

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 21, 2018  
Sermon Title: The Power of Story  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Mark 4: 1-9; Numbers 22:21-23

## Mark 4:1-9

*Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'*

## Numbers 22:21-33

*So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab. God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back on to the road. Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.*

*Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!' But the donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?' And he said, 'No.'*

*Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. The angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.'*

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All right, now, that's a heck of a story, Balaam and his donkey. A Biblical "Mister Ed." Anybody here old enough to remember the TV show "Mister Ed," the talking horse? Then there was "ALF" and the movie, "E.T." Don't forget Jimmy Stewart's best friend, the rabbit "Harvey," or the modern version, "Ted."

But 3,500 years before we had talking horses or talking teddy bears and talking extraterrestrials, the Bible gave us Balaam's talking donkey. Balaam was an Old Testament prophet. He was supposed to speak for God . . . supposed to. But Balaam wanted to do something God didn't want him to do, and Balaam insisted on doing it anyway. So he hops on his donkey to go do what he shouldn't do. To stop him, God places an angel with a sword, standing there smack dab in the middle of the path. The donkey stops. You see, the donkey sees the angel with the sword and doesn't want to get chopped up, so the donkey stops. He tries to veer off to the right, veer off to the left; the angel's still there. So finally, the donkey flops down and refuses to budge. Balaam gets furious. He whacks the donkey, kicks the donkey, screams at the donkey. Finally, the donkey turns around and says to Balaam, "What's wrong with you? Haven't I always been a good donkey? Reliable? Steady? Are you blind? Can't you see God's angel standing right there with a sword?" At which point Balaam finally sees what he didn't want to see: God's "No," God's warning angel with a sword. So he apologizes to his donkey, gives it an extra apple and a sugar cube, tickles the donkey's ears, and they live happily ever after, serving God.

I've always liked this story, in particular because Balaam and his donkey are on talking terms. Balaam is not the least bit surprised when his donkey turns his head around and tells Balaam what's what! It's perfectly natural.

I've visited enough of you in your homes that I know you talk your dogs, and they let you know what's what. Alida talk to her cats, and they talk back. I talk to my squirrels, and they put me in my place.

Somehow, this story made it into the Bible, and 3,500 years later here we are in Connecticut, still talking about it, trying to learn some lessons from it. You have a prophet whose ego and greed blind him to God's purpose. You've got a donkey with more spiritual vision than the prophet. And you've got a God who expects people to do what's right, not what's expedient or popular or profitable. All from one ancient story about a talking donkey.

We love stories, don't we, the world over? Hans Christian Andersen. O. Henry. Jesus's parables. Folktales. How many family days end with telling the kids, "Go upstairs now, brush your teeth, get into bed, and I'll come up in a minute and read you a story"?

A good story and a good storyteller have a pull on us. Look at the explosion of popularity for podcasts, many of which are storytelling platforms like "The Moth." A few years ago, Mike Mitri was a producer of a hit Broadway show, "A Christmas Story," the story that became a film that became a Broadway show. "A Christmas Story" was written by Jean Shepherd, a legendary late-night radio talk show host. In my growing-up days, folks listen to him deep into the night, and all he did was tell stories, read poetry, tell more stories. Nowadays, talk radio is all politics, all anger, all the time. Not Jean Shepherd. For him, life was stories, stories were people, people were stories.

That reminds me of another old-time memory of a popular New York City cop show. Long before "CSI" or "Law & Order," there was "The Naked City." Each episode concluded with the narrator intoning, "There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them."

Travel the world, go back in history, you'll find every culture immersed in stories. Go to Indonesia or Malaysia, you'll be entertained by elaborate puppet shows telling the stories of their people, their history, their religion. In India, traveling troupes of actors bring whole villages to a halt as they play out the stories of their 5,000-year-old world. Across Europe, in days gone by, "morality plays" were the Netflix of their day, stories told to impart a key lesson for living life. Of course, that's the Bible. Story after story after story, each one with lessons to live by.

The Book of Genesis is just a whole bunch of stories explaining how humanity came to be. You can take it metaphorically or literally, but the lessons still resound. God, creating it all in six days. Resting on the Sabbath. Adam and Eve messing it all up, giving into temptation. Cain and Abel's sibling rivalry,

jealousy, murder. Noah and the Ark, but don't forget the rainbow. Jonah and the Whale, but don't forget Jonah gets out, does the right thing after all. Daniel in the Lion's Den, standing up for religious freedom. All the way to the Book of Revelation, scary stories, frightening. "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," forever fueling the imagination of writers, moviemakers, portraying war, pestilence, famine, and death. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Not to overlook Jesus's Last Supper, a short story of its own, full of drama, pathos, betrayal, fear, symbolism, and lurking shadows. There's something about that story.

