

Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
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Pittsfield, MA 01201

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!

"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. *1 John 4:10-11*





From the Pastor's Desk

Judah mourns and her gates languish; her people lament on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns;

On Tuesday I drove up East St. about 45 minutes after the terrible auto accident at Pittsfield High School, having no idea what had just transpired. I have never seen so many blue lights in all my life. The traffic was blocked in one direction and was moving at just a crawl in the other. I couldn't believe my eyes; it looked like a bomb had gone off with wreckage strewn all over. It was hard to tell if there was more than one car. What had happened? How did a car end up against the front of the building? Which way were they traveling? How many casualties were there? It was impossible that anyone could survive given the scene. I'm afraid the image will remain imprinted in my memory from now on out.

It was on news later that evening, and on the front page of the paper the next morning. Only one car, and, yes, both were killed. Apparently two men in their 30's had raced down Second St. at between 80 and 100 mph. How it is possible that they ran two red lights at that speed and cleared both directions of traffic without hitting any other vehicle, never mind any students that might be congregated on the sidewalk after school, is nothing short of a miracle. The bigger question that is yet to be answered as far as we know is, "What were they thinking?" Was this intentional? Were drugs involved? We may or may never find out the answer to these questions.

Underlying these questions of course is, what of any innocent or unsuspecting commuters or pedestrians? Was there no concern for anyone else's welfare if not their own? I'm sure I'm not the only one who asks this question. Even if suicide or drugs was involved, is there not still a modicum of concern for the value of anyone else's life? This is becoming a more relevant question, given the rash of indiscriminate shootings in our schools, malls and movie theaters these days. It is frightening, but I'm afraid it tells us something about the condition of our society.

I don't want to be a pessimist, but I believe there are some parallels between our culture today and that of the ancient Israelites in the days of Jeremiah. This was a down time in ancient Israel. It had been several centuries since King David and his son, Solomon. Leading up to Jeremiah's period, the nation of Israel had lost their spiritual moorings. The worship of Yahweh had become largely irrelevant, but the decline was not limited to just the spiritual sphere. It impacted every aspect of society- moral, economic and social. Life became cheap. As hard to hear as it may seem, there were even times during periods of famine when women ate their own newborn children to satisfy their own hunger. And yet, despite the proclamations of the prophets, who were often ridiculed, the people could not see the connection.

Today, people are aghast at the events on the evening news. Yet in a week or two after each tragedy, we move on as if nothing had ever happened, completely oblivious to the underlying causes. This perhaps is the most frightening thing of all. Or, perhaps we look for answers to these things in places where answers are not to be found or provide only anemic answers at best. This is what Jeremiah refers to as "cisterns" without water.

But, you know, this is where we as the church come in. We need to be careful not to draw too direct a parallel between ancient Israel and Pittsfield or America. The parallel is really between ancient Israel and the church. And yet, we as the church live within our communities and our culture. And we as the church have been given a prophetic voice.

Jesus told the woman at the well that if she knew who she was speaking with she would have asked him and he would have given her "living water". We have that living water. We have answers to the questions and the crises, and that answer is Jesus Christ. This gives new imperative to our calling as Grace Church in Pittsfield. We need to pray for the families who have been directly impacted by this tragedy and we need to pray for our community. And we need to pray that God would give us opportunity to be his voice in our community.

Pastor Tom Bridgman



Missions Corner

News from Susan Stone in Romania



Christmas Greetings,

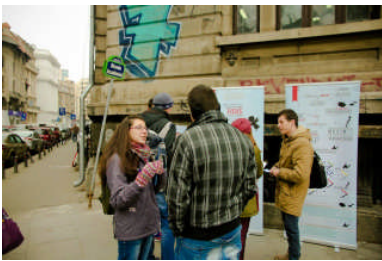
Question: Upon what *one* occasion in the history of mankind did worship in heaven burst into earth?

Answer: The birth of Jesus Christ, 2nd person of the Trinity

This event was so infinitely wondrous and important that it merited not only in heaven but on earth, supernatural celebration and angelic worship. Let us take time this Christmas season to express to God the sentiments of His angels, when they said, in response to Christ's birth, "Glory to God in the highest . . ."

Quick Update: Three three questions (asked of or by me), three explanations, to give you a little taste of recent ministry activities, preparing equipping and mobilizing students and young professionals to be salt and light in the workplace. More later!

