

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 12, 2021,  
Sermon: "My Jesus"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Various

## **"My Jesus"**

## **Introduction**

Two years ago I sat in a café in Paris and began to write my newest book. On all of our trips, Alida likes to have the occasional "Alida Day," when she goes on a longer walk than I want to walk, to a place I don't want to go, to see things I don't want to see. It doesn't happen often. Maybe once a week or once a trip. That's not bad. So she goes her way, and I find a coffeehouse. Thus began *My Jesus*. Although let's go back further.

I used to be a runner. I ran most every day for decades and often used my running time to pray, to talk with God. On one of the runs, when I had reached the half-century mark in life, I renegotiated my contract with God. I asked God for permission to do two things in the rest of my pastoral ministry.

First, to err on the side of loving too much rather than too little. I'd seen too much of religion in general, and churches in particular, working hard to exclude people, to keep people away, to love them too little. I wanted to use the rest of my life to love too much. Second, I asked God to let me use the rest of my ministry to concentrate on Jesus.

He was all I could handle. I'd just spent much of my life immersed in world religions. I'm no expert, but I knew them well, often from the inside. I'd worshipped with Buddhists and Hindus, I'd preached in mosques and synagogues; I studied for years at Harvard's School of World Religions. I have my Master's and Doctorate in Religion. But it was just too much, too expansive, too confusing for my little brain. I can barely grasp all of Christianity with all our denominations and divisions and doctrines.

So I said to God while running the back roads of New England, "Let me focus on Jesus. Let me spend my life, my work, my Church on Jesus." Yes, yes, yes. I know about the Trinity. I know about Transubstantiation, Biblical inerrancy, reincarnation, and predestination. I know creeds and dogmas, St. Paul and the Reformation. I know who can get Communion and who gets rejected. I know

about speaking in tongues and High Church versus Low Church and televangelists and theology. It all just makes my head spin. So I figured I could spend the rest of my life making my head spin and the rest of my career making your heads spin. Or, we could get to the heart of the matter. And that's Jesus.

So, at that little café in Paris, I began to work. The Jesus of history. The Jesus of the Bible. The Jesus of pop culture. The Jesus of tradition. The Jesus in his own words. The Jesus in everyone else's words. But finally, the bottom line: "My Jesus." The Jesus of my life. The Jesus of my experience. The Jesus of my understanding. And an invitation to you to do the same, to think through the Jesus of your experience, of your questions, of your needs: *Your* Jesus.

Today . . . I introduce you to *My Jesus*: the lifelong journey with Jesus and the new book. It's out in the narthex for the next few weeks, \$10 a copy. I'll bring it to you in sermons, chapter by chapter, in the year ahead. We'll use it in Bible Study next month. And Jesus will be the focus of this year's *Advent Devotional*, looking at him every which way. My Jesus and yours. This will be a great journey together.

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### **Scripture, said in unison:**

His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Almighty God, the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:16)

You shall call his name "Jesus" because he will save us from our sin. (Luke 1:31)

He is Emmanuel – God with us. (Matthew 1:23)

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, who comes from God, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God. (Matthew 16:16)

He humbled himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:7)

This is my body broken for you; this is my blood, shed for you. (1 Cor. 11:24)

He is gone into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. (1 Peter 3:22)

I am the good shepherd . . . the vine . . . the gate . . . I am the way, the truth, the life, and the resurrection. (Gospel of John)

Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:20)

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## **"My Jesus"**

## **Sermon**

After Alida finished her Covid quarantine in Spain, she had one free day to do some sightseeing. Museum? Check. Botanical Gardens? Check. Cathedral? Check. But she also found a little out-of-the-way Church we'd never seen, "The Church of San José." When she returned to Fairfield, she told me I would have loved it. It was the perfect "David Rowe Church." Dark. Somber. With a dead, bloody, life-sized Jesus lying at the foot of the cross.

And Alida is right—that awfulness touches my soul, despite a lifetime in cheery New England Protestantism, filled with stories of Jesus surrounded by children, carrying a little lamb on his shoulders, being nice and helpful and generous to everybody—friend and foe, rich and poor, young and old.

My Church memories are happy. My Jesus memories are happy. The Jesus of *My Jesus* is an entirely positive force. And yet, Alida is right. I am drawn to the crucified Christ, the sacrifice, the agony, the loneliness, the loss. Jesus carrying his cross, Jesus on the cross, Jesus off the cross, cradled in his mother's arms like Michelangelo's "Pietà," perfectly capturing the horror and the beauty, the sorrow and the purpose, the evil . . . and the love. Jesus is the ultimate paradox! A contradiction and enigma, an exclamation point and a question mark, humanity and divinity all wrapped up together.

We are the inheritors of Jesus Christ. Whether we are Christian, or consumers of culture, our understanding of Jesus is 2,000 years in the making. I was reading about a Church with gigantic stained-glass windows, featuring a really white Jesus, a lily-white Jesus. They've been figuring out how to keep the stained-glass window and not undo the beauty of their Church but still cover up the way-too-white Jesus. They created a treelike art piece, where the tree trunk and branches cover up Jesus's flesh, so you still have a lovely stained-glass window but no white Jesus.