At the end of Lent, just before Easter, during Holy Week, one of our special services is on Maundy Thursday. It's the remembrance, the retelling of Jesus's Last Supper. Every year we show some sort of video, and the most powerful one we've ever shown is a scene from a French movie about a group of Catholic monks in Algeria. It's a true story from the 1980s, and in the final scene, they gathered around a table for, yes, a Last Supper. They know that Muslim terrorists are coming for them; to kidnap them, kill them, which indeed happened the next day. But on that night, they break bread and share wine and have a "Last Supper." That powerful story ringing as true today as 2,000 years ago, a story of love and innocence and sacrifice in the face of the worst the world has to offer. Yes, the power of story.

My new book is a collection of short stories written in the belief that stories change lives. A good story with a good plot, a good character or two, can carry a message deep, deep into our being, into our soul, into our faith. Today's sermon is not a reading of one of these stories or a summary of the book. This is about the "power of story," the singular power, the lasting power of a good story.

As many of you know, I was president of Habitat for Humanity International for many years, from its very early days to great popularity. We got there by telling stories, good stories, powerful stories, with huge impact. It took a while to figure that out. At the beginning, I bombarded people with statistics, numbers, graphs. This many people are homeless, this many people live in shacks. This percentage of the population has more sickness, problems, despair, because of bad housing. Everybody's eyes glazed over in boredom.

Now, what I'm about to tell you is true—which is an odd thing to say in a sermon . . . it makes it sound as though everything else is a lie—but my point is you're not going to believe this, but it's 100 percent true. While writing this part of the sermon, I got so bored writing about how boring our early Habitat presentations were that I took a break. I got on my treadmill and picked up this January 7 *New York Times* Book Review section to read while on the treadmill. Here's the front page: "Book People," it declares, and what follows is a review

of a book, *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, Civilization* by Martin Puchner. Gee, I wish I had thought of that. So I read on: "Literature," the first page declares, "that emerged 4,000 years ago, has shaped the lives of most humans on planet Earth. We are what we read . . . Storytelling is as human is breathing." (Sutherland, John. "Book People." *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 Jan. 2018, p. 1.)

Thank goodness I learned that truth so that back in those early days of Habitat, I got away from facts and figures and got into stories. I remember when we authorized our very first Habitat audiovisual public relations marketing slide show. We all sat around, excited and breathless to view it, and fell asleep halfway through. Boring. Lifeless. We threw it out, literally, threw it out.

Then we found a story. A young photographer captured the story of one family in one wretched tarpaper shack in one rural Georgia town, and the transformation that took place as one work crew of volunteers tore down the shack and built what we called "a simple, decent house." And Habitat took off from there. We had our story.

In my Habitat years, I did over a thousand speeches, sermons, in every imaginable setting: huge cathedrals, humble thatched-roof huts, Rotary Clubs, colleges, school assemblies, on radio and TV, at political conventions, street rallies. You name it, I spoke at it. You might wonder how I did it.

You football fans, you watch the games, it's pretty tense; the TV camera zooms in on the coach. He's got a big laminated sheet of paper with a hundred possible plays to call, color-coded to be ready for every possible situation. That was me, right down to the color-coding. I had a big sheet of paper with 20 Bible stories and 20 Habitat stories, all ready to pick from for just the right audience: rural Pennsylvania, Lower East Side of Manhattan, a Nicaraguan town hall, Princeton University, a Haitian slum, the Plaza Hotel. Just the right story to do the trick, to "shape lives," to make a point, to show the way, to get people to go deeper. That's what I decided to do. To write some stories, to dig deeper. For my benefit, and yours, and way out beyond our front door.

I've been a preacher since 1968. I've been teaching my whole career, sometimes four classes a week. That's a lot of preaching and teaching. I love it. I'll keep doing it. But to go deeper requires new approaches. Here's why: For most of my career I could count on the fact that most of who was in Church one Sunday was in Church the Sunday before and would be in Church the next Sunday. My preaching and teaching hit my target audience. No more. With business travel and hectic schedules and countless holiday weekends and youth activities, we never know who will be here and who won't.

