle a story, plumb the depths of meaning, find the heart of it all, and then share it.

I've given you two visions of the future. On one side, the "Humanist Haven," where we get beaten at our own game, where the atheists take Sundays and doing good and helping others and AA and strip away all of God and do better at evangelizing their story. Or *Baseball for Dummies*, who cheer and wear the team colors but don't really know the game, hardly ever played the game. That's one side.

On the other side are folks like the kid from North Carolina and our own Rachel. One knew something and wanted to share it; one found something and wants to follow it.

Let me tie all this together, a little baseball plus Alida plus Rachel plus (you didn't see this coming) a little Annual Pledge Campaign. You know, Alida was in that "Dancing with the Stars" charity event a few weeks ago, and one friend told her, using an old baseball term, "Alida, you are a five-tool player." Old-timers know a "five-tool player" is someone who runs, throws, catches, hits for a power, and hits for average. A five-tool player. We aim to be a "five-tool church."

When you're 95 and in a nursing home, we're there. When you're 4 and ready for Vacation Bible School, we're there. When you're 16 and going through a rough time in high school, we're there. When you're 28 and have found the love of your life, we're there. When your heart is broken by a death you never expected, we're there. When life throws you a curve ball, a fastball, or a bean ball, we're there . . . here, always. And your pledge makes it possible. You do your part; we'll do ours, together.

Let's sing our final hymn, No. 480, "I Love to Tell the Story"

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.
I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

*I love to tell the story; more wonderful it seems
Than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams.
I love to tell the story, it did so much for me;
And that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.
I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

*I love to tell the story; 'tis pleasant to repeat
What seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
The message of salvation from God's own holy Word.
I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*

*I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,
'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.
I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.*