To tell you the truth, I don't fault the stained-glass artist or the Church. We grow up knowing what we know. The Jesus of most of my life has been Western, Northern European white. I grew up with a mass media post-World War II, Madison Avenue, Hollywood Jesus. When we went to the movies to see "King of Kings" or "The Greatest Story Ever Told" or "Ben Hur," Jesus pretty much looked like me, but taller.

At Church we were taught Bible stories by filmstrip and flannelgraph. Filmstrips were like slideshows linked together, one set scene followed by another. Flannelgraph was like cutout dolls that you placed on large panels of flannel, moving them about as the story unfolded. Like Ken and Barbie made of paper, pretty

much looking like Ken and Barbie. As I grew up, I branched out to other art forms with other Jesuses.

The haunted Jesus of "Jesus Christ, Superstar" on Broadway, leading Mary Magdalene to plaintively sing, "I don't know how to love him." The good-buddy Jesus of 1970's rock 'n' roll song, "Put Your Hand in the Hand (of the man who stilled the water)"; and the huge hit, "Oh, Happy Day (when Jesus washed . . . my sins away.)" How cool was Jesus if they sang about him on top 40 radio or "Casey Kasem's Countdown"? And there was the almost hippie, good vibes tragic/comic Jesus of "Godspell" and the "Cotton Patch Gospel" on and off Broadway—a little vaudeville, a little slapstick, great music, happy till it's not, then happy again.

And if you grew up in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant churches, you mostly sang pretty hymns about the nice Jesus. Oh, there was the occasional "Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed?" and "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood." But for the most part we sang these:

"Tell Me the Stories of Jesus"  
"Fairest Lord Jesus"  
"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"  
"Jesus, Friend, So Kind and Gentle"  
"All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name"  
"Jesus Shall Reign"  
"Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult"  
"Jesus, Lover of My Soul"  
"Softly and Tenderly, Jesus Is Calling."

Eventually I grew up, and after failing Art Appreciation 101 in college, I started to appreciate art. All the greats, all the classics, the Dutch Masters and Italian legends. Rembrandt and Caravaggio; all those legendary Bible stories captured on canvas and sculpted in marble. No surprise, the artists' models were European, the Biblical village scenes were European, the clothing and food and everything portrayed, European. And why not? That's what they knew.

And then I began to travel. Across Africa, India, Latin America, the Caribbean. And guess what! They paint and sculpt what they know. Black Jesus. Brown Jesus. Asian Jesus. African village settings for Bethlehem. Nicaraguan and Indian and Peruvian settings for all the Bible stories. Bible characters wearing colorful clothing and living in houses and eating food from their culture, their region, their tribe. Saris and kente cloth and sombreros; rice and beans, curry and fufu; each culture reshaping Jesus and Christianity to its own form.

That's in art and culture, but it is equally true in theology and Christology. Theology is "God talk," the study of God. Christology is more specific, the study of Jesus Christ. And all that changes from place to place, century to century.

In my book (and you'll hear that a lot in the next year!), in my book I quote a scholar who refers to the "Jesus of Each Epoch." It's the idea that things change a lot, things change dramatically every generation or so, even every decade, things change dramatically every year, even daily. It's true of family history, natural history, personal history; it's true of religion and culture and business. Things change, we change, the world changes, and what attracts our attention, what captures our imagination changes. Through it all, for 2,000 years, in the middle of it all, stands Jesus. *Jesus*. But which Jesus?

In the last 200 years, there have been two diametrically opposed efforts with Jesus. One to maximize him. One to minimize him. The maximization of Jesus emphasizes his majesty, his royalty, the coming day when all the world's power will bow before him, the fierce warrior king triumphant over all.

The minimization of Jesus brings him down a peg or two, turns him into sort of a Jewish Dalai Lama, a wandering holy man, a do-gooder, a nice guy. Is he one or the other, or both? Or even better?

In that little Paris café, I listed the names and titles people have come up with to break away from the old-timey Christ of power; or from the feel-good "Jesus loves me."

Jesus as the . . .  
Turning point of history  
Cosmic Christ  
King of Kings  
Son of Man  
Light of the Gentiles  
True image  
Monk who ruled the world  
Model exemplar  
Universal man  
Prince of peace  
Teacher of common sense  
Liberator  
Salvator Mundi  
Bridegroom of the soul  
Power of the spirit,  
Mirror of the Eternal

Again . . . which Jesus?

I was reading this week about one of America's largest churches led for the last 60 years by two of America's most influential pastors. The current one is a key player in Texas's new laws against abortion. The previous one didn't bother much about it. Two pastors of the same Church, the same denomination, the same politics, preaching Jesus. Jesus, full-time Jesus .

Yet, total opposites on one of the most significant issues of the last 60 years. That's the dichotomy that surrounds Jesus. It is *not* an exaggeration to say that many of the worst things done in the last few hundred years were done in Jesus's name. And many of the best things were done in Jesus's name. What do we make of this? What do I make of this?