1. Ministering with/alongside students and grads in Bucharest



"Susan, could you come here please?" Simona, one of the grads with whom I meet regularly, beckoned me over to speak in English with a young Austrian man who said he was agnostic. The students had set up a station in the center of town near one of the faculties and were engaging passersby in talking about their "Christmas personality". Those interested heard a short presentation of the gospel and received New Testaments, gospel literature and invitation to a Christmas program and ski camp organized by our OSCER-Bucharest group.

We had a long conversation about faith. I challenged him to search out the evidence for God until he found answers and to read the gospel of John.

2. Ministering with/alongside grads in Romania and the Republic of Moldova

"What was the problem?" I asked Rodica, the coordinator of the grad ministry in the Republic of Moldova. Although Balti grads were enthusiastic, attentive and willing I had felt like I was slogging through knee-deep mud trying to get them to work through practical applications to our Bible study on glorifying God at work. She informed me that the idea of choosing a specific way to put Biblical knowledge into practice in the coming week was completely new to them . . . a "Western thing", she said. I made up my mind then and there that I would have to focus more on "Practical Applications", especially in the more Russian-oriented Republic of Moldova, in training leaders for the discipleship in the workplace course "ProImpact."

3. Ministering with/alongside grads in Europe

"Could I have your email address?" asked Denisa, a young kindergarten teacher from Albania at the annual Cross-Current Conference in Munich, Germany. I had sort of taken her "under my wing" and had helped her process the things she was hearing for the first time. Pictured above is a discussion in the Education group (there were 4 other professional groups meeting at the time) on how to teach "self-esteem" from a Christian perspective. Participating in this group were teachers from Albania, Belarus, Belgium, England, Georgia, Germany, Moldova, Norway/Brazil (it's complicated), Portugal, Serbia and Ukraine. As a representative of the Grad Leaders Network I will be helping this group with mentoring.

Be strengthened in the Lord,

Susan



GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Congratulations!

Happy Anniversary to Peter and JoAnn Kulberg who celebrated **41** years of marriage on December 27th.



Called Home

Ardys Soules, mother of Shelley Schmidt and wife of Frank Soules, former pastor of Grace Church, was called home to glory on January 5th. Her passing was unexpected and the family is in shock. Uphold those who mourn, especially her 6 children as well as extended family, as they walk through this "Valley of Tears," even as they rest in God's promises.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. John 14:3

Note: Ardys' obituary may be viewed at <http://www.timesfreepress.com/obituaries/2014/jan/06/>

Prayer Gathering

All are encouraged to take part in our monthly Prayer Gathering on **Sunday, January 26th**, from **5:00-6:00 p.m.** Join us as we come before our Father's throne to praise Him, seek His direction, and "find grace and mercy to help us in our time of need." *Hebrews 4:16*



Annual Meeting

Please mark your calendars for our church's annual business meeting, to be held on **Tuesday, February 4th, at 7:00 p.m.** All are encouraged to attend as we look back on God's faithfulness, and look forward seeking to discern God's leading for the coming year. Please be in prayer for this important time.

Upper Valley Bible Conference

"Unpacking Forgiveness" is the theme of this year's Upper Valley Bible Conference, to be held on **Saturday, March 15th, from 9:00 am-4:00 pm**, at Valley Bible Church in White River Jct., VT. Cost: \$25/person through March 5th. For brochures see Charleen Bridgman, or go to the website: <http://uvbc.wordpress.com>

Women's Retreat Opportunities

- ◆ **NECCF Women's Retreat:** for women of 4C's churches in New England. **Friday 6:00 p.m.- Saturday 4:30 p.m., March 14-15** Theme: "Casket Empty: God's Plan for Redemption Through History." Location: Holiday Inn, Tewksbury, MA Hotel cost \$80 per room. Retreat cost: \$79 (includes Friday evening ice cream sundae bar and Saturday breakfast and lunch). **Registration deadline:** full payment must be received by **February 14**. For registration forms or more information see Charleen Bridgman.
- ◆ The Evangelical Free Church's **Faithlift 2013** will be held on **Saturday, March 29** with the morning session beginning at 9 a.m. Theme: "Personal Design by Love Divine" with speaker Darcie Gill. Cost is \$30. Registration forms and online registration will be available in February. **Registration deadline** is Saturday, March 19th.. More information will follow.

