

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: July 10, 2022  
Sermon: "Religion in the News"  
Scripture: Esther 3:12-15  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## Esther 3:12-15

*Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.*

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Here's this morning's full-page lead op-ed in today's *New York Post*: "Keeping the Faith: Christians Are Sick of Being Punished for Their Views in America." That's "Religion in the News."

In the Bible, Jesus is talking with the Disciples about a construction accident in a nearby town that killed 18 people. People wondered if God killed them for their sins. That's "Religion in the News." The building collapse is the "news." Blaming God is the "religion." (Luke 13:4).

In our Scripture lesson this morning from the Book of Esther, the King of Persia sends out a proclamation that on a certain day anyone can get up and kill as many Jews as they want. This was before radio, TV, or the Internet, so the "news" was distributed by couriers riding across the nation, or shouted by town criers, or on a notice nailed to a tree. The O.K. to do it is the "news." The fact that it targeted Jews is the "religion."

Let's sample some headlines before looking more closely at a few. "Southern Baptist Moral Meltdown," about clergy sex abuse in America's largest denomination and the inevitable cover-up." "The Passover Story is an American Story," trumpeted another newspaper, about the link between Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery and that story's inevitable link to America's struggle with slavery and racism. But here's my favorite just this week from the "Religion News Service," an aggregator of "religion in the news." (Why didn't I think of that?)

This one caught my eye: "Forty Years After Mass Wedding at Madison Square Garden." I was there! Forty years ago my son and I took the subway into Manhattan to Madison Square Garden to attend one of Rev. Moon's "Mooney mass weddings," 2,075 couples from all over the world, married at one time by the notorious would-be Messiah, Rev. Moon.

Let me tell you, that was a trip. But it's also a great jumpstarter for discussion about religious cults, arranged marriage, and even the power of culture over religion.

Next are two opposite sides of the same coin about women rabbis. One is titled "Woman Orthodox Rabbi – First to Start and Lead Own House of Worship." The other from the *Connecticut Post* is about a new female Chinese-American Jewish gay Rabbi in New Haven. *The Boston Globe* also had a front-page tribute article on Nancy Taylor, retiring after heading Boston's historic Old South Church. All three articles get us thinking about the changing face, literally, of religious leadership. And it's more than just the "face" that changes. Expanded leadership results in new ways, new priorities, new styles, new tone.

When I entered seminary, our incoming class was 88 strong: one Black woman, one White woman, one Black man, and 85 versions of me, who were mostly White, male, fresh out of college, straight (as far as we knew). My one gay classmate was denied ordination.

These articles I mentioned, like all stories in "Religion in the News," are jumping-off points for lively discussion to get us thinking, questioning, pondering.

For example, what does it mean to be a pastor, a clergy person? What do you want in a pastor? What would be a deal-breaker? Our denomination was at the forefront of women's ordination 150 years ago. Alida is absolutely at the forefront of women's leadership in religion and in our town. How do we go about finding the next generation of church pastors?

It's the same with the Bible, right? We don't study a verse or preach a Bible story just because Jesus said it 2,000 years ago or Moses did it 3,000 years ago. This isn't archaeology, where our only interest is in things because they're old. We always want to know the application to today, to us, now.

The Old Testament part of the Bible has references to businesses cheating their customers by manipulating, corrupting weights and measures. Well, what does that verse teach us in 2022 about business ethics, customer rights, and why does God give a hoot about any of it?

Many religious news articles are sort of "self-help," general-interest stories, not much different from the Food section. In the Food section, you'll find articles on how to make the perfect summer salad or a new recipe for a vegan meatloaf or a fresh raspberry pie.

*The New York Times* had two excellent articles that were sort of "self-help" but also provocative about prayer. One was right after the murder of schoolchildren in Texas, titled, "In Prayer We Find Answers and Strength." The other is "Praying to a God You Don't Believe In." That elicited a lot of thoughtful letters to the editor. In fact, a headline in the "Letters to the Editor" section caught my eye: "Dear God, Even If You Don't Exist."

