

Minister to give lecture on Colonial churches

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The Rev. John Heeckt, of the Ridgebury Congregational Church, is giving a series of lectures.

RIDGEFIELD -- Think back 300 years.

Think back before Main Street had any stores. There were no paved roads, no Stop & Shop and no Metro-North Railroad. There was no post office, no playhouse and no recreation center.

There were, however, plenty of churches.

It's those churches, many of which are still standing today, that the Rev. John Heeckt, minister of the Ridgebury Congregational Church, will discuss Tuesday and March 11 in a two-part lecture series.

The lectures, titled "Words of Wonder, Days of Judgment: the Churches of Colonial Ridgefield," are at 7 p.m. in the Ridgefield Community Center on Main Street. Admission is free and open to the public, but reservations are required.

Heeckt will talk about the religious beliefs of members of Ridgefield's oldest churches -- the First Congregational Church of Ridgefield, founded in 1708; Ridgebury Congregational Church, founded in 1760; St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, founded in 1725; and Jesse Lee Memorial United Methodist Church, founded in 1759.

"While the founders of all these churches came from England," said Heeckt, "they each had different perspectives on how the church should be reformed."

Heeckt, a Ridgefield resident, thinks it's important for local residents to better understand what their ancestors were like and the movements their churches grew out of.

He said Ridgefielders three centuries ago believed in God to a much greater extent than they do today.

"People living in the small farming community of 18th century Ridgefield understood almost nothing about how the world works. They believed their entire world was full of strange, mysterious and supernatural forces and felt completely powerless in it," Heeckt said.

If their cows got sick, they automatically attributed it to God punishing them. If it rained at the right time for their crops, they thought they were being blessed for a good deed they'd done.

"Growing up on the other side of the scientific revolution, people today strongly believe in cause and effect. We tend to think everything that happens to us has a rational explanation," Heeckt said.

Learning what our forebears believed should "expand our thinking and help us realize that, although we may have come a long way from our ancestors, we still have things in common with them," he said.

While they may not be as obvious, there are still things in the world that are mysterious and unexplainable, he noted.

"Our lives are in many ways still at the mercy of forces beyond our control. We have to deal with death, tragedy and disappointments all the time. The only difference is that our ancestors were a lot better at coping with these things than we are," he said.

Aside from the way long-ago Ridgefielders felt about the world in general, during the Colonial period the relationship between church and state was very different. Churches played a much more significant role in people's lives than they do today.

The entire school system was run from the church. Churches also supervised foster care, the public welfare system, and the care of widows and orphans. And all births, deaths and burials were recorded in the church.

At the conclusion of each lecture, Heeckt will answer questions. According to Ridgefield resident Bill Lucas, trustee of the Ridgefield Congregational Church and a Ridgefield Historical Society board member, "this is the first lecture series of its kind to be given in town."

The lectures are a joint venture of Ridgebury Congregational Church and the Ridgefield Historical Society. They coincide with the town's 300-year anniversary celebration taking place throughout the year.

Call (203) 438-5821 to make reservations for the "Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment" two-part lecture series Tuesday and March 11th at 7 p.m. at Ridgefield Community Center, 316 Main St.

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