

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: May 24, 2020  
Sermon: Memorial Day  
Scripture: Memorial Day Litany  
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## ***A Memorial Day Litany***

Though I scatter them among the people, yet in distant lands they will remember me. They and their children will survive, and they will return.  
*(Zechariah 10:9)*

**When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy Temple.**  
*(Jonah 2:7)*

On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.  
*(Psalm 63:6)*

**After I looked things over, I stood up and said to all, "Don't be afraid! Remember, the Lord is great and awesome."**  
*(Nehemiah 4:14)*

The Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup and said, "This is my blood; drink it in remembrance of me."  
*(1 Cor. 11:23-25)*

**Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.**  
*(Exodus 20:8)*

All they asked is that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.  
*(Galatians 2:10)*

**I thank God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for you I always pray with joy, because of your partnership in the Gospel.**  
*(Philippians 1:3)*

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We are ALL in the "remembering business." God's in it. I'm in it. The Church, coming up on our 300th anniversary—we're in it. That same year of 2025,

America will be having our 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and you know America will be full in on it.

And guess what! This pandemic has been good for nostalgia, the official name for the “remembering business.” People are playing board games. Eating family dinners. Baking. Walking. Talking on the phone. It’s like the good old days! Remember?

Whenever I preach on Memorial Day weekend, I’m caught between two childhood memories. In those ancient days, it was still called “Decoration Day,” the day when folks went to the cemetery and did a spring cleaning around the graves, planted flowers, said a prayer . . . and remembered. *And* it was a patriotic holiday. We marched in parades, ending with 21-gun salutes; we all stood in awe of old World War I vets. And a big part of “Decoration Day” was decorating. Decorating the graves of veterans, decorating war memorials in each town square.

But the meaning of the day is best captured in the word “memorial.” It is Memorial Day; it’s Memorial Day weekend. We may barbecue, we may wander down to the beach. We may be champing at the bit to reopen after weeks of isolation, but above all it is a time of remembrance. Which is a big part of the heart and soul of our religion, the Jewish half, and the Christian half. All those Scriptures we just read, they take us from deep in the Old Testament (the foundation Scriptures of Judaism) right through Jesus’s life and early Church (the foundation Scriptures of Christianity).

I didn’t even use the best Scripture from Judaism about remembering: Deuteronomy, Chapter 8. A few years ago our Church hosted the Fairfield Interfaith Thanksgiving service, and a rabbi was the preacher that night. He preached on Deuteronomy 8, which is filled with strong encouragement and strong warning. “Remember,” God says to Israel over and over, “remember, remember, remember!” And, “Don’t forget, do not forget because if you forget” (here comes the tough part), “if you forget the Lord your God, you will be destroyed.” (Deuteronomy 8:19)

That’s harsh talk. But the truth is that’s reality. Any partnership, any team, any cooperative effort requires each side to remember and honor the value of the other. And the best way to not forget is to remember the best of the other. That’s God’s point. God and Israel had a relationship, an understanding, and it is rooted in remembering. Remember who you are. Remember where you came from. Remember how you got this far.

Jump ahead to Christianity, and it’s similar. Jesus lives a life of sacrifice all the way to the cross. Jesus lives a life of love and forgiveness—radical love, radical

forgiveness—all the way to the cross. All that gets exemplified and summarized by Jesus's Last Supper, an extensive drama that ends with Jesus saying—come on, you know it by heart—it ends with Jesus saying, "Do this in remembrance of me." *In remembrance*. Our job as inheritors of Jewish-Christian faith is to make each day Memorial Day. Remembering.

Since we've all been more or less stuck inside for 65 days (but who's counting?), Let's do some remembering. What do you remember that you used to do that you haven't been doing? What do you remember about daily life that as soon as you can, you're going to run out and do? What you remember about America that you want to get back to enjoying, honoring? Heck, what you remember about Church that you want back ASAP?

I'm sure you've been having these conversations with your friends and family or in your head for weeks. Depending on where we are in life, people are saying, "I can't wait to go to school, I never thought I'd say that!" "I want to see people, any people, real people!" "I want to shop without being afraid."

Even people who put off going to the dentist tell me, "I want to go to the dentist." "I want a haircut!" "I want a hug!" And the most universal response, seriously? We've heard it from teenagers, from parents, from our elderly: "Community. We want community back. That simple. Just being together." How simple and basic those things are. Nothing fancy or exotic or expensive. Just simple basic things we remember.

