

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 27, 2020
Sermon: "We Are Out of Our Minds:
A New Year's Sermon"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 2nd Corinthians 5:13-19

¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. ¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Three verses jumped out at me from that Scripture:

Vs. 13: . . . *if we are out of our minds, it is for the sake of God*
Vs. 17: . . . *if anyone is in Christ, the old has gone, the new has come*
Vs. 19: . . . *God has committed us to a ministry of reconciliation*

Well, to begin with, "We are out of our minds." That's the basic organizing principle of our Church ministry. "We are out of our minds." We had seven Christmas services in 24 hours. Plus, two more entirely different online services.

If you've seen the gigantic Christmas tree just outside our Church window, that's from our neighbor's front yard. Seriously. Bill Jaffe gave us his gorgeous 20-foot-tall tree. We got a team of volunteers, cut it down in the snow, put it on a tarp, dragged it up Bronson Road, erected it by the entrance to the tent, *just so* when kids and families came to our outdoor services, they could have that magical "wow" moment when the lights go on and the star sparkles, and they go up to decorate it with angels and shepherds and manger ornaments, as we tell the Christmas story.

The tent itself was a bit of middling sanity. A tent with no walls on a day expecting 50-mile-an-hour winds! And we did have winds for two services, rain for one, sun for one, cold for one. And it was fine. Better than fine.

Our organist played the organ from inside the Church, accompanied by a four-piece brass band outside in its own tent between the big tent and the Church.

Then, indoors for 9 PM and 11 PM. Spectacular music, heavenly beauty, freezing rain. Altogether proving, "We are out of our minds . . . for the sake of God."

But the real verse for today is that middle one: "If anyone is in Christ, we are a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come.

We old-style New Englanders aren't much accustomed to shouting out, "Amen . . . Hallelujah . . . Praise God," but sitting here on December 27th, almost ready to kick the old year out the door, good riddance to 2020, we might be ready to shout, "Hallelujah!" "The old has passed away," "Praise God . . . the new is about to begin!"

I'm not going to belabor 2020. You've gotten or seen all the 2020-related Christmas cards, T-shirts, ornaments; we've heard all the jokes and read all the reviews. Our little Church counts 1,200 members. The newest is two weeks old; the oldest, 98. In any given year, 50 of us, maybe 75 have a really lousy year by all the definitions of lousy. Yes, 2020 made life miserable for everybody. I'm not saying some folks didn't make the most of it. All those "silver linings" that people talk about, they are real. We've found ways to "make do."

The business of turning "lemons into lemonade" worked wonders; and interestingly, in 2020, at both ends of the spectrum. People learned technology *and* relearned the simple things of life. But I was reading a review of the new book by Michael J. Fox, the popular actor who has spent years fighting Parkinson's. In the interview, Fox admits the wisdom of turning lemons into lemonade" but says he's tired of lemonade.

We're tired of 2020. It's done. It needs to be over. Even in good years, you'll remember that the days around New Year's—say from December 27th to 31st, you'd see images of the "Old Year," represented by a decrepit old man and the "New Year," represented by a bubbling, happy baby. Now, as a decrepit old man myself, I might take a little umbrage at equating "I can't wait for this old year to end" with "I can't wait for this old man to end."

But I get the idea: "enough is enough." That's where Christian faith and New Year's traditions connect. New Year's traditions include new calendars. Take that old calendar off the wall, rip it up, toss it out. Put a new one up with all those

empty spaces. Each day a new beginning. Each month accompanied by fresh inspiration: a painting, a photo, a quote. And New Year's resolutions! No matter how much we make fun of them, no matter how quickly we break them, there's still that promise that comes with each resolution. Whether it's something you're going to stop or something you're going to start, the promise of the new year is that you can, in fact, do it. The good, the better, the best you intend *is* possible. Nike is right: "Just Do It."

The theological, especially the practical theological centerpiece of Christianity is similar. Change is possible. Repentance is doable.

The Bible is called "The Holy Bible," but there's not much holiness in there. Moses was a murderer and a scaredy-cat. David was a mercenary and an adulterer. St. Paul was an executioner and more than arrogant. Tough, gruff St. Peter ran and hid when it counted. But they're all in the Biblical Hall of Fame because they rose above their worst moments. You name them: Job. Jonah. Jacob. Rebecca. Esther. Mary. Thomas. Martha. John's mother. Everyone has moments of selfishness, doubt, ego, fear, jealousy, anger, despair.

The ones we remember are the ones who rose above it. The runner who falls down and gets back up to compete. The businessperson who goes broke and bounces back. The friendly neighbor, loved one, or you, going through sickness, rehab, recovery, and finding new life. Anyone who has been written off, ignored, neglected, rejected, and yet there they stand—proud, successful, confident.

"The old has passed away." The old sins, the old reputation, the old way of being, the old attitude, the old failures—over and done with.

We've all heard the old quote, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." At some point, we have to break from the "same over and over again" that has failed us, that isn't working. We have to toss out the old calendar, start a new one; we have to stop what needs to be stopped and start what needs to be started. In secular terms, that's the promise of New Year's. In religious terms, that's the promise of Christian faith. "Out with the old. In with the new." "The old has gone. The new has come."

Christmas Eve I was talking to young friend in Church. She's looking at Hofstra for college. That set me down "Nostalgia Road." I won't bore you with the sordid details, but when I got kicked out of Colgate, Hofstra was the only place on earth to let me in. Inspired by great teaching and fascinating students, I did really well.

Hofstra took a chance on me when I was nothing but risk. Then Colgate let me back in, led by a Dean who believed in me when I had nothing to believe in. Second chance. Forgiveness. The old gone, the new begun.

That leads me to the final key verse for today: "God has committed us to a minute of reconciliation." The promise of reconciliation is person to person *and* us to God. That which has been broken, that which is torn asunder, conflicted, is reconciled, healed, forgiven, made whole.

God doesn't want us burdened by our sins any more than we want 2020 hovering over us forever. "Be done with it," God says about our sins; "Be done with it," the calendar publishers say to us, as we toss the old calendar out; "Be done with it," the optimistic, positive, hopeful person says, ending what didn't work and facing a new year with a new life.

You're going to hear a lot about reconciliation in the new year ahead. Two years ago I wrote my way-too-long essay, "My America," offering a prescription for overcoming division in our nation, our families, our daily lives and interactions.

In my sermon introducing that essay, I called for this Church to be a place of reconciliation, the place where we don't let others divide us, where we don't let ourselves divide us, or we don't let ourselves be divided.

Let this little Church on this little hill be greater than any hate, pressure, ideology out there. That will prove to everybody that "We are out of our minds. For the sake of God."

We neither hide it nor deny it. Chopping down a neighbor's tree, dragging it up the street, having kids hang ornaments on it; putting up a huge tent to seat everybody safely distanced from wind and virus; doing the Sunday School Christmas Pageant filmed outdoors, in masks all over town; creating music in a dozen different, fun ways that lifted every spirit. Raising \$15-\$20,000 in our Christmas offering for "Bridge the Gap," just to help our neighbors. Having all our youth groups still meeting outdoors as we head into January. Keeping the sanctuary open all day, every day; keeping us apart while somehow being together, and being together while somehow keeping apart.

I agree—"We are out of our minds. For the sake of God."

I love it!

Our closing Christmas carol is "What Child Is This?"

*What Child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

Chorus:

*This, this is Christ, the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!*

*Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading. [Chorus]*

*So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own Him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
Let loving hearts enthrone Him. [Chorus]*