

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: August 26, 2018
Sermon Title: What I Did on My Summer Vacation
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Psalm 150

*Praise the LORD!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!*

*Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!*

At our early outdoor service this morning, Alida and I led worship, and our theme was based on that old grammar school ritual, that first week in September back-to-school essay, "What I Did on My Summer Vacation." It was an assignment meant to say, "Hey, summer is over, get used to it," and it sort of smoothed over the transition back into school life, got us writing and thinking, yet it wasn't too taxing. It marked the change of seasons.

The Bible has two main thoughts about changing seasons: it recognizes that God created them, and each has its distinctive purpose. Since ancient Biblical times were very agrarian, most thoughts about the seasons had to do with farming: seedtime and harvest, for example. Of course, our New England is structured by seasons. Summer is really special; autumn is breathtakingly beautiful; winter is for skiing; spring is for thawing out, warming up, and hope.

But the Bible has one more thought, which we used at my father's funeral last week. He had been a Church pastor for almost 70 years, so we looked for Scriptures about ministry and Church work that seemed applicable to his life and faith.

In St. Paul's letter to Timothy, he says, "Preach the word. Correct, rebuke, and encourage. Do the work of an evangelist. Discharge all the duties of your ministry. Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith." (2 Timothy 4:2-7)

So you can see why we chose that for my father. That's the life he lived: preaching, teaching, counseling, and believing, right to the very end. But I skipped over one phrase that goes in the middle of all that: "Be instant in and out of season." *Be INSTANT in and out of season.* "Instant" is an old-fashioned word that means be ready, be prepared, stay active, don't slow down. The practical implication is that there is no "out of season," no "down time." If you are doing something important, you should be committed to it all the time, not part-time, not halfhearted.

We see that in the sports world. For professional athletes, in the old days, they'd play their sport, football, baseball, do it a few months of the year, then they had an "off-season." In the real old days, they'd go back to their hometown, find a job, they'd work at the local convenience store, help on the family farm.

Nowadays, professional athletes are expected to give their full commitment all year long. Training, practicing, studying, rehabbing. We see that in our Church with our young people. Our athletes and musicians, our sailors and rowers, our artists—it's all year long. You've got the "in season," with games and playoffs and championships. Then you have the "out of season": camps, more skill training, more weightlifting, practice, practice, practice.

Look at our cellists today. It's the end of summer, vacation is almost over, last chance to do nothing, lie on the beach, suntan yourself, or . . . come to Cello Camp, practice your technique, move those fingers, learn those pieces, play in Church on a Sunday morning.

Even our Church. We made a very conscious decision years ago that we don't take the summer off as a Church. We stay strong being "*instant*, in and out of season." From the monumental ASP trip at the end of June to the equally monumental Vacation Bible School that filled every nook and cranny last week, we stay active, alive, "in season and out." Nothing slowed down. Nothing got skipped over.

Of course, when I think about “what I did with my summer,” the overwhelming memory is the dying, death, and funeral of my father. In September I’ll devote a Sunday to lessons learned from my father, especially about Church and ministry. For someone who grew up in the Church in the 1920s in rural Maine and spent most of his life serving urban Churches in New York City until he was 86, he experienced American Christianity with all its ups and downs, and he taught me everything I know. I’ve often said from this pulpit that whatever you like about what I do as your pastor I learned from him; whatever you don’t like, I learned on my own!

But of course this summer, regarding my dad, we focused on the personal, not the professional. Above all, his death was a reminder of how precious life is, how fast it goes, how overwhelming is the loss. You’d think after a thousand funerals, after my mother’s death 31 years ago, I might not need a reminder, but I do.

The Bible has a wonderful teaching about the resurrection. St. Paul proclaims, “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.”

“In a moment . . . in the twinkling of an eye”—that is just as true of death. One moment we have a loved one, the next minute we don’t. One minute we have a friend, a sibling, a father or mother, and then we don’t. I say that as one who believes 100 percent in heaven, in eternal life, in resurrection; and I believe in signs, those little coincidences and hints that come like emails straight from heaven, like a loved one telling us, “Arrived safely, everything’s fine, miss you, see you soon. XXOO.”

