

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: Leadership  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Joshua 24:14-15

## Joshua 24:14-15

*Now fear the Lord and serve God with all faithfulness... then choose this day whom thou shalt serve... as for me and my family, we shall serve the Lord."*

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The world is full of lousy leaders. Whole nations have been destroyed by lousy leaders. Businesses have been ruined, sports teams have been turned into losers, armies have been defeated, schools have failed, Churches have died, all because of lousy leaders. And the reverse is also true: nations have been saved, businesses prospered, sports teams victorious, armies triumphant, schools improved, Churches blessed, all by good leaders.

Leadership is that "X factor," that missing ingredient, that intangible quality that can make or break most anything. Think right now of one good leader who impacted your life; and the reverse, a lousy leader in your lifetime who almost ruined things: coach, school, sport, family, community. Somewhere along the line, somebody led you . . . somebody led you to success, somebody led you to disaster.

Our Lenten season at Greenfield Hill Church has already had several highlights. The Duke University Chorale concert this week was stunning. It was a veritable Church service, full of faith and all the inspiration that can be pulled from the life of Christ. And our own Katherine Waugh was spectacular!

The week before we had an equally stunning, inspiring event. We hosted a luncheon with Command Sgt. Maj. Gretchen Evans, and despite the onset of yet another nor'easter, 45 people were treated to a speech they'll never forget.

Gretchen is the daughter-in-law of Bob and Jan Evans. She's a tiny wisp of a woman, barely five feet tall. I doubt she's 100 pounds. But she kept us spellbound with her stories of 27 years in the United States Army, working in

counter-intelligence, parachuting into war zones all over the world, serving two tours in Afghanistan before being grievously wounded.

Above all, she was a *leader*. Indeed, the title of her book is *Leading From the Front*. During her presentation she showed some pictures of leadership in action—one in particular we'll never forget. She and her soldiers were fighting a battle, out-weaponed, outnumbered. They were preparing a last stand on a tiny flat rock on top of a mountain. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. And yet a helicopter landed right there, on its back legs, two-thirds of the helicopter hanging out in midair as the wounded were loaded and the soldiers rescued.

It happened because at the right moment, leaders led. Like so many inspiring stories that grip us, Gretchen's stories are of grace under fire, of courage against all odds, of faith and purpose and strength of will coming together to cast aside doubt and fear. That's leadership, whether the battle is against terrorism or cancer or injustice or competition or even within ourselves.

As I've often pointed out in these hyper-politicized and deeply divided days, everything is seen through a pro-Trump/anti-Trump prism, just as it often was during the Obama presidency. If I talk about leadership or leadership styles or "leading from behind" vs. "taking charge," it will be viewed as anti- or pro-Obama or anti- or pro-Trump. The fact is leadership has been around since Eve led Adam around by the nose out of the Garden after eating the apple. So whatever you thought of Obama, whatever you think of Trump, whatever you want in the next president, leadership should be a priority.

If you want the Mets to have a good season this year, if you want GE shares to rebound, if you want better movies from Hollywood, if you do or don't want a casino in Bridgeport, if you want clean water, safe schools, common sense anything; if you want Bridgeport to be revived, Fairfield to be preserved, this 300-year-old Church to prosper into our fourth century; if you want your child to succeed or your parents' retirement home to be good or your commuter train to run on time or your favorite restaurant to stay open, then you have a vested interest in good leadership. Because none of that is happening without leadership.

I've been scouring the Bible on this topic, and you know what? It's not that complicated! Leadership in the Bible has three components:

1. Chosen-ness.
2. Humility.
3. Boldness.

Chosen-ness means by hook or by crook you are the one for the job. Maybe God taps you on the shoulder or shouts in your ear. Maybe events conspire to put you there. Maybe you're the only one left. Maybe people voted you in. But there you are: the leader. Something needs to be done, and you're the one to do it by reason of qualification, circumstance, opportunity. At some point it falls to you. You're the leader. The idea of chosen-ness is, it's not blind luck. In religious terms we call that being "called," "ordained," "chosen."

