

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 3, 2022  
Sermon: "God as Opera"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Scripture, in unison

*I and the Father are one. Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father-God. I am in God, and God is in me. It is God, living in me, who is doing His work. I will ask my Father, God, and God will send you His Spirit. You will realize that I am in my Father, God, and you are in me, and I am in you. The world must learn that I love God the Father, and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me. May you be one as we are one.*

(taken from various verses of John 10, 14, and 17, on the unity of God and Jesus, and introducing the Holy Spirit)

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**Sermon: "God as Opera" David Johnson Rowe**

(David has been preaching a series of sermons spread over the year, based on the chapters of his book, *My Jesus*.)

Introduction:

When you write a book, you want it read! So a lot of thought goes into topic, book cover art, font size, chapter titles. I took some risks with chapter titles for *My Jesus*.

I'm trying to get you to lay out \$10 to buy a copy, and right there on page 1, I'm planting in your mind that it might be boring! Two other chapter titles use the word "Kerygma," a word most have never heard before.

A few weeks ago my sermon was based on chapter 6, "Jesus Doesn't Want Me for a Sunbeam," the title of a grunge rock song by Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. The song mocks one of the most popular children's hymns.

Chapter 9 was another big risk, "What if I'm wrong!" You paid 10 bucks, you diligently read 139 pages of my attempt to show a loving, miraculous, life-

giving, positive-leaning, hopeful, always good Jesus. And then I hit you on page 140 with "What if I'm wrong?!"

We'll do that chapter in the spring. Today's chapter and title are more enigmatic: "God as Opera." *God as Opera*. Titles are meant to entice you, to draw you in, to make you think even before you start reading! So . . . What are you thinking?

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The most convoluted Christian teaching is the Trinity. *The Trinity*. Trinity means three. A trinity is made up of three of any things that are connected. In Christianity, we teach that God is three in one, the Trinity. God the Father. God the Son. God the Holy Spirit. God as Creator. God as Redeemer. God as inspiration. Yet we claim to be a monotheistic religion: mono-theistic = one God.

Christianity is the spiritual direct descendent of Judaism, the world's first monotheistic religion. Somehow, we keep monotheism central and still talk about the three persons of the Trinity: persons . . . plural. Resulting in Christianity's own unique math,"  $1+1+1=1$ : one God, one Jesus, one Holy Spirit, add them up, those three persons, plural,  $1+1+1=?$  We say "1."

Which leads me to God as opera. Before Covid, Alida and I went to Paris, and she took me to tour the Opera House. Not a performance, just the tour. It was fascinating and magical and spectacular: gigantic chandeliers, humongous stage, the ceiling painted by the great and mystical Marc Chagall. The Opera House filled with mementos of all the great operas and opera singers. It left me stunned, filled with wonder, and lots of questions; especially, how do they do that? How does it all come together?

You've got dancers and actors and singers and chorus and costumes and orchestra and special effects and startling surprises, fire and lakes and forests and palaces. How does that work? You probably wondered the same thing after a great Broadway musical.

The next day we got a private guide to take us through the Musée d'Orsay, the magnificent museum famous for all the greats of French art. So we walk through all the Rodin statues, past the van Goghs and the Pissarros, to the far end, where our guide shows us a replica of the Paris Opera House in miniature. About 3 to 4 feet high, split in half and opened up. And showing everything from the Marc Chagall ceiling to all the ropes and pulleys and stagecraft, all the subterranean storage, including, well, if you want a lake, here's a lake; you need a forest or a castle? There they are, ready to be hauled upward to the stage.

Suddenly, the opera house made sense. I could see how it worked. I could see how it all fit together. A mystery revealed. God as opera. God is a mystery. Two-thirds of the Bible is the Old Testament, and it features almost entirely God. There are a few passing references to the Spirit and some promise of a coming Messiah, but the focus is on God.

And God is mysterious. Originally, God was so special, so mysterious, that even God's name was unpronounceable: "YHWH." No vowels. Can't say it. We're even told not to say God's name "in vain." We're told "not to make any image of God" at all. We're told to "worship in spirit and truth." We're told to "fear God." God is male and female, Judge and King. Creator. Destroyer. Alpha and Omega. The Beginning and the End.

God is angry, just, awesome, and vengeful; yet merciful, slow to anger, a lover. God wipes out the earth with Noah's flood and destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone, kills Job's whole family to make a point. And we are supposed to get the point.

God sends manna from Heaven when the Israelites are hungry. God sends a cloud to protect them from danger. God sets the rainbow in heaven as a promise to never destroy us again. God sends angels and dreams and visions to guide us. Yet God never shows his face, never shows up in person.

To put God in human terms, God is the toughest coach you ever had, the sternest teacher you ever had, the most helicopter parent on earth, an absolute monarch, a no-nonsense judge, a demanding "my way or the highway" boss.

We've all had such people in our lives, some of us have been such people, and the fact is it's not a sustainable model. At some point we need to know there's something beneath the wrath, beyond the anger, something deeper, better, some purpose within to be revealed. Jesus is the reveal. But it took a while for me to catch on.