Our typical Church attendance is 50 percent different week to week. We had 1,700 here for Christmas. We'll have a thousand for Easter. We have college kids and young adults scattered all over America and the world who consider this Church the heartbeat of their faith. We have business people right now in London and Beijing and Frankfurt, listening to the sermon, wanting to be connected. We have vacationers this very day in Canada and Florida and the Caribbean. They're not here, but we are their Church home. So we keep looking for fresh ways to be together, to dig deeper.

That's why we do email Bible Studies. That's why we live-stream our sermons and post them on our website. That's why I write books. This one especially. Stories. Fiction . . . sort of, mostly. Autobiographical? Here and there. Faith-driven? Every one. Every word. Provocative? Pushing the envelope? I hope so.

There's one story, "A Church for Christopher Hitchens." We've seen a dramatic increase in atheism in America, a decline in organized religion, a decline in Churches, skepticism, even cynicism about faith, all of that led by the popular late Christopher Hitchens, an absolute mocker of all things Churchy. So in my story, I invite you, the reader, to come with me. It's a short journey. Come with me into a Church that just might turn a cold heart warm. Even Christopher Hitchens's. Just might.

And there's the story I'm going to give you next week, "Jesus at Auschwitz," which is exactly what it sounds like. Jesus at the center of earth's hell, at the worst of the world's worst. Jesus gets an earful. How many times have we heard someone say or said it ourselves, "When I get to heaven, there are a few questions I've got for God, yessirree!?"

That little hockey player in New Canaan who died this week from the flu. The popular family in Westchester killed in an airplane crash in Costa Rica. The Christmas fire that wiped out a family in Greenwich. Newtown. 9/11. Every unjust horror feels like a Holocaust; so yes, we have our questions for God. So, in my story, I go for it, I fire away at Jesus; but Jesus gives as good as he gets. It's a tough match."

And yes, I, um, what shall I say . . . I "reimagine" some familiar Bible stories. Or "retell," or "expand." Including the Last Supper, for Pete's sake! Now, that's got to take some gall to think I can add to *that* story! But gall I have. And let me tell you where it comes from.

Will you humor me for a moment? We are almost done, so bear with me. Take out the pew Bible in front of you, the blue book, open it up to the New Testament section, the back half of the Bible. on page 80. Look for Luke,

Chapter 15, verses 11 to 20, and just run your finger across the page a couple of times, and keep your finger there.

Some years ago I attended a lecture by a great English Christian, a strong Bible believer, an evangelical Christian. And he had us do the same thing: open up our Bibles, run our fingers across the page a few times. And he said to us, "You see all that black ink, all those words of the Bible printed in black? I believe all that!" "But," he went on, "do you see all the white spaces on the page?"

Go ahead, do that right now. Look at the page in your blue pew Bible. Do you see all the white spaces there between the black print? The white spaces between the letters, between the words, between the sentences and paragraphs?

There's a whole sea of white space there. That's where we come in. That's where the Holy Spirit can work us, that's where our imagination can roam, that's where creativity can enter. That's where Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" and Broadway's "Godspell" and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and Da Vinci's "Last Supper" came into being. And who knows? Maybe that's how my little *Water Into Wine* came into being. Yes, I believe the black print. And I love to use the white space.

This week in our Bible Study, I told an outrageous story—not one of mine—that led to a terrific discussion about the difference between "twisting" the Bible and "thinking hard" through the Bible. I aim for thinking hard. And in most every story, I push. I push you. I push God. I push our hope in God. And I believe that can push us, and our Church, to new depths of faith.

Many of you already have this book. I've heard from a lot of readers already, and everyone is oohing and aahing over the cover, which is reproduced on the bulletin cover. It's an oil painting by our own Megan Brown, Becky and Mike's college sophomore daughter. It reflects on the Bible story, "Water into Wine." You know the story. Jesus goes to a wedding; the reception runs out of wine, Jesus's mother tells him to do something. He's annoyed, but he does something, and when they pour some wine out, it's really good wine!

Well, last spring, Megan and I talked over this Bible story. I told her to read it for herself a few times and bring it to life on canvas, and Megan has done it brilliantly. *Brilliantly*. With such grace, with elegant simplicity, she lets us feel the power of transformation, the evidence of miracle, as the hand gently tips the water pitcher, clear water pours out; and as it flows into the cup, the wine is there. That's "the power of story."

Now, before you run out and buy up all the copies, let's sing the most perfect hymn for today, "I Love to Tell the Story," No. 480 in your hymnal.

*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.*

*[Refrain:]*

*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. [Refrain]*

*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. [Refrain]*