Jesus said to his Disciples, "You did not choose me. I chose you and appointed you to go and to bear fruit that will last." (John 15:16) And if you remember Jesus's life, he started off by walking around the countryside and picking people to be his Disciples. "Follow me," Jesus told Peter and John and Matthew, a Biblical version of those old World War II posters, "Uncle Sam Needs YOU!"

The problem with "chosen" leadership is obvious. It's a very short jump from feeling "chosen" to being arrogant, obnoxious, dictatorial. The great leaders in the Bible recognized that they got chosen *despite* what they were, *not* because of what they were. *Humility* is the number-one most common trait among the great leaders in the Bible; lack of humility is the number-one trait among the failed leaders in the Bible

Moses certainly did not think he was the one to lead Israel out of Egypt. He tried to beg off. Jeremiah and Isaiah were both certain that God made a mistake choosing them. "I'm too young," Jeremiah said. "I'm unclean," Isaiah protested. Solomon felt he wasn't fit to be king. Not smart enough, not experienced, not wise. St. Paul called himself "chief among sinners," the worst of the worst, God was scraping the bottom of the barrel to pick him, he said. But picked he was, and lead he did. But he knew what he was, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

That's what led Paul to a very surprising declaration. He wrote, "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak to shame the strong; God chose the lowly and the despised, the things that are nothing, nobody, of no account to nullify those that are boastful." (1 Corinthians 11: 27-30, somewhat paraphrased)

In other words, God wants ego out of leadership. We are the vehicles of God's greatness. We are not greatness itself. We are what we allow God to accomplish through us.

I have a favorite quote I've used 100 times, so forgive me for repeating it, but it's delicious, and it is so perfect for people who give themselves all the credit. Their pomposity, ego, arrogance lead us to say about them, "He was born on third base and acts like he hit a triple."

The great leaders combine those two components, chosen-ness and humility, and the result is an amazing boldness or courage. You see, humility is a strength, a virtue, an advantage. It's not a weakness or a failure. It makes you a listener, a team player, someone others will trust, follow, believe in.

When the Bible talks about leadership, it uses two images: shepherds and watchmen. Shepherds watch over a flock; watchmen watch over a town. Both are required to be vigilant, awake, aware, and ready to lead.

Jack Barry sent me a letter this week with a terrific phrase. He wrote, "We need a phalanx of practical, pragmatic, game changers who'll get their act together." I like that a lot. *We need a phalanx of practical, pragmatic, game changers who'll get their act together.* Four qualities, mostly useless in isolation, but taken together offer a path to leadership. "Practical-pragmatic": that means something that will actually work, that makes sense, that you can explain and do. "Game-changer": exactly what it sounds like. Change the game. Turn things around. No more status quo. The game as it is isn't working, something's lacking. Usually the most popular response is the easiest: keep doing it; keep doing what's not working.

You've heard the old saying, "The seven most dangerous words in the English language are 'we've never done it that way before!'" Or the joke, "Question: how many New England Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb?" "Answer: Change? My grandmother donated that light bulb!" In other words, let's stay in the dark. You need leadership only if you want to get out of the dark. You don't need leadership to sit in the dark, do nothing, go nowhere. Jack's last point is "Get your act together."

Our Scripture lesson comes from the Book of Joshua. Quick background: the Israelites, the Jews, had been slaves in Egypt. Moses finally got his leadership act together; he led the Israelites out of bondage, out of Egypt, into freedom, right to edge of the Promised Land. Then he froze. Paralyzed by fear, uncertainty, doubt, they froze. Moses failed. That generation of leaders failed. It took another 40 years before the Israelites found the gumption, the spunk, the faith, the leadership to go into the Promised Land.

That new generation of leadership was Joshua, and the two Scriptures for today are at the opposite ends of his life. The first, as he starts to lead; the second, at the end of his life, looking back. It starts with God saying, "We need new leadership. This is a new time, a new day, new circumstances." And God repeats this mantra: "Be strong, be courageous, be strong. Be very courageous." "Trust me," God says, "lean on me, use me."