That actually was my conversion prayer. At my lowest ebb, kicked out of college, the Army wouldn't take me. Other colleges wouldn't accept me. I was an embarrassment and a failure, and while I was working on the Coney Island Beach Boardwalk, God hit me upside the head a lot, until late one night I said out loud, "Dear God, if you exist (and I don't think you do) . . ." and I went on from there.

A wake-up call. Conversion. Transformation. Back to college. The Prodigal Son welcomed home. "The call" to ministry. Seminary. And 56 years after the Coney Island Boardwalk and my own atheist prayer, here I am.

That's how these "Religion in the News" articles can work if we let them. They can take us back, they can propel us forward, they can get us to think deeper.

With "Religion in the News," we look for two kinds of news items. The obvious ones, the ones with God or faith in the headline. And the not-so-obvious ones that don't mention religion at all but beg a religious perspective.

These Covid years led to many stories about the new realities of dying, isolation, grieving, when all the rituals were upended or suspended, or Zoomed. One article was "Book About Death and Grief Can Bring Hope." There's no religion in

the entire article, but we can insert religion into it. We can bring our faith, our experience, our ideas, our books into the article, make it “religion in the news.”

Our Church has a whole ministry devoted to getting books into the hands of people after they’ve had a death in the family. Often my books, with poems about grief, love, and memories; or with chapters about death and beyond; or with short stories about heaven. And other books by other writers, profound, personal, literary, faithful—all designed to agree with that article headline: “Books About Death and Grief Can Bring Hope.”

“Religion in the News” always peaks during presidential elections and politics. News stories mocked Bill Clinton for carrying an oversized Bible to church; questioned George Bush the younger when he said Jesus was his favorite philosopher; didn’t know what to make of Jimmy Carter when he talked about being “born again,” and admitting to adultery by “lusting in his heart.”

When Ben Carson was running for President, news organizations and most people had no idea what it meant that he was a Seventh-day Adventist. Or what it would mean for the Presidency if Romney won as a Mormon, or Jack Kennedy as a Catholic, or Joe Lieberman as an Orthodox Jew. Those articles explored it all, to everyone’s advantage.

Beyond politics, happily for me, religion pops up in every aspect of the news: Food section, culture, Broadway, book reviews, business pages, obituaries, lots and lots of sports stories, and yes, the Supreme Court. In the last three weeks the Supreme Court has made ruling after ruling that will shape religion and give me “Religion in the News” material for a long time

This is where it gets fun . . . and dicey. People don’t want too much politics in their religion. But, as the saying goes, “It’s complicated.” I have one article, “Why Voters Avoid Politics: Fear of Being Fired, Loss of Pastoral Ability.” And its opposite, “The Stolen Election Falsehood Goes to Church,” how the debate about the 2020 Election is Dividing Churches.” We had lots of articles, lots of discussion about churches divided by politics, left/right doesn’t matter. Something gets said in the pulpit, some petition is shared at coffee hour. People stop talking to one another or stop coming to church or start a new church down the road or fire the preacher. So in our class, we end up discussing what is religion, what is politics, what are the boundaries. What is O.K, and what isn’t.

More and more, every article about politics has a religious bent; every article about religion has a political bent. Look at climate change and the environment: you would think that was a science issue. Look at Covid and masks and

vaccinations: you would think that was a medical issue, a public health issue. Look at look at immigration. You'd think that was a population, public policy, or social policy issue. Yet, these issues and many others are tinged with religion or immersed in religion or religion wants in.

Of course, overturning *Roe vs. Wade* and essentially outlawing abortion is the big headliner. You may think it's about politics or law or even rights. But the handprint of religion is all over it. When you add up the Catholic Church plus Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants, that's over half of Christianity, and they fought for this, funded it, reshaped the conversation, and won. If you didn't see that as "Religion in the News," you're missing the news or religion. And when you add the likelihood of ending contraception and gay marriage, the argument becomes central to religion all the way to our own altar or our own pastoral ministry.

