

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 26, 2021
Sermon: "Deborah – Alida's Forerunner"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany – Alida's Favorites

Litany of Alida's Favorite Scriptures

Leader: *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.* Isaiah 43

People: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." Matthew 19

Leader: *"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."* Matthew 25

People: What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6

Leader: *Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who loves God and does what is right is acceptable to God.* Acts 10

People: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Luke 10

Leader: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Show me your faith apart from your works. I by my works will show you my faith.* James 2

People: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep . . . If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 12

Those are very, very special Scriptures, not only Alida's favorites, but they also fit her to a T. Today is the third and final part of a nine-month celebration. The first two parts were sermon presentations by Alida, one on her calling into ministry,

the second on her trademarks—what make her the minister we treasure. Today is the final piece: a lot of praise, a lot of fun, and a lot of cake!

And I must say across all those years, all those accomplishments, nothing has put a bigger smile on her face than becoming the Chaplain of our Fairfield Fire Department. And like everything else she does, she jumped into that 100 percent, visiting each firehouse, talking to the firefighters, delving deep into the ethos and spirit of being true first responders; and, yes, even baking cookies. We welcome Fairfield Fire Chief Dennis McCarthy here today to join us in celebrating Alida.

We've been making a big deal out of Alida's 32 years at our Church, which is unusual. The number 32 isn't special or auspicious or holy. We think of 10- or 25- or 50-year celebrations, or three and seven as holy numbers, even 40, which in the Bible represents fulfillment. But 32? Yet, this Church has recognized that 32 *is* a Big Deal. For us. For Alida. For our brand of religion.

The "glass ceiling" that has often kept women below a certain level of success and authority is called the "stained glass ceiling" in church life. For most of 2,000 years women were kept out of pastoral ministry, period. Once women began to be ordained in larger numbers, from the 1980s, say, they were usually limited in choice and opportunities. But Alida broke through the stained-glass ceiling to become a prominent pastor of a thriving Church and an influential person respected all over town.

Her participation, her counsel, her presence is sought and valued. And now she's been here for 32 years. The longest serving pastor in our Church's 300-year history and certainly one of the longest serving women pastors at a single Church anywhere. In New England. In America. In the world! This is historical! This is monumental! And it has been wonderful to see the whole Church embrace this significance.

The first meeting I attended here was June 1997, and the first item on the agenda was "replacing Alida," helping Alida "to move on." It was actually a well-intentioned meeting. She had been here eight years as an Assistant. She had just earned her doctoral degree at Princeton Seminary. It was the perfect time for her to go to the next step in her career or, it was decided, we could figure out what it would take to keep Alida here, to keep her fully engaged, motivated, fulfilled, to make her want to stay.

When you think about it, that was a fascinating process, based on wanting what was best for her, and they ended up choosing a path it was best for our Church and best for her. That was 24 years ago. Thank God for wiser heads.

Have you noticed my sermon title? "Deborah"? I should explain it quickly, or some of you will think I've forgotten my wife's name! No, I was looking for some Biblical, female parallel to Alida that would equal her status and her achievements. We all are alive at the moment in history when lots of "firsts" are being celebrated. The first Black superhero in the movies, the first woman mayor in Boston, the first woman governor in New York, the first Asian to win an Oscar for directing, the first all-citizen crew of astronauts in outer space, the first baseball pitcher to hit 40 home runs and win 10 games.

The world changes and improves, new standards are set, new voices and faces emerge, new stories are told—all to the good. So it is worth noting that Alida became the longest-serving pastor in our Church's 300-year history—male or female. I told you this a few months ago, but it's worth repeating for perspective. About 4,000 churches in America close every year; about 17,000 pastors quit, 13,000 get fired. That's a whole lot of pastors and churches that don't like each other.

There's a true story of a pastor who got up to preach on Christmas Sunday and said to the congregation, "I'm giving you all what you want for Christmas. I quit!" And he walked down the aisle and out the door. So yes, 32 years at the same Church big deal. And the pride should go both ways. Alida should be proud and you, her people, her congregation, her Church *should* be proud.

That's what got me scouring the Bible for women of conviction, women of courage, women of vision, women of accomplishment, women who stood their ground, did their jobs, made a mark.

Queen Esther, who saved the Jewish people from an earlier holocaust in Persia 2,500 years ago. Lydia, a successful businesswoman who embraced Christianity when it wasn't popular. Mary Magdalene, who stood by Jesus through thick and thin, even when it was dangerous. Ruth, whose enduring sacrificial love has been the model of faithfulness, defying the culture, religions, and traditions of her day. Just love.

All good examples, but I went for Deborah. To understand why, we have to step back in time, 3,300 years ago, back to the ancient Middle East at a time when Israel had fallen on hard times." (Judges 4 and 5) They were headed downhill, in the wrong direction, overwhelmed by challenges, beset by problems. The one bright light was Deborah, described in the Bible as a "prophet" *and* counted as a "judge." To be accepted by the people in those days as a "prophet" meant that folks trusted you to express God's will. And to be a "judge" in Biblical times meant that whenever there was a squabble in Israel, folks trusted you to give a fair hearing and make a wise judgment. The Bible tells us that "Deborah sat under a palm tree and people came to her to have their disputes settled." Which is

basically Alida's life, minus "sitting under the palm tree." Alida never sits still. And there are no palm trees in New England.

