

Climate Change: The Moral Issue

Those of you who have sat in these pews over the years have probably figured out by now that I tend to steer clear of “topical sermons.” Truth be told, I harbor a deep suspicion of the genre. Too often a topical sermon is what happens when the preacher picks a topic and then roots around in the Bible to find textual support for what she or he has already decided to say. Sometimes the result is faithful to scripture, but too often it’s not. In many cases, the Biblical text is more pretext than anything else.

For the same reason, I tend to steer clear of “special emphasis Sundays.” According to the *Presbyterian Planning Calendar*, there’s a special emphasis for almost every Sunday of the year. Did you know that today is “Universal Day of Prayer for Students” Sunday? Last week was a double header: “Health Awareness and Day of Prayer for Healing and Wholeness” Sunday as well as “Camps and Conferences Sunday.” And February 3rd was, of course, “Super Bowl of Caring Sunday” as well as “Chaplains Sunday.”

(Pity the poor chaplains who have to compete with the Superbowl.)

Once you start down that road, Sunday ceases to be the “Lord’s Day” and becomes instead “Whose Agenda Is Up Today?”

But, as I say, today is an exception. Today the topic is Global Climate Change. I could take as my text a multitude of scriptural passages, but let us begin with the basics: Psalm 24, verse 1:

**The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;**

Or if you prefer, as I do, the poetry of the King James version:

**The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,
the world, and all who dwell therein.**

From a Christian perspective, this is where any discussion of climate change must start. The earth does not belong to us. It belongs to God and to God alone. When we humans speak of “owning” this or that plot of land, the coal beneath this mountain, or the oil beneath that ocean, we are speaking theological nonsense.

None of creation belongs to us. Not oil, not coal, not land, not water. *Everything* belongs to God, just as every breath we take is the gift of God.

Not only that, every *creature* on earth belongs to God. The microorganisms we cannot see with the naked eye, the trees and plants, the elephant and the ant, the snail darter and the snail – they belong to God as well. “All creatures of our God and King,” as declares the hymn of St. Francis of Assisi.

You and I are not the *owners* of God’s creation. We are the *stewards* of God’s creation, entrusted to handle with care that which is not ours.

Somewhere along the line, we Christians got our divine assignment muddled. We began to think of creation as something to be conquered, not nurtured. We mistook the mandate of Genesis to “have dominion” over the earth to be a license to exploit the earth for own purposes.

Some historians think the problem began with the Enlightenment when we ceased to think in communal terms and began to see ourselves as rugged individuals. Whatever the case, the real damage started with the Industrial Revolution.

We dammed mighty rivers to generate electricity. We dug deep mines to extract coal, and when that method ceased to be profitable, we blew the tops off the mountains and used gigantic machines to extract what we wanted. We even harnessed the power of the atom, first to make bombs, and eventually to power our factories and heat and cool our homes without regard to how we would cope with the resulting radioactive waste.

We called this “progress,” the taming of nature, the victory of man over the elements. What we failed to notice was how the perceived “benefits” of all this activity came at a terrible cost to God’s creation in the form of polluted rivers, toxic waste, the disruption of the ecosphere, and the extinction of entire species.

We now know that the greatest and most dangerous consequence of our misuse of God's creation has come from the burning of fossil fuels. Expressed in simple terms, we humans have put so much carbon into the atmosphere that we are causing the earth's temperature to rise with alarming speed and devastating effect.

Scientists call it the "Greenhouse Effect." More than half of all the carbon humanity has put into the atmosphere in its entire history has been emitted in just the past three decades.¹

All that carbon is changing the earth's climate.

- Sea levels are rising.
- Droughts that used to go on for a year or so are lasting three and four years.
- The polar ice caps are melting.
- The glaciers are receding.
- Wild fires are consuming thousands more acres than in the past.
- What used to be 500-year floods are inundating cities like Houston, Texas.
- And, as we Floridians know better than anyone else, shorelines are receding and hurricanes are becoming more powerful and indescribably destructive.