More obvious Supreme Court decisions, but less talked about, are these three:

1. They allowed Maine to give tax dollars to religious schools.
2. They allowed Boston City Hall to fly a Christian flag alongside the American and Massachusetts flags. Non-government groups have been permitted to raise their flags on special occasions, but City Hall has said, "No" to the Christian group's flag. The Court ruled for the Christian group. An interesting follow-up news story is now that religious groups can fly their flags on public property, a satanic group has asked permission to fly its flag at City Hall.
3. The most intricate one. A football coach had a long history of publicly praying after the game, kneeling on the 50-yard line to do it. No one was required to join him, but some of his own players did. Some opposing players did until the school shut him down and then fired him. The Supreme Court backed him.

This is a fun one. You've got football, God, and prayer. Now, you Northerners probably think these are three separate issues: football, God, and prayer. But when I lived in Georgia, I saw they are tied together. So with this case, and the others, we get to think hard about the U.S. Constitution, about the separation of Church and State (which is *not* in the Constitution), about the government in no way "establishing" or benefiting any particular religion (which *is* in the Constitution), about "what is prayer?" About "what is coercion?" And maybe the big question: can you force someone to pray? Can you actually prohibit someone from praying?

I'm all over the place on this issue. I've spoken in lots of public schools about Christianity, during school hours, in classrooms and assemblies, to required-attendance events. And I've been rejected as a speaker.

When I lived in Georgia, my son Aaron was in high school, and students asked me to start a group called "Fellowship of Christian Athletes," (FCA). It was for "athletes and all whom they influenced," which opened it to everybody.

By the second meeting we had 100 teenagers—athletes, school band, cheerleaders, friends. The coaches backed it. My announcements went over the intercom. My flyers lined the hallways. We met before school and after, in the library, cafeteria, and gym. The school fed us. I regularly had 80 to 100 kids for prayer, Bible study, and a close look at how a strong faith and a disciplined athlete were the perfect combination. And we adhered to the laws of the day.

The group was initiated by students. I was not a school employee, it was not held during school hours. And I think we did a lot of good, while pushing the envelope pretty hard. All of which begs some great questions: what is "freedom of religion"? Where does religion fit into education? That "wall of separation between Church and State?" How tall is it? How impenetrable? Does it have barbed wire on the top of it? Or a gate in the middle? Or a ladder to get over it?

Well, we started this sermon with two "Religion in the News" stories. The first was a building collapse, 18 people killed, and people are wondering the age-old question: where was God? Did God do it? The second was our Scripture lesson for today about Jews living in a foreign country long ago, when it was decided it was O.K. to kill them all.

Those ancient Biblical news stories are as current and timely today as they were centuries ago. And it is just as important now, as then, to read the news, to see the connection to religion, to ask her questions, to think through the issues, to learn, to understand, and to grow.

And, to leave your interest further piqued, here's the headline from yesterday's *Connecticut Post's* half-page Op-Ed: "Religion, Sex, and Ending the Stigma of AIDS."

Much the same news story Jesus was asked about 2,000 years ago.

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Our closing hymn today is the "Northfield Benediction."

A Benediction is a blessing, usually given by the pastor to the congregation. This summer, we will end each service by blessing one another, using the "Northfield Benediction." David attended the Northfield-Mount Herman School, founded by American Evangelist D. L. Moody.

The Northfield Benediction is part of the musical tradition of that school, and based on the familiar Scripture of benediction in Numbers 6:24-26. Let's treasure this mutual blessing.

*"The Lord bless thee and keep thee,  
The Lord make His face shine upon thee,  
and be gracious unto thee,  
And be gracious unto thee;  
The Lord lift up his countenance,  
His countenance upon thee,  
and give thee peace!"*