Learning & Arriving: May the LORD Repay!

by Doug Rose

I am weak today, though anointed king; and these men the sons of Zeruiah are too difficult for me. May the LORD repay the evildoer according to his evil. 2 Sam. 3:39.

Joab commanded the Israelite army under King David. He was David's contemporary but also his nephew, the son of David's oldest sister, Zeruiah, and the brother of two other renowned warriors from the house of Jesse, Abishai and Asahel. Throughout his career, Joab showed unswerving loyalty to Israelite nationalism, stalwartly defending David's reign, but occasionally placing David's interests behind Joab's personal perception of patriotism. Despite his proximity to David in both lineage and mission, Joab does not wholeheartedly embrace David's theology. When Joab makes a final break with David over the anointing of a successor to the throne of David, Joab is repaid for the difficulties that his ardent nationalism caused the fledgling empire.

We follow Joab's career primarily in 2nd Samuel and 1st Chronicles. After the persecution of David by Saul, the Judahites under the command of Joab engage in a civil war against King Ish-bosheth's Israelites, led by Saul's uncle, Abner. Notwithstanding that Abner appears to change heart and seeks to make David king over both kingdoms, Joab brutally assassinates Abner, motivated by his suspicions of Abner's true political agenda (as well as Joab's personal vendetta over the death of Joab's brother, Asahel, at the hands of Abner).

Joab leads the conquest of Jerusalem as a capital city for David, and soundly defeats the Aramean mercenaries defending Ammon, then capturing the Ammonite city, Rabbah, as a tribute to David. During the siege of Rabbah, moreover, Joab accomplishes David's sinister plan for the death of Uriah. Joab undertakes to reconcile David to his son, Absalom, in an effort to strengthen the line of succession of David's house, but when Absalom later stages a coup against David, Joab does not hesitate to kill the usurping prince, despite David's standing orders to the contrary. Joab even reproves David for mourning Absalom, urging instead that David not disaffect the loyal army.

After David replaces Joab with Joab's cousin, Amasa, as commander of the army, Joab next stealthily assassinates Amasa, doubting Amasa's loyalty to the crown (Amasa had led the rebel forces under Absalom, and delayed taking action against a later revolt). Joab even conducts David's infamous census of all Israel, although Joab questions the wisdom of David's actions. Joab never demurs from putting the advance of the national interests of David's kingdom ahead of all else. Joab champions the reign of God's anointed king, David, he preserves and protects the realm, but his agenda is always secular in nature: nowhere in these chapters are we given any insight that Joab, like David, is motivated by the advancement of the kingdom of God.

In the final vignettes from the scriptural accounts of Joab's life, his nationalistic and dynastic fervor drives Joab to remonstrate against the will of the LORD in the coronation of Solomon as David's successor, as Joab instead supports the reign of David's oldest son, Adonijah. David had years earlier cursed Joab for making David's rule too difficult, and David charges Solomon to seek retribution against Joab for his shedding of the blood of war in peace. Although after his many years of nationalistic fervor, Joab finally seeks refuge in the tabernacle of the LORD, his embrace of the altar of God comes far too late, and Joab, the "evildoer", is repaid according to his evil.

True Christians Pray

by Jonathan Edwards

We are abundantly instructed in scripture, that true Christians do lead a holy life; that without holiness no man shall see the Lord, Hebrews 12:14; and that every one that hath this hope in him, purifieth himself, even as Christ is pure, I John 3:3.

But how is a life, in a great measure prayerless, consistent with a holy life? To lead a holy life is to lead a life devoted to God; a life of worshipping and serving God; a life consecrated to the service of God. But how doth he lead such a life who doth not so much as maintain the duty of prayer? How can such a man be said to walk by the Spirit and to be a servant of the Most High God? A holy life is a life of faith. The life that true Christians live in the world they live by the faith of the Son of God. Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life; and to say a man lives a life of faith, and yet lives a prayerless life, is every whit as inconsistent and incredible, as to say, that a man lives without breathing. He that lives a prayerless life, lives without God in the world.