And I say that as one who knows my father had a fantastic life, great accomplishment, great love, great ministry. And even knowing and believing all that, there is the fact that he is gone. My friends and family in India have a phrase for death that is so stark and so true. They would say, “He is no more.” He’s in my memory, yes. He’s with God, yes. But “he is no more” around here.

He would have loved our Church today. First, he always loved this Church. Second, he loved music. Third, he loved art. Fourth, he loved young people. So he would have sat down front. He would have followed every note of Wendy’s solo, he would have asked Megan Brown to create a painting for him, and he would have applauded those cellists as he did when he went to Lincoln Center. And I know this: he would’ve told them they were ready for Lincoln Center. Having the cellists here today is very special.

I was actually away right after my father died, in Bratislava and Prague. Alida was with me for many days, as we carried our grief from Church to Church,

saying prayers, lighting candles, remembering, weeping. One night, we went to my favorite Church in Prague, a Catholic Church pastored by my friend and hero, Father Tomáš Halík. Father Halík was secretly ordained a priest during the years of communist oppression, and now he serves a Church that is packed on a Sunday night at 8 o'clock in the dead of summer, standing room only. And I was the oldest person there by 30 years.

When I asked him once what was happening there, he kept it simple. "Joy," he told me, "we teach a faith of joy . . . and we encourage our young people in everything—their art, their music, their faith." And he does it "in season and out of season." And he would have loved, *loved* Megan's painting, Wendy's solos, and our young cellists.

On this visit, he had invited Alida and me to meet him after worship, and when he learned of my father's death, he placed his hands on both of us and prayed for my father, thanking God for his lifetime of ministry. Then he asked me to pray over him. I was never so scared and so honored in my life. Before we left, he stationed the three of us between two large photos of Václav Havel and Pope Francis for a couple of selfies. "My two friends," he said of them.

Perfect choices for today, Václav Havel, the Czechoslovakian playwright who led artists and musicians in a nonviolent revolution that overthrew the communists, and Pope Francis, who took the name of St. Francis, whose words Wendy sang a few minutes ago. Our Church and those heroes on the same wavelength. That's good company.

After Alida returned to Fairfield, I took the train back to Bratislava to begin my writing in earnest over the next two and a half weeks. I wrote nonstop, a long essay on "My America." A white paper for our Church to prepare for its 300th anniversary. And short stories on words and vision, demons and miracles.

The miracle is that I wrote at all. My first right night back in Bratislava, I suffered a bad fall in the middle of the main boulevard. I didn't break anything, but I ripped and tore and strained most everything and could barely walk at all.

Being a coward, I didn't tell my wife for four days. I figured I'd get better and then tell her all was fine . . . except I never got fine. Finally my hotel people threatened to call her and insisted on getting medical help for me. The main instigator of this was the doorman, Joseph: an evangelical Christian, a Lutheran, an immigrant from Ghana in West Africa, who brought two Slovakian paramedics to my room and told them, "This is my friend Rev. David, a very important pastor from America. He has great work to do, so you must fix him."

For the next 11 days, as I crawled around the streets of Bratislava, I was waited on hand and foot, cared for by strangers—coffee house waiters, museum curators, and local priests. On one of my crawls, I came across an Ayurvedic Medicine Massage Center, an Indian form of traditional healing. I hobbled in, they gave me a young man from India who doused me in hot oil and beat the living daylights out of me for four days straight until I was either on the road to healing or too scared to complain. But they had me moving again. An immigrant African, two Slovakian paramedics, an Indian massage therapist, and dozens of just plain nice people, all those “angels” Alida preached about a few weeks ago, God’s agents, who came just in time.

