

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: God Is Working His Purpose Out
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:11-12

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For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.

The Bible has great expectations. Great expectations for you. Jesus actually said, "Be ye perfect, even as God is perfect." And, great expectations of God. Listen to this conversation between the great prophet Isaiah and God.

Isaiah says to God, "For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm, and a shade from the heat." (Isaiah 25:4) And God says, "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand. (Isaiah 41:10) Even to your old age I am he, even when you turn grey I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46:4)

Beautiful, inspiring, soaring Scriptures. Meanwhile, we've got storms terrorizing the South, terrorists plotting their evil, tyrants getting away with murder, Putin and Assad and the North Korea guy spreading chaos in the name of patriotism. We have personal tragedies, complications, troubles, even in our own bucolic church. And God says, "Don't worry."

Jesus says much the same. In his magnificent Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says a perfect message for New Year's weekend. "Do not worry. Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field." (Matthew 6:26) Jesus even mentioned the sparrows, which gave rise to that beautiful hymn, "His Eye is On the Sparrow."

But. Yes, but. Things go wrong for the sparrows. And in old age, some folks don't get sustained, carried, or rescued. And sometimes there is no shelter

from the storm, no refuge for the needy or the poor. Sometimes the world seems far removed from God's control. When I was in Confirmation class in 8th grade, we were taught that God is the "Three 'O's": omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. Omnipotent means God is all-powerful. Omnipresent means God is everywhere. Omniscient means God knows everything.

So . . . if God can do anything *and* God is everywhere *and* God knows everything, how come _____? Well, you fill in the blank. How come crime? How come car accidents? How come natural disasters? How come San Bernardino and Newtown? How come I fall on ice all winter long? How come disease, famine, evil?

I've often said (maybe you have too) when I get to heaven, I'm going to ask God a few questions, the implication being we're not entirely happy with how things turn out sometimes, whether it's about us personally or the world in general.

Judaism, for example, has stories about putting God on trial. I remember a TV special a few years ago about Jews in a concentration camp in World War II, where these victims of the holocaust are arguing about the existence of God, or at least the goodness of God, or the relevance. So they put God on trial with a prosecutor and defense attorney and witnesses and a jury.

When people think about God, there's a whole spectrum of thought. On one end is atheism: there is no God, period. Stop blaming him. Stop explaining him. Stop crediting him. Everything that happens just happens. That's why we have the word "happenstance." A less vulgar expression is "stuff happens." Deal with it.

At the other end, God does it all, period. Good, bad, and ugly, it all comes from God. God is like the water on Cape Cod. "If you don't like the weather, wait. It'll change in an hour." It's still weather. Well, that's one view of God.

Everything is attributable to God. We call some things good, some things bad, but that's because we don't have the big picture. We can't read God's mind. So hang in there, it's all God, so ultimately it's all good. Ultimately. *Ultimately*. That's a big word. Ultimately can be a long time. Ultimately can be far away. Meanwhile, there's you and I, life, and all that "stuff that happens." And frankly, the Bible, for the most part, *the most part*, seems to agree.

In the Old Testament, everything is God's fault: war, pestilence, defeat, famine. God uses everything, God manipulates everything to make a point, to get our attention, to fix us. Enemies defeat us at God's command. Famine

humbles us, so we change our ways, Bad leaders reign over us because we've deserted God. So God gives us our just desserts.

Jesus is a little less draconian. He pretty much mirrors what we observe. Jesus said, "God causes the sun and the rain to fall on the good and the evil, the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45) You have to be careful with that verse. It doesn't say God *does* good and evil. It just says that much of life unfolds in ways that don't favor the good or the just. It just happens. In fact, Jesus goes a step further, almost contradicting the Old Testament.

He was once accused of being able to do good only because he was in league with the Devil, and his response was made famous by Abraham Lincoln: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." His point was the Devil can't do good, that's not his nature; and God can't do evil, that's not God's nature. "Stuff just happens." We try to figure it out. We try to assign blame. We try to do what's right, expecting a good result. But life confounds us.

