

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon Title: Iran and Iraq  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Ezra 1:1-4

## **Ezra 1:1-4**

*In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:*

*'Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.'*

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During the first Gulf War against Iraq, under President Bush the elder, I used the occasion to preach a couple of sermons about Iraq in the Bible. In the Bible, Iraq is called Babylon, and it's very prominent. Now, that war was fairly brief, and our soldiers didn't go much into Iraq. We didn't pay close attention to the history or map of Iraq.

But when the next Iraq war came, all the Biblical connections became clearer. News stories would mention Chaldea, Nineveh, Jonah, King Nebuchadnezzar, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. And as you know, whenever our religious identity ends up in mass media or pop culture or on the evening news, I use the opportunity to increase our Biblical knowledge, whether it's the Russell Crowe movie, "Noah" or "Jesus Christ, Superstar," back on Broadway or a novel about Mary, the Mother of Jesus, or politicians quoting or misquoting Bible stories. They all give us a chance to learn something, so I'll do a sermon on it.

With Iraq, frankly, people were amazed by the connections. The story of the Jews really begins with Abraham in Iraq. The book of Genesis tells us that God called Abraham out of "Ur of Chaldea," and told Abraham to "get thee to a far country . . . and I will make of you a great nation . . . and all who bless you will be blessed . . . and your descendants will be a light to the Gentiles."

There's a lot to unpack in those few verses that still reverberate in our world today. As our soldiers fight in Iraq, you'll occasionally see a map of Iraq. One province, even today, is Chaldea. God begins Judaism in Chaldea, later known as Babylon, that conquered Israel and dragged the Israelites into slavery; later known as Assyria that gave rise to Hanukkah; later known as Iraq, from which Saddam Hussein shot rockets into Israel to forestall our invasion.

It gets curiouser and curiouser! And the points of connection go round and round, connecting right back to us, complicating, well, even our foreign policy today.

A few weeks ago, the president announced that the U.S. would be moving our embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. "Why?" some people wondered. Why care? Why is it important? The president's "base," as they say, his most solid block of supporters, is among "evangelical Christians." And they care deeply about this, about Israel, about Jerusalem, about Jews.

Why? Go back to what God said to Abraham, who came from Ur, in ancient Iraq. God said, "I will make of you a great nation. Your descendants will be a light to the world. And I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." For a lot of people, the line is pretty straight from Ur of Chaldea, ancient Iraq, to American politics, 2018. God made Abraham into a great nation, Israel. *Check*. Israel gave us Jesus, the "light of the world." *Check*. And if we bless Israel, we, America, will be blessed. That's the logic of it, the spiritual logic, before we even get to the politics of it, for about one-third of our country.

But we're not done with Iraq yet. Again, if you follow our longstanding war in Iraq, you've seen our soldiers fighting in Nineveh Province. Nineveh. Where did you hear that name? That's your "Jeopardy" bonus question today. Nineveh. It's on the tip of your tongue, isn't it? Nineveh. *Nineveh*. You're about to say "Jonah and the Whale," aren't you? You would be correct! God told the prophet Jonah to go to the wicked people of Nineveh and tell them to shape up or else. But Jonah refused. He hated Nineveh, Iraq, the enemy; he wanted God to "or else" them. So Jonah gets on a boat, hoping to escape God's call. A big storm comes up; the sailors realize God is mad at somebody.

Jonah confesses it's him, the sailors throw Jonah overboard. He's swallowed by a whale, and that's not the end of the story! Sitting in the belly of the whale, waiting to be digested, Jonah has a change of heart. The whale vomits Jonah onto the beach. Jonah goes to Nineveh, brings God's message, and Nineveh repents!

Which brings us to ISIS. ISIS conquered much of Iraq, especially Mosul, which is in . . . Nineveh! And four years ago, ISIS blew up the tomb of Jonah in Mosul. I could go on and on about Biblical Iraq, Babylon, Mosul, and its connection to us and Christianity and lessons for today.

Iraq conquered Israel, dragged the Jews off into slavery, and we end up with the Book of Daniel in the Bible. "Daniel in the Lions Den." Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the "fiery furnace." God's people refusing to give up their religion, even in the face of death. All that happening 59 miles south of Baghdad 2,500 years ago. And still resonating today, even affecting, directly affecting American politics, U.S. foreign policy, modern-day terrorism, the chaotic Middle East.

Which brings me to Iran. Iran is in the Bible too. You've heard of Persia and Xerxes, King of Persia, Queen Esther, and the Book of Esther. What happened to Israel was a big deal for a while under King David and King Solomon. But Babylon came along. They were big for a while, conquering everything in sight. Then Persia came along, ancient Iran, they conquered Babylon, took over everything Babylon owned and giving us two great Bible stories.