Other than that, Alida and Deborah share a lot in common. People's trust. People's confidence. Her demeanor. Her wisdom. Her patience. Her spirit. When life gets tough or complicated or worrisome, there needs to be somebody in our corner we can count on, that we would go to, that we know would listen to us, care about us, and love us, no matter what.

That's rare in our world. Rare as 32 years in one Church. Rare as a woman running the show. Rare as Alida.

Now the story of Deborah gets more interesting. She didn't like the mess Israel was in. She didn't like the taste of defeatism in the air. She didn't like the presence of oppressors all around. With full confidence of God in her bones, with full faith of God's spirit as her tailwind, she gathered the top generals of Israel and told them to take on the enemy, face to face, trusting God for triumph.

The generals . . . the male generals, may I add, the professionals, they said to Deborah, "Nope. Not unless you go first." And you can imagine the snickering, the catcalls, the vulgar jokes; the macho posturing that went with it. Until, to their amazement, Deborah says, "Sure, let's go, follow me." And Deborah led Israel to dramatic, liberating, miraculous victory.

As a parable, *and* as a parallel, that's Alida. Alida entered pastoral ministry at a time when churches were closing, Christianity was dwindling, youth groups were dying, and religion was in decline. Not a very promising career choice!

She comes from a family of very accomplished people. Some 80 years combined of teaching at Harvard, University of Virginia, and Brown University. Decades of public service. Wonderful musicians and world travelers. But Alida joins a profession dying on the vine! Oh, sure, there were some thriving churches, mega-churches, fundamentalist churches.

But they don't even believe in women Deacons! We had a megachurch pastor speak one year during Lent, and he said flat out, "No women in leadership." Period. Fundamentalist churches, same thing. No women pastors. No Alidas. Their loss. So Alida found her way here at a time like Deborah's, a time fraught with challenges, obstacles, difficulties.

Thirty-two years later, she stands here like Deborah, triumphant, confident in God's word, speaking through her, confident in God's spirit, working through her. Each year for 32 years she has echoed Deborah: "Let's go," she says, to us, about everything. "Follow me." Except she never makes us feel as though we're

following her. She makes us feel as though we're on a journey together, side by side, following God's best path, and she's on the journey with us.

There's a story told about Jesus. You know the basics: he gets born on Christmas, killed on Good Friday, resurrected on Easter, hangs around for a couple of weeks, then, a few weeks later, he goes back to heaven. That's where the story picks up. When Jesus gets to heaven, all the angels and heroes of the Bible, they gathered 'round. They couldn't wait to hear his report about his experience on earth. "How did it go?" they asked, breathlessly. "Well, I did everything I was supposed to. Some liked it. Some didn't. So they killed me. But I came back, and now I'm here. But I left 12 men to take care of everything." "Twelve men?" Someone asked. "What's Plan B?" "There is no Plan B," Jesus says.

Well, as I said, that's a story. If the point of the story is that Jesus left the church in our hands, human hands—true enough. And sometimes, it works beautifully.

The simple truth is that even though this is Alida's day, yes, we're celebrating Alida. Yes, Alida gets the praise and the gift, but the simple truth is that today is as much about you as it is about her. You have 32 years of being a wonderful, supportive, encouraging, loving, exciting, and visionary congregation. For 32 years, you've been a team, and you've done it right. You've made it work. For 32 years you've enabled her, let her soar. If Jesus's plan was to leave the church in hands like yours, no need for plan B. But, if the point of the story is that the church was left in male hands, well, guess what! There is a plan B: Alida.

Women have been the backbone of the church for 2,000 years. Now they get to be the "headbone," to coin a phrase. And for 32 years, we've had the best one.

At Alida's 10th anniversary celebration, 22 years ago, 1999, I told you that Greenfield Hill Church was known as the "Church of Timothy Dwight." But one day it would be known as the "Church of Alida Ward." That day has arrived.

Alida's final benediction you've heard a thousand times. Let's all stand and say it together:

Go out into the world in peace. Have courage! Hold fast to what is good. Return to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people.

Love and serve the Lord your God rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit

And now, let's sing our final hymn, "Come Celebrate the Call of God," written by Brian Wren in 1989 as a gift for Alida's ordination here at Greenfield Hill Church.

*Come, celebrate the call of God
that wakens and renews,
and chooses from us, for our good,
the bringers of good news.
The Spirit's blessing all ordains
to show what God has done,
yet brings to focus and contains
the many in the one.*

*A chosen one today replies,
and fit and ready stands.
Her calling now we recognize
with prayer and loving hands.
A servant leader, truthful friend,
we gladly will receive,
to stir and comfort, shake and mend,
be glad with us, and grieve.*

*Great Spirit, give her word and breath
in Christ to live and speak,
and shield against the powers of death
the outcast and the weak,
her flag of faith, above defeats,
in heaven's breeze unfurled,
as all her deepest gladness meets
the hunger of the world.*