

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 17, 2019
Sermon Title: "It Goes Without Saying"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Psalm 23

Psalm 23

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.*

Did you get your copy of our "Lenten Devotional"? Or are you receiving the daily devotional online? If not, it's not too late. You can pick up a copy on the way out of Church; or let us know your email to get it online.

This year's theme is "Nature." Along with the usual verses about Jesus's Holy Week, about half of the devotions focus on nature. Frankly, it's the one thing in

today's world that's not controversial. Nature is beautiful, it's awesome, it's inspiring, it's fun. A lot of vacations are at places we seek out for the joys of nature, whether it's mountains or oceans or lakeside. Even when nature is tough, it's still something to behold.

That snowstorm a couple of weeks ago left every tree, every house, every street breathtakingly beautiful. And, of course, now we're all anticipating the delights of spring and summer. Nature bursting forth with all its bounty; plus, people have been telling me for years that nature is the number-one compelling argument for God. All my life I've asked people why they believe in God, and so many times people cite some experience of nature: a sunrise, a sunset, a rainbow. A bird that comes along at just the right time. A burst of color on the horizon. A New England autumn. And we say, "God did that just for me!"

So I went through the Bible, and I chose all these verses about nature:

Nehemiah 9:6

And Ezra said: 'You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you.'

Psalms 65:9-13

*You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.*

Isaiah 55:12

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

Psalm 19:1-2

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.*

Psalm 121:1-2

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

Even the cover! You remember in January we had visitors from Bratislava, Slovakia: 12 young adults and three Franciscan priests, and we had the most wonderful, loving, Christlike time together. When they left, the young pre-med student gave us a painting she'd done just for us while riding the Metro-North train between Fairfield and New York City. It's of the stars in heaven, because, she said, our Church is like the "stars of heaven." "*I will indeed bless you, and I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven.*" (Genesis 22:17)

Life can be so beautiful. Then we wake up on Friday to learn that a young man from Australia, fueled by white nationalist extremists' internet hate, from America to Serbia, slaughtered 50 worshippers while they were praying to God in their mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, and suddenly rainbows and sunsets seemed far away.

In my pastoral letter to you on Friday afternoon, I told you that I had planned a "truly lovely, nice, sweet letter" to you, reflecting on last Sunday's worship service. It was such an extraordinary, beautiful experience, and I wasn't leading it, I wasn't preaching. I was sitting with you, in the back pew, quite touched by it all—the exquisite, simple grace of this sanctuary, the flowers on the altar for very dear loved ones, several candles lit on the prayer candle stand, wonderful music; and spread throughout the service, people from our Church reflecting on their mission trip with Alida to India and the power of God's love.

That was the letter I was going to send on Friday. Instead, I wrote the one called "From Charles Manson to New Zealand." All these awful human beings who want to stir you and me to hatred. Even today was supposed to be a fun sermon. You can see the title right in the bulletin: "Old As Dirt, Part 2," a fairly humorous look at aging, since I'd just survived another birthday. So that was my spiritual plan for you this weekend: a really lovely pastoral letter on Friday about how great life is in our little Church; and a lighthearted sermon on Sunday to send you off to enjoy St. Patrick's Day. Then hate incarnate, evil incarnate; our latest satanic minion invaded the tranquil spaces of Friday prayers in bucolic New Zealand.

And we take a gigantic step backward: to Paris and Nice, to Sandy Hook and Parkland, to London and Las Vegas, to America's 9/11 and Spain's 3/11. Today's mini-holocausts of hate and munitions. They, those satanic minions, they get the hate and munitions, both so easily, and we get the sorrow and fear.

I used to be a runner, for 40 years or more, every day. I loved running parks and woods and trails, even city streets at night. Sadly, I saw how much fear I created as a male. Whenever I came up behind a woman alone, even from 50 yards back, I could see and smell the fear. She'd start walking faster, clutch her purse, look furtively over her shoulder. I learned to minimize it. I'd shout out jaunty greetings: "Don't worry! Old man running!" Or, "How about those Yankees?" But still, I caused fear.

I did it again on Friday. At 2 PM there was a press conference at the big mosque at the corner of Park Avenue and State Street in Bridgeport, what used to be the old United Congregational Church. The Council of Churches asked clergy to show up as a sign of compassion and solidarity. Senator Blumenthal, Congressman Himes, Mayor Ganim were there. The press. Some clergy. And many Muslims.