Now, don't fret the details here, I can't remember them myself. I spent more time this week on Google than on the Bible, trying to get names and dates straight. Let's keep it simple. Israel gets conquered by Babylon, ancient Iraq. Israelites carted off to slavery in Babylon. Babylon gets conquered by Persia, ancient Iran. What to do with their Jewish slaves? Well, some stay, some go home.

Our Scripture lesson tells about the Jews going home. To get the full story you'd have to read two books of the Bible nobody reads: Ezra and Nehemiah. Here is the *CliffsNotes* version: you have a lot of Jews living in exile in foreign countries. Foreigners, usurpers, slaves, exploited and unwanted. Back in Israel, everything is in ruins. The Temple destroyed, cities laid waste, villages empty, farmlands abandoned, the whole place rotting. It's not just a ghost town; it's a ghost nation.

Now, here comes the surprise! God lays it on the heart of the king of Persia. To let the Jews go home—willingly, with Persia's blessing, encouragement, help.

The king of Persia, our modern-day Iran, wanted the Jews to go back to Jerusalem, back to worship their God, their way, in their Israel.

The rest of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us how it happened. Strong faith and hard work and getting their priorities straight. We'll tackle this another Sunday, but let me repeat what I just said. The nation of Israel, helped by old Iran, rebuilt their nation by *strong faith, hard work, and getting their priorities straight*. Nehemiah puts it bluntly: they succeeded because "*the people had a mind to work!*" (Nehemiah 4:6) What a great verse! ". . . *the people had a mind to work!*" And ancient Iran helped!

But (there is always a but, isn't there?) . . . but, some Jews stayed in Persia. Generations had gone by, they settled it, got used to it, it was home. The story I'm about to tell you, the story of Esther, is the story our Jewish friends and loved ones celebrate as Purim. *Purim*, a sort of Jewish Halloween.

So Jews stay in Persia, minding their business, doing their own thing. One day, the next king of Persia gets mad at his wife, kicks her out of the palace, and holds a yearlong beauty pageant to pick his next queen.

A Jewish girl, hiding her Jewish identity, is entered into the pageant by her uncle. And she wins! Esther, a secret Jew, becomes the queen of Persia! But (Oh, yes, another "but") anti-Semitism rears its ugly head 2,500 years ago in ancient Iran. There's a high-up government official who hates Jews and bribes the king to allow all Jews to be killed by any Persian who can, then steal their stuff, willy-nilly. A holocaust in the making. But (Yep! Another "but") Queen Esther's uncle goes to Esther and makes one of the greatest and shortest motivational speeches ever. He says to her, "Who knows but that you were born for such a time as this." "*Who knows but you were BORN for such a time as THIS!*"

So Esther steps forward, reveals her Jewish identity, lays it all on the line in her appeal to the Iranian/Persian king and saves her people. The holocaust is prevented. The evil anti-Semite is hanged. And Jews continued to live in Iran and Iraq, peacefully, safely, until, well, the last 50 years.

Modern Iraq and modern Iran have become "killing fields," hotbeds of terrorism, and nightmarish oppressors of their own people. And we are in the middle of it, aren't we? We've been at war in Iraq since 1990. Our enmity with Iran goes back to 1979, if not before. We are their "great Satan" in their eyes; they are our "Axis of Evil," in our eyes. And don't you think Putin just loves it?

So why bring this convoluted Biblical geopolitical history to a snowy, sleepy Sunday sermon? Well, once again, something is happening in Iran. Rebels are

in the streets. Protesters are being killed. The government is cracking down. And the people, always the people, they just want to be free. To eat a burger. To use the Internet. To go to a soccer game. To worship as they want. To wear jeans. To hold hands on a date. To read a novel of their choice. Have a job. Have an opinion. Think for themselves.

Our president, exactly like the last six presidents, is trying to figure out what to do, what to say. What I'm saying is that it's worth remembering Babylon and Persia, Iraq and Iran. They're not just two-bit countries that popped up on the scene to annoy us. Twenty-two hundred years before America was born, one Persian King restored Israel, and another Persian king saved the Jews.

Maybe the lesson for us is our enemies weren't always our enemies. Change is percolating in surprising places. Maybe it's O.K. to be friends again. The people of Iran, not the ayatollahs, but the people, the men and women and young people of Iran want what we take for granted.

Maybe what that long-ago Jewish-Iranian Queen Esther was told by her uncle can be true for us. "*Who knows but that we were born for such a time as this?*"

Our final hymn is No. 67, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

*O God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
our shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal home!*

*Under the shadow of thy throne  
still may we dwell secure;  
sufficient is thine arm alone,  
and our defense is sure.*

*Before the hills in order stood,  
or earth received her frame,  
from everlasting thou art God,  
to endless years the same.*

*A thousand ages, in thy sight,  
are like an evening gone;  
short as the watch that ends the night  
before the rising sun.*

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
soon bears us all away;  
we fly forgotten, as a dream  
dies at the opening day.*

*O God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come,  
be thou our guide while life shall last,  
and our eternal home.*