The consensus among scientists is overwhelming and almost unanimous: Humanity is at a crossroads. If we don't reduce our consumption of fossil fuels and find a better and less destructive way to live on this planet together, we will doom our children and our grandchildren to a life of unspeakable misery on a planet that will be almost unrecognizable.

In Biblical terms, we are selling our birthright as God's stewards for a mess of pottage now. We are eating sour grapes that will set our children's teeth on edge. We are robbing future generations of their rightful inheritance. We are treating as our own that which does not belong to us.

It is as though the prophet Jeremiah were speaking directly to us when he warns:

¹ Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate Change: How People of Faith Must Work for Change* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1028) p. 14

Thus says the Lord:

**Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.**

**They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.**

**They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.**

Three short years ago, many of the world's leaders took an important step toward addressing the global climate crisis when they gathered in Paris and pledged to cut their greenhouse gas emissions. On December 12, 2015, leaders from 196 nations adopted the Paris Climate Accord, but for it to take effect, 55 countries that produce 55 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions had to commit to the agreement. Both China and the United States signed on, and on November 4, 2016, the agreement took effect.

Then came the election of 2016. On June 1, 2017, President Trump declared his intention to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord. That was not only a step in the wrong direction, it was proof positive that our current President cares nothing about the future of this planet. He chooses to ignore the true national crisis – indeed the global crisis -- that is climate change. Instead, he prefers to spend billions to build a wall on our southern border.

I have bad news for Mr. Trump. A wall cannot keep the planet from growing warmer. Whether immigrants or presidents -- we all live at the same address and are subject to the same laws of science. Acknowledged or not, climate change will **“scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts.”**

I am humbled by what this congregation has done so far to repent and change the way we live our corporate life in the face of climate change.

We were amongst the first congregations in our denomination to reduce our “carbon footprint” to zero. To accomplish this, we refurbished this historic sanctuary. We tore the roof off the Education Building and built a new roof facing the sun, and on it installed solar voltaic panels that produce about 25 percent of our electrical consumption. We yanked the window air conditioners out of classrooms

and installed highly efficient mini-split heating and air-conditioning units. We're just now recycling the copper piping from our now redundant heating system.

We didn't stop there. We approached the Presbyterian Foundation and asked them to help us withdraw our investments from fossil fuel companies and "green up" our endowment. We said we didn't think we should be supporting fossil companies so long as they are committed to business as usual. It's business as usual that is the problem.

For six years we worked with fellow Presbyterians to convince the General Assembly to do the same. Three times we tried, and three times we lost, but as we say now, "The fourth try is a charm."

We are doing this because Jesus commands us to love God and our neighbors, and we have come to understand that neighbor-love extends not just to those alive today, but also to those who will come after us, neighbors not yet born who will live with the consequences of our generation's action or inaction.

Some say all this concern is too little too late and they might be right. But if the church of Jesus Christ does not stand up and bear witness to the truth, how will the truth be known? How will the truth which sets us free be itself unbound in this age of greed, fake news, and overt denial of reality?

Climate change is a moral issue, no less than slavery was a moral issue for the folks whose slaves helped to build this sanctuary. No less than civil rights was a moral issue for some of you sitting here this morning, you who risked jobs and friendships to stand for racial justice.

For now, at least, we cannot count on moral leadership from the highest levels of our government to think beyond next quarter's corporate profits. We cannot expect the wolf to guard the henhouse, but we can be the church of Jesus Christ.

We can be the called-out people of God. We can live up to the example of the saints who have gone before us – saints who faced other moral crises. Saints like Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King, Jr. Saints like C. K. Steele and R. Davis Thomas. And living saints, too – saints like Jim Antal, Bill McKibben, and Pamela McVety.

This congregation has made significant steps, but we could do more. And we will – because we must.

Most important of all, we must not give up hope. The God who calls us to work for climate justice is the same God revealed in Jesus Christ, whose grace sustains us in all endeavors to do God's will, and whose steadfast love endures from generation to generation.