In one of the most profound conversations in the Bible, Jesus asks the Disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" What's the gossip? What's the talk around town? What do people make of me? Then Jesus looks Peter straight in the eye and says, "Who do *you* say that I am?" What do *you* make of me? Who is *your* Jesus?

What I've done in the last 25 years and what I'm doing with this book is to simplify things. To break it down. To break religion down. To break Christianity down. To break Jesus down to the essentials.

In most things in life there comes a time when we need to break it down. I'm a writer. Fifty years of writing sermons, books, essays, poems. And in every writing effort, there is a point where I get tangled up in sentences, lose my way in a paragraph, drowning in words.

After countless fits and starts, I have to break it down. Forget all the efforts I've put into writing already. Forget all the corrections I've made already. Forget all the noble thoughts I thought were so inspired. I need to break it down. I ask myself: what am I trying to say? Then I strip all the verbiage away, and say it.

For those of you into sports, it's the same thing. Golf. Tennis. Your ski run. Your basketball shot. For me it was baseball. Every season there comes a point when your game is off, your swing isn't working. You try to tweak it. Fix it yourself. Nothing. Finally, you have to break it down. To the basics. To the essentials. Not the fancy. Not the complex. Not the overreach.

In baseball, when I was slumping, I choked up on the bat, shortened my swing, might even bunt, and at practice I'd play "pepper." Bat meets ball. Period.

*My Jesus* breaks it down. Two thousand years of Christianity. All sorts of Christians breaking off in this direction or that, hating on one another, dividing,

excluding, fighting, literally fighting, literally killing one another. Two thousand years of wasted faith, wasted opportunity, wasted Jesus.

My lofty goal is to reclaim Jesus, to break down the religion that bears his name, Christianity. And zero in on his heart, his essence.

Now let's switch gears entirely. I'll close with a story from India. I began our mission, FOCI (Friends of Christ in India) with two amazing Indian friends. Azariah and Sister Mary Seethamma. Sister Mary grew up in India as a Hindu at a time when child marriage still happened. While still a little girl, not even a teenager, she was married to her much older adult uncle. He soon died. Mary was still little girl *and* a widow, both the worst things to be in the old days, confined and restricted in every way, only a life of drudgery and loneliness ahead. As life became unbearable, she became desperate. Sister Mary attempted two escapes: suicide and running away. She felt abandoned at every turn by everyone.

Miraculously, what saved her life was a small group of Jesus followers. In the name of Jesus, in the spirit and path of Jesus, they welcomed her, they made her life matter. Jesus became the bright light in her life. Not some doctrine. Not tradition. Not denomination. Just Jesus. My Jesus. Maybe yours.

Let's find out.

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**Following is the Prayer of Invocation given by Rev. Alida Ward at  
Fairfield's 9/11 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration – Sept. 11, 2021**

Let us pray:

God of hope and God of strength, be with us on this day that is sacred to us forever.

Today we remember that when people ask God for help—  
you, God, send people.  
When people call on you for help, you send people.

Twenty years ago today,  
thousands called on you for help  
and hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds came to them.

Today we grieve for the thousands lost.  
And today we remember those who ran to help them.

The community of first responders who heard God calling them to the towers.  
The 343 firefighters who gave their lives,  
the 71 law enforcement officers who sacrificed theirs,  
and the hundreds of others who ran toward the flames  
drawn by invisible cords of courage and of love.

Today, O God, speak to us through our sorrow  
for those whose names we still speak with grief  
for those whose names are etched in stone in a place we now hold sacred  
for those whose hearts were broken twenty years ago  
and those forever altered by sickness and by loss.

When people call for help, God, you send people.

Help us, all of us, to be those people.  
May the strength of those we mourn give us strength.  
May the faith of those we remember give us faith.  
May your hope give us hope.  
And may we, each day, remember the words that Father Mychal Judge, FDNY  
Chaplain, spoke each morning:  
*Lord, today, take me where you want me to go.*

Amen.

(inspired by the *UCC Daily Devotional*, published on September 11, 2021)

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Our final hymn today is "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty," No. 25 in your Hymnal

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, who rules all creation.  
O my soul, worship the wellspring of health and salvation.  
All ye who hear,  
now to God's temple draw near.  
Join me in in glad adoration.*

*Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,  
who, as on wings of an eagle uplifted, sustaineth.  
Hast thou not seen?  
All that is needful hath been  
granted in what God ordaineth?*

*Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work, and defend thee.  
Surely God's goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.*



*Ponder anew  
what the Almighty can do,  
who with great love doth befriend thee.*

*Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee,  
fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee.  
Then to thy need  
God as a mother doth speed,  
spreading the wings of grace o'er thee.*

*Praise to the Lord! O let all of God's peoples and races,  
all that hath life and breath, give thanks for manifold graces.  
Let the Amen  
sound from God's people again.  
Gladly forever sing praises.*