We recently celebrated my 50 years since ordination, my 54<sup>th</sup> year in ministry. And it's amazing I made it this long. When I was younger, oh my! I had this young man in my church who was terrorizing his mother. One day I saw him on the main street of the town, walking my way. When we got close, I punched him in the stomach, hard, doubled him over, then I bent down and whispered in his ear, "If you ever touch your mother again, I'll kill you." He left town the next day, and soon he was killed in a bar fight.

Was I a good pastor? Or right? Or helpful? Decades later I'm in this Church, where we talk about "Christlikeness" and love nonstop. Maybe I've learned a thing or two.

In my book I raise the specter of a couple of heresies that basically have to do with the nature of God. Heresies are ideas that most people don't agree with, the stuff that used to get you burned at the stake. For example, I suggest that God "maybe learned a thing or two." That's a heresy because God is supposed to be omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, unchanging, "the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow."

We're taught that God wiped out humanity in the Great Flood *and* died on the Cross for humanity in the form of Jesus. We're taught to kill every man, woman, child, and animal in the Battle of Jericho; *and* we should "turn the other cheek," "love our enemies," and "forgive debts and debtors."

That's a whole lot of change, best explained in one of two ways: God changed; or our understanding of God changed. Either way, that's a whole lot of change.

Which brings us back to "God as Opera." For me, opera is a mystery. I can be awed by it. Amazed by it. Puzzled by it. And maybe I could just leave it at that. But for me, seeing the miniature Paris Opera House cut in half and split open to reveal the inner workings—that was enlightening, exciting. It opened me up to opera as I'd never known it. And in the past year or so, seeing some deeply personal documentaries on Pavarotti and Maria Callas that opened my eyes.

All of a sudden, I could understand what they were doing, and how they went about it, and what it all means and why it's so powerful. Why it matters. Why people love it. None of this inner knowledge ruined it for me. Seeing the guts of the Opera House or learning the personal struggles of the great artists—none of that took away the splendor or the power. For me, it made it more real. For me, that is what Jesus does for God. He opens up God. I can look inside. I can see what God is up to and why. And why it matters. And why we can love it so.

There can be a harshness to God when viewed in isolation, a rigidity to God, an inscrutability, and yes, a mystery that is not always enchanting. Almost like a parent or teacher or coach who won't let you see their soft side, who won't let their guard down.

It definitely leads us to fear God, which the Bible tells us to do a million times; and to worship God, which the Bible tells us we'd better do if we know what's good for us; and to obey God if we don't want to be in trouble. But somewhere along the line in the history of humanity, God wanted more than to be feared, worshiped, and obeyed.

God wants our heart. Our love. Our faith. To do that, God, like my opera house, needed to be split open so we can see inside. Jesus is the softer side. Jesus lets his guard down. Jesus is "one with us," the very promise of Christmas. Jesus IS

God, split open, so we can see inside. Jesus is the human side of God.

One of my favorite quotes (you've heard me use it a lot) is "If you're having trouble grasping the idea of God, it's too ethereal, too remote, too other-worldly—don't worry about it. Concentrate on Jesus. Jesus is the near end of God. *Jesus is the near end of God.*"

That's why our Scripture today is a conglomeration of verses in which Jesus plunges himself into God. They are one. You've heard it said of some best friends, of certain couples, "If you see one, you've seen the other." That's what Jesus is saying about him and God. Joined at the hip. A team. "You see one, you see the other." They're each other's shadow.

And Jesus lived his life so flagrantly, so fully, holding nothing back, that we get to see the real depth of God, *the real depth*. A love. An attention. A passion. A commitment. A sacrifice.

It comes through the best of Jesus's days. The magnificent miracles. The soaring stories. The tender moments. And it comes through the worst, the hardest of Jesus's days.

Holy Week begins next Sunday. "The passion of Christ," we call it, when we get to feel all that Jesus feels. It can be hard, brutal, discouraging. But also inspiring, uplifting, motivating . . . saving.

Perhaps one of Christianity's most popular hymns is "How Great Thou Art," that ponders the greatness, the unequalled, even unimaginable greatness of God. Almost beyond our comprehension. The hymn writer, pondering the great mystery of God, declares, "And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die—I scarce can take it in."

Couple that with the all-too-human Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, just after the Last Supper, just before he's arrested and crucified, praying to God, "If it be possible, remove this cup, this burden, this awful destiny from me. Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done."

Jesus takes us inside to what we scarce can take in. And we understand. Now we get it.

On Monday evening, Alida organized our Fairfield Clergy for one of the most important and powerful interfaith events in our Town's history. With 12 participants from nine churches, synagogues, and mosques, we prayed for peace in Ukraine.

The priest from a Ukrainian Church captivated us with his strong call for love in the midst of war. He described the kind of love in the Bible. There's the erotic, romantic love; and a best-buddy kind of love; plus family love. He described the kind of love in the Bible. But the priest zeroed in on Agape love, a Godly love, rooted in sacrifice, yes, in suffering. Sacrificial, unselfish suffering, he reminded us that by its very love is healing and life-giving.

That's the life and meaning of Jesus. That's what makes sense of Holy Week. That's the joy of Easter. That's God as Opera, the mystery opened wide.

Our parting hymn today is No. 433, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." Let's stand and sing together.

*Blest be the tie that binds  
our hearts in Christian love:  
the fellowship of kindred minds  
is like to that above.*

*When we are called to part,  
it gives us inward pain;  
but we shall still be joined in heart,  
and hope to meet again.*