During all those days of pain and inspiration, with the sorrow of my father hovering above me, trying to imagine the most healthy future for our little Church, I kept having “God moments,” spiritual “aha” moments, those moments when it is crystal clear that God has taken over your journey, your schedule, your mind. You’re just along for the ride.

With tender care from strangers, I found myself incredibly focused with a single-minded clarity. Everything was coming through loud and clear as I wrote—ideas, thoughts, prayers.

In Bratislava, my hotel was next door to the Franciscan Church, and I worshiped there every day. Something’s happening in that Church too. I went there nine nights in a row and never could get a seat. One night I walked in using two canes, and a man in a wheelchair offered me his wheelchair. That gives you an idea of the shape I was in.

My persistence in going to Church every day was driven by a vow I had made. My first day over there I contacted our assistant, Rachel, and our prayer coordinator, Anne Lyons, and asked them to send me a full list of every prayer concern they were aware of throughout our whole Church. I promised that every day, sometimes twice a day, I would find a Church, go in, sit down, and pray specifically, individually, personally, for every single person on that list. I ended up with 31 people: children, young adults, elderly; death, sickness, sorrow; job loss, transitions, treatments. There I am, barely able to walk in, sit down, or stand up, dressed a sport coat, going through a long list printed on paper, praying for a half-hour, moving my lips, half out loud, with every appearance of talking to myself like a crazy person, or, hopefully, not to myself.

And, when possible, lighting candles: 31 candles, like some crazed pyromaniac. One night I got to Church late. The doors were open, but the sanctuary was cordoned off by a wrought-iron gate. About 10 feet inside the gate was their prayer candle stand—tall candles, in glass, set in sand. It’s customary to leave an offering when you light a candle. Well, I couldn’t reach the candles, but they

were mostly already lit, so I figured I'd piggyback on someone else's candles. Not wanting to cheat the Church, I took out a bunch of euro coins and threw them 10 feet at the candles in glass and, yes, broke two of them.

When you think about it, it's amazing that I am back here at all. Somewhere in Bratislava between the hospital and the prison is probably where I should be.

I'm almost done.

Bratislava is four hours from Prague, and I had to get back to Prague for my final days of writing and for my plane home. But I was too hurting to even get on a train, much less carry a suitcase. As the day grew closer, Joseph, my African Lutheran doorman, announced that God told him to drive me to Prague on his day off. And he did. Averaging about 105 miles per hour, delivering me to my hotel, driving up one-way streets the wrong way in the heart of Old Town Prague, and lecturing my new hotel manager in perfect Czech how to care for this badly injured, most important Reverend from America.

By the time my sojourn/sabbatical ended, I was such a mixture of emotions. Alida and I had had a most marvelous time together. I had had a most unnerving, surprising, adventurous, inspiring time since. I had written more than I had hoped on tough stuff, including the eulogy for my father. How to end it?

If you know Prague, there is a famous bridge, Charles Bridge, which crosses from Old Town to the Castle. In the summer it is so packed with tourists, I avoid it, totally. But my last night I chanced it.

The crowds were immense. The roar of the crowds was intense. But about half-way across the bridge, I came upon the ethereal sounds of cellos. Cellos! First, a string quartet with a wonderful cellist. Then, just a little farther, a young man, a lone cellist. Me, him, and his cello. And I stood there for an hour, transfixed. That's quite a word: trans-fixed. Yes, I felt as if I was being *fixed*. That God was healing me, body and soul.

Every couple of minutes I'd throw some euro coins in his cello case with almost the same spirit, the same purpose, that I had thrown them at the prayer candles a few nights earlier. Every note that young man played, every time his bow ran across the strings of his cello, I stood a little straighter, and I was immersed in gratitude—for my father, for my wife, for my Church; knowing full well there aren't enough candles in all the Churches of Europe for me to light one for every blessing in my life.

I put some more money in the cello case, walked back across the bridge, and I was ready to come home.

We'll conclude our service by listening to Wendy's solo of our final hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," No. 585.

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
oh, what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer!*

*Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge,
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield you;
you will find a solace there.*