Years later, after a lifetime of lessons learned the hard way, Joshua stands before his nation and challenges them: "Choose this day whom thou shalt serve."

In a song called "Gotta Serve Somebody," Bob Dylan sang a few years ago,

*". . . you're gonna have to serve somebody*

*"You may be a construction worker working on a home  
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome  
You might own guns and you might even own tanks  
You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks*

*"But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody."*

That's what Joshua was saying. we all serve somebody, some thing.

It may be a passion, an addiction, a hobby; it may be God or work; it may be reputation, legacy, pride, or money. It can be fear, status quo. But one way or another, Dylan says, "You're gonna serve somebody." Joshua just says, "Choose carefully whom you're going to serve." "Get your act together."

Those of us of a certain age surely read the obituary last week of Roger Bannister. Roger Bannister, the first person to run a four-minute mile back in 1954. The four-minute mile was like so many barriers to human progress, things we believed impossible: spaceflight, cure for cancer, democracy. An under four-minute mile.

We hear that all our lives about things large or small that can't be done. Problems that can't be fixed. Issues that can't be tackled. Ideas that can't be challenged. Maybe running the four-minute mile wasn't as big as curing cancer, solving gun violence, ending prejudice, fighting injustice, restoring faith, saving democracy, protecting children. But Bannister can teach us a thing or two.

When he reminisced about his barrier-breaking run, he talked about what it takes to break from the pack, go for the lead. This is how he put. It's worth hearing.

*"In a typically analytic and introspective passage, he described the moment at which a runner decides to break from the pack and take the lead:*

*"The decision to 'break away' results from a mixture of confidence and lack of it. The 'breaker' is confident to the extent that he suddenly decides the speed has become slower than he can himself sustain to the finish. Hence he can accelerate suddenly and maintain his new speed to the tape. But he also lacks confidence, feeling that unless he makes a move now, everyone else will do so and he will be left standing.*

*"The idea at the heart of this passage [is] that you must seize the right moment or risk its passing forever."* (Litsky, F., & Weber, B. (2018, March 4). "Roger Bannister, First Athlete to Break the 4-Minute Mile, Dies at 88." *The New York Times*, p. A20.)

What an interesting, even amazing, lesson on leadership. He says that to take the lead first requires you to understand that you "cannot sustain a slower pace to the finish." What a wonderfully understated sentence.

So many people, so many businesses, so many Churches, so many policies in government and society try to "sustain a slow pace to the finish." Don't change. Don't try. Don't think. Don't do something that would put you out front. "Sustain a slow pace to nowhere." You can't go on like that and accomplish your goal. Then, surprisingly, Bannister says there's a place for fear in leadership; fear that if you don't do something, if you don't take action, if you don't break out, you're going to be left in the dust. You must "seize the right moment or risk its passing (you by) forever."

If you are a sports nut, a political junkie, a student of history, a serious Christian, you know the great leaders who have seized the moment, who refused to sustain a slow pace, who got their acts together. Who chose, one day, whom they would serve and broke away from the pack to leave.

God, send us just such leaders today.

Our final hymn, continuing on the subject of leadership, goes back to the story of Moses and the Israelites and their exodus from Egypt, with lot of imagery. No, 633, "Lead On, O Cloud of Presence."

*Lead on, O cloud of Presence, the exodus is come,  
in wilderness and desert our tribe shall make its home.  
Our bondage left behind us, new hopes within us grow.  
We seek the land of promise where milk and honey flow.*

*Lead on, O fiery Pillar, we follow yet with fears,  
but we shall come rejoicing, though joy be born of tears.  
We are not lost, though wandering, for by your light we come,  
and we are still God's people. The journey is our home.*

*Lead on O God of freedom, and guide us on our way,  
and help us trust the promise through struggle and delay.  
We pray our sons and daughters may journey to that land  
where justice dwells with mercy, and love is law's demand.*