I drove over around 1:30. First, I passed a smaller mosque as Friday prayers let out, the mosque ringed by police cars. As I slowed down at the corner, people looked at me, hard. A few minutes later, I entered the parking lot of the big mosque, again as prayers let out. Lots of police and police cars. Muslims, milling about, mostly all people of color, or at least a lot browner than I.

I was driving real slowly, being in a cramped parking lot and all, and people looked at me, really closely. Was I like that Australian guy? That Norwegian guy who killed 77 youngsters? That Charlottesville guy? That Pittsburgh synagogue guy? That Charleston Emanuel Church guy? That Coast Guard officer guy? All hell-bent on killing to multiply hate, honing their craft on the internet, and all looking far more like me than the worshippers at the Bridgeport mosque. The shoe was on the other foot.

Inside, there was grief, stirring words, anger, beauty. The imam spoke, a dashing young man in an elegant robe. (I might wear a robe again if I looked like that!) He was carrying a most delicate bouquet of flowers, tiny wisps of white petals. He said the flowers had just been sent to the mosque by a neighbor, and he read the card, a condolence prayer card, signed, "Michelle and family," if I heard correctly. A gift of nature in the midst of destruction. How often we see that, don't we?

I knew by then I had to scrap my happy sermon for today and started to think of what I needed to say. But each time I thought of something, it was always something I was sure you already knew.

And then, blame it on God. This same single refrain kept running around my head:

"It goes without saying."
"It goes without saying."
"It goes without saying."
"But say it."

We do that all the time. If Mrs. Smith goes into the hospital for surgery, we pray for Mrs. Smith. "It goes without saying" that we want Mrs. Smith to have successful surgery, to get better. But we say it anyway. Much of what we say "goes without saying," but we "say it anyway." So for the last part of Church today, I'm going to say a few things that "go without saying." Most, by the way, are straight from the Bible.

It goes without saying that Christians, Jews, and Muslims share a tortured history that blasphemes our God, betrays our Scripture, mocks our faith.

It goes without saying that Christians and Jews and Muslims have so much in common—all children of Abraham, all from the soil of the Middle East, all sharing two-thirds of the Bible.

It goes without saying "that the fruit of the spirit," the proof of God's spirit alive in us, is "love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." (Galatians 5:22) Those are the marks of a Christian life.

It goes without saying that all white people are not white nationalists, that all Muslims are not terrorists, and we'd all better make that distinction clearly.

It goes without saying that "God created man and woman in God's own image." We humans are meant to mirror God. (Genesis 1:26)

It goes without saying that we should “do unto others as we would have others do unto us.” (Matthew 7:12) Every human interaction begins that way: either on the right foot or the wrong foot.

It goes without saying that the worst in others should *not* bring out the worst in us.

It goes without saying that a burning cross is exactly, *exactly* what it looks like: the willful destruction of Jesus’s Cross, and all that he stood for and died for.

It goes without saying that we are known by the company we keep, so keep good company, keep company with that which is good: good-doing, good-being, good-believing.

It goes without saying that we must “hate what is evil,” oppose it, call it out, be clear about it, distance ourselves from it; and instead, “cling to what is good.” (Romans 12:9)

It goes without saying that it doesn’t have to be that complicated, that down deep, seriously, we “know what is good and what God requires of us: to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly, *humbly* with the Lord.” So keep company with what is good: justice, kindness, humility. (Micah 6:8)

It goes without saying that the “Prince of Peace,” this Christ we proclaim, this Jesus of Nazareth, would disavow anyone who does evil in his name, anyone who is unjust in his name, or unloving, anyone who would violate the sacredness of life in his name.

It goes without saying that “blessed are the peacemakers,” and the “making” part takes effort; it’s work, it’s hard; so “seek peace and pursue it,” the Bible says. There is nothing passive about that, nothing “que será sera.” “Make it,” “seek it,” “pursue it”—that’s where the blessing is. (Matthew 5:9; Psalm 34:14)

It goes without saying that “faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love. And love never ends.” (1 Corinthians 13:13, 8)

It goes without saying that “perfect love drives out fear.” (1 John 4:18) And “You will fear no evil.” (Psalm 23:4)

It goes without saying that “love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8) So, this world needs a lot of love, *NOW, not later. Now.*

Let’s stand and sing our final hymn this morning, No. 593, “Lead Me, Lord.”

*Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy righteousness,
make thy way plain before my face.
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord, only,
that makest me dwell in safety.*

*Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy righteousness,
make thy way plain before my face.
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord, only,
that makest me dwell in safety.*