I love my squirrels. Alida loves her cats. Her cats eat my squirrels. I don't have any more squirrels. Is that God's plan? Or is it my fault for feeding the squirrels? Or Alida's fault for adopting feral cats? Or is it Darwin's "survival of the fittest"? Which, "creationism" aside, could be God's plan? It makes my head spin. But in the middle of all that spinning, all that out-of-control whirling, in a world of happenstance, and "stuff happens," in the middle is God. We believe that.

Well, here's what you're stuck with today. You're in Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, a fairly unusual place. We're not a Unitarian church where God may be up for debate. We're not one of the humanism groups that have a style of religion, but God is irrelevant. We're not a fundamentalist church, where the motto is, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." We are a pretty old, almost historic, somewhat contemporary, warmly evangelical church with some liberal twists, a kind of church that focuses on Jesus Christ, trying to make sense of the world.

Most of the time we're thinking of *you*. How to help you. How to strengthen your faith. How to bless your life. How to lift up your spirits. How to keep you and God close. How to be hopeful, faithful, positive. Today we're stretching beyond ourselves to look at the larger picture. We're trying to see what God's up to, where God fits in with the whirling happenstance stuff.

The idea for this sermon began with a hymn, "God is Working His Promise Out." It's a fairly extraordinary hymn in its humility *and* in its prose. It tells us that God has a plan, a purpose, an end game, an ultimate (there's that

word again!), *ultimate* resolution for everything. Every thing. Everything that puzzles us, troubles us. God may not do it or cause it or want it; but God is in the middle of it, "working his purpose out." That can be hard to swallow.

When I got fired years ago (I don't need to go into that today. I wrote a whole book about it!), the thing I hated the most, more than getting fired, more than the injustice, the thing I hated the most was folks telling me "Some day you're going to thank God for this." I actually said to the lawyer, "If you say that one more time, I'm going to punch you."

In the middle of anything we don't like, we don't want to hear, "Don't worry, it's God's will, one day you'll be grateful for this, 'God is working his purpose out.'" It may actually be true. I'm certainly quite blessed in my life today. I am grateful today, but I still wish I'd punched that lawyer out.

The humble part of that hymn is the admission right in the title, "God is working the purpose." The purpose is a work in progress. It's not finished. It might not even be apparent. But God is working on it. Meanwhile, we have to stay in the game, we have to hang in there.

There's a beautiful verse in the Bible I have always loved from St. Paul's letter to Timothy. "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day." (Timothy 1:12) Let me repeat that: "*I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day.*"

What a lovely, optimistic "everything-is going-to-be-fine" verse. No need to worry. Be happy. Only this week, after 45 years as a pastor, only this week did I see the phrase just before it. Paul says, "I am suffering. I am suffering," he declares, "I am suffering . . . *but* I am not ashamed. *Because* I know whom I have believed and am persuaded, convinced, that God is able" to make it all work out. In the end. Ultimately. But not yet. In the meantime, Paul admits, "I am suffering."

I am a servant of God, and I am suffering. I'm a good person, and I am suffering. I'm faithful and believing and trusting, and I am suffering. I'm doing right. I'm living right, and I am suffering. But, proclaims Paul with extraordinary joy, I've made a deal with God, a contract, a covenant, a promise. And I know, I know God will deliver. "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he will keep that which I've committed unto him against that day." That day, when everything turns out all right.

As you know, Alida is in India with her team. Jamilah, our Yale associate, is part of the team—almost—getting there two days late. But her trip to India

was hellacious—96 hours from start to finish; ice storms in Detroit, winter blizzard in Chicago, Cancellations, delays, rerouting—96 hours.

But what we know that she doesn't know yet is that it will all be worth it. Once in India, she will be hosted, welcomed, inspired, loved, embraced, garlanded, and celebrated. Others have gone before, and they know it. Others are there now, and they know it. Jamilah is about to know it. The 96 hours of uncertainty, of misery, of frustration—all worth it.

She has endured happenstance, she has endured the "stuff that happens," she has understood Paul's lament, "I am suffering." And now she is discovering that God has kept all that he committed for this very day, just for her. The promise of faith isn't about everything going right today. The promise of faith is about everything going right "ultimately," the end.

That's why it's called "faith."