Remembering usually brings out the best in us. When people get nostalgic, when we sit around the table or a back porch, swapping stories, we remember the good stuff. Two people from my childhood are active on Facebook with posts about our childhood neighborhoods in Queens, Woodhaven and Richmond Hill. Wonderful stuff. Wonderful photos. Wonderful stories. None of the bad stuff. I mean, we had gangs, we had tragedies, we had subway strikes and racial conflicts. We even had the Mafia in our neighborhood.

But our memories go to our favorite ice cream parlor, going to Ebbets field to see the Dodgers, where you got the best pizza, the local movie theater, our overhead subway station. And our various "Fields of Dreams" for roller-skating, stickball, baseball.

We've had a lot of funerals lately, and I was talking to one of the sons. We got talking about our baseball careers. We both laughed as I said, "You know, the older we get, the better we used to be." That's the joy of remembering. The good stuff gets priority.

The Bible is doing the same thing, Old and New Testaments, Jewish and Christian Scriptures, both saying, "Remember," God says, "the good stuff." Why? It helps you avoid the bad stuff and get through the tough stuff.

Doing funerals, the truth is a lot of deaths came in difficult ways. A long illness. A tragic accident. A compilation of life's twists and turns. And always, when I meet with the families, I say, or they say, or we all say that we don't want that person's life defined by their last days, their final hours. We want to celebrate the fullness of that life, the breadth and depth, the goodness remembered. That's the basis of all living relationships. The goodness remembered, the goodness built upon, the goodness carried forward.

So God says to ancient Israel, and Jesus says to modern us, think back, remember, when you felt guided, when you felt protected, when you felt strengthened, when you felt needed, when you felt called, when you felt loved. Remember how that felt.

Step by step, we are all emerging from this pandemic crisis shutdown. We have been battered and bruised; it has been a shock to our system. The numbers are horrific, the damage widespread, the whole experience mind-numbing. And now things are stirring. Like crocuses in March and Dogwoods in May, little examples of life are popping up all over. There may yet be baseball. They may yet be graduation parties, there may yet be college and restaurants and vacations and real hugs.

My call to you today is let's make sure the best of us emerges. We all know that there is a big election coming. The partisan knives are already sharpened, and it's pretty sure that it's going to get ugly. Notice I said, "It's going to get ugly."

"It" is an impersonal pronoun. It refers to a *thing*. Personal pronouns, that's you, me, we, us. So it may be true that "It's going to get ugly." But we don't need to be ugly. You and I have the chance to lift up our leaders, lift up our expectations of them, lift up their standards, lift up their sights. Let's put our idealistic best against any political worst, and let the best in us win.

There's a wonderful phrase in the Bible I've always loved, St. Paul writing to his friend Timothy and giving him his best advice. He says, "Be instant in season and out of season." To "be instant" means to be ready "in season and out of season." Think about that. If you're supposed to be ready "in season and out of season," there is no "off-season," no time when you and I can slack off of the Christlikeness that we talk about here in our Church all the time.

Applying that to us on Memorial Day, we need to be remembering what's good, what's best, remembering what's right "in season and out of season," not just Memorial Day. Every day.

Alida and I had three funerals this week: two dear moms, one beloved dad. And they were wonderfully similar. In each case tears were mixed with smiles, while stories were told of great love. That's the power of remembering. The tears of sorrow are real. The stories of love are stronger.

That's worth remembering.

Our closing hymn on this Memorial Day, "**America the Beautiful**"

*O beautiful for spacious skies,  
for amber waves of grain;  
for purple mountain majesties  
above the fruited plain!  
America! America!  
God shed his grace on thee,  
and crown thy good with servanthood  
from sea to shining sea.*

*O beautiful for heroes proved  
in liberating strife,  
who more than self their country loved,  
and mercy more than life!  
America! America!  
May God thy gold refine,  
till all success be nobleness,  
and every gain divine.*

*O beautiful for patriot dream  
that sees beyond the years  
thine alabaster cities gleam,  
undimmed by human tears!  
America! America!  
God mend thine every flaw,  
confirm thy soul in self-control,  
thy liberty in law.*