How can you expect to dwell with God forever, if you so neglect and forsake Him here? This your practice shows, that you place not your happiness in God, in nearness to Him, and communion with Him. Now, if this be the case with you respecting God, then how can you expect to have it for your happiness to all eternity to be with God, and to enjoy holy communion with Him?

Let those persons who hope they are converted, and yet have in a great measure left off the duty of secret prayer, and whose manner it is ordinarily to neglect it, for their own sake seriously consider these things.

It is not very likely that you will ever

be constant and persevering in this duty, until you shall have obtained a better principle in your hearts. The seed that is sown in stony places, though it seem to flourish at present, yet as the sun shall rise with a burning heat, will wither away. None will bring forth fruit with patience, but those whose hearts are become good ground.

Lost Without Him

To move you to persevere in the duty of prayer, consider how much you always stand in need of the help of God. We cannot draw a breath without his help. You need his help every day, for the supply of your outward wants; and especially you stand in continual need of him to help your souls. You continually need the instructions and directions of God. What can a little child do, in a vast and howling wilderness, without some one to guide it, and to lead it in the right way? Without God you will soon fall into snares, and pits, and many fatal calamities. Seeing therefore you stand in such continual need of the help of God, how reasonable is it that you should continually seek it of him, and perseveringly acknowledge your dependence upon him, by resorting to him, to spread your needs before him, and to offer up your request to him in prayer.

-from *Prayer Point*, a prayer ministry of Samaritan's Purse, Volume 14, Number 4, 2013.

-the above text is edited from Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) sermon, "Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer."

YOU ARE HERE: A Spiritual Mall Map

by Susan Mendelson

Did you ever walk away after sharing your faith with someone and wonder, “What just happened?” “Did I have any impact on that person at all?” “What if I had said . . . ?” These questions and so many others can plague us after speaking to someone about the life-changing subject of who Jesus is and why He is so important.

Eighteen years of full-time service with Jews for Jesus has taught me that even when we don’t have answers to those questions, we need to keep going. Let me encourage you to not second guess such encounters with unbelievers. You don’t have to say just the right thing in order to share your faith. None of us can possibly see the big picture, so when we walk away from a witnessing situation, we really can’t know how our words may have positively affected the person. Since all believers are engaged in a spiritual battle, the adversary is always ready to tell you how poorly you performed. Please don’t listen to him. Speaking is better than not speaking.

My friend Steve is a Jewish believer in Jesus and an extraordinary evangelist! Before he knew the Lord, a girl shared her faith with him in a way that I would never recommend. She told him that if he didn’t believe in Jesus he was going to hell. Wow. Couldn’t she have found a better way to be a witness? Couldn’t she have said something a little more sensitive, maybe? But it turned out to be the very thing Steve needed to hear, because he thought about it and wondered if it were true. It set him on a course of discovery that led him to faith.

We never know where a conversation may lead. We might wish we had one of those mall maps—you know, the kind you look for when you arrive at an unfamiliar shopping center and are trying to find a specific store. There’s always that big red arrow labeled, “YOU ARE HERE.” Surrounding the area, colors and numbers show exactly where you need to go. You can even see what shops are on the way and maybe those are places you either want to check out or avoid.

We don’t typically get a map like that when we are witnessing. We don’t see what’s just down the way a bit or around the corner from where we’re trying to go. But what we do have is even better. We have a God who *does* have the big picture and knows the complete “YOU ARE HERE” map for each one of us. In that all-knowing position, and with our willingness, God will provide us with the encounters that He intends for us to have, and will equip us to speak the necessary words at that time.

Our conversation with someone about Jesus may be just a small stop on someone’s spiritual journey, but think about what an enormous privilege that is. When we wake up each morning with the words, “Use me today, Lord,” in our hearts, we’ll find that “YOU ARE HERE” arrow always pointing to our place of contentment. Because we can always trust God’s promise is at work in and through us when we are willing, whether or not we see it in the moment. That contentment is unmatched by anything else.

Susan Mendelson is our missionary to Long Island, New York. Prior to that she toured with the Liberated Wailing Wall (Jewish Gospel music team) and then solo. Her album, Jewish Gospel Favorites, brings her personal style to ten Jewish gospel classics. You’ll find a free download of Susan singing “In the Sanctuary” (by Stephen Katz) at [j4j.co/lwwmusic1](http://www.j4j.co/lwwmusic1).

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