

“See What Love God Has Given Us”
Sermon for Earth Day, 2009
Congregational Church of Belmont,
United Church of Christ
Belmont, California
Scripture: Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-48
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We can approach scripture in several ways when we are thinking about our care of the earth. One way is to look for specific instructions, guidelines, rules, that seem to speak to environmental concerns, perhaps a seeking passage about stewardship. I think that approach is likely to tell us what we already know. Instead, today, I am taking an approach one of my seminary professors recommended to me: to approach every passage as an environmental message. I have chosen the lectionary passages for April 26.

Initially I settled for my theme on the first line of the passage from First John: “See what love God has given us.” But to be honest, this doesn’t seem like a very juicy theme. Do we really need to convince each other that all of what we experience is a gift of love? As I studied the passages, however, my eye continued to focus on a more difficult subject, that of sin.

The passage from First John soon shifts from gifts to sins: “Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that Christ was revealed to take away sins, and in Christ there is no sin. No one who abides in Christ sins; no one who sins has either seen Christ or known Christ.”

Our psalm this morning said: “Do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in God.”

And the Gospel passage concludes: “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in the Messiah’s name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

So there you have it: my subject today is sin, every UCC congregation’s favorite subject.

I wanted to tell you a story about an Environmental Ethics class I am teaching this semester, for college juniors. I chose a new book for this semester, called “The Ethics of Climate Change: Right and Wrong in a Warming World.” As academic books go, it is short, 160 pages, and as academic books go, it is quite readable. It has just six chapters, and we read a chapter a week for six weeks early in the semester.

The first chapter is about the science of global warming. In 1988, the United Nations gathered the International Panel on Climate Change to study all of the peer-reviewed technical studies. The panel is staffed by hundreds of scientists

from around the world, representing many scientific fields.

The panel has published several reports. The first, in 1990, never doubted that climate change was happening, but how fast and how much were uncertain, as was the degree of human influence. The second report, 1995, argued that overall, a “balance of the evidence showed a discernable human influence on climate.” The third report, 2001, stated, “There is new and stronger evidence that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is attributable to human activities.” The fourth report, 2007, stated, “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, wide-spread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level.” (15).

Okay, so global warming is happening, we are causing it. There will be shortages of drinking water, scorched croplands, millions of environmental refugees, animal and plant extinctions, more extreme weather events. To quote James Garvey, “There is going to be a lot of death in the future, a lot of death which wouldn’t have happened had we and those before us acted otherwise. There will also be a lot of extra suffering, disease, thirst, hunger, violence and the like, horrors which wouldn’t have happened had we and those before us acted otherwise. What we do now and in the next few years is going to matter.”

My students did not like the book. Too scary, too doom and gloom. “If you write like that, you are just going to turn people off, you will be counter-productive.” They much preferred other writers who described ways of adapting to climate change, encouraged gradual lifestyle changes, nudged them along.

How about you? Too much fire and brimstone? Given my topic of sin, I couldn’t help thinking one of our tradition’s most famous sermons, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Congregational minister Jonathan Edwards first gave this sermon in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741. It was a best seller, and it is still in print. The 1740’s were a time of great religious revival, called the Great Awakening. It was a time of many religious conversions, much talk of hell and salvation, of sin and repentance. Our scripture passages for today were probably quite familiar fare.

Edwards went on for about an hour over and over emphasizing a few ideas: it is only the hand of God that keeps us from sliding into hell. “The corruption of the heart of man is immoderate and boundless in its fury; and while wicked men live here, it is like fire pent up by God’s restraints, whereas if it were let loose, it would set on fire the course of nature; and as the heart is now a sink of sin, so if sin was not restrained, it would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven, or a furnace of fire and brimstone.” (154). Yes, he said fire and brimstone. Edwards found multiple ways of saying the same thing before turning to the “application” of his message: “The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation.” (157).

Garvey spent another five chapters trying to convert my students to an

understanding of the urgency of our ecological situation and their ethical obligations to respond. They continued to resist. I hoped that as we got to the last chapter that they would start to understand why he had emphasized ethics as reasoned reflection; why he believed we must take responsibility, focusing on principles of justice and sustainability; why we cannot do nothing; why we must act collectively.

The last chapter addressed individual choices. My students zeroed in on a section that discussed psychological barriers to action, in other words, DENIAL. Garvey named ten barriers. Think about them as I read them: does one of them seem right to you? Here they are: 1. I don't believe in climate change; 2. Technology will be able to halt climate change; 3. I blame the government, or the Americans, or the Chinese (note: Garvey is British); 4. The scientists are hypocrites, they published their report on paper; 5. It's not my problem; 6. There's nothing I can do about it; 7. How I run my life is my business; 8. There are more important and urgent problems to tackle; 9. At least I am doing something; 10. We are already making a lot of progress on climate change. (144-145).

Did one of these fit you? At least one seemed to fit my students. Many of them missed Garvey's point about how denial works, and focused on #9, **At Least I Am Doing Something**. They thought it was pretty good if they recycled sometimes, took the bus sometimes, maybe took a shorter shower one day. "He's going to turn people off if he criticizes them." I had hoped that our contemporary environmental revival, our Great Awakening, would predispose the students to listening to his message. Instead they were well protected against any sense of urgency, any call to change their ways of living, any radical disruption to their plans. Well protected against any sense of sin in their own lives.

I wonder if the members of the Connecticut congregation were less resistant in the moment to Edwards's message than my students were to Garvey's. Like Garvey, Edwards pointed to the ways people tried to protect themselves from the call to repentance. "Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do. Every one lays out matters in his own mind how he shall avoid damnation, and flatters himself that he contrives well for himself, and that his schemes will not fail." (155).

Some of Edwards's comments, while perhaps old-fashioned in their language, could have come from Garvey (minus the religious slant). "Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly. ... the earth does not yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; ... and the world would spew you out, were it not for the sovereign hand of him who hath subjected it in hope." (157-158).

Actually, there is even less hope in this sermon of Edwards than in Garvey's

book. As Isaac Watts wrote in his copy of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," "A most Terrible sermon, which should have had a word of Gospell at ye end of it, tho I think it is all true."

Well, we have finished with the Terrible part, tho I think the latest climate change report is all true.

Hope is not all missing from Harvey's book, or from the many resources that point us toward changes we can make. There are many secular resources, and also religious ones. The National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group. The United Church of Christ Environmental Ministries program. Books, websites, organizations. Urgency can be depressing or hopeful: at least we see the problem. We can rouse ourselves to change.

Just as the lectionary passages pointed me to the topic of sin, they also point the way to change. Listen again:

From the psalm: "Do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in God." Before action there is time for prayer and meditation. We can choose sacrifices, right sacrifices, giving up destructive habits; creating new ways to meet our real needs; recognize that just as Edwards reminds us, we are always relying on God's grace.

From First John, this time in Eugene Peterson's translation: "All who indulge in a sinful life are dangerously lawless, for sin is a major disruption of God's order." We can seek to understand the laws, spiritual, scientific or otherwise, that will lead us to a just and sustainable future. We can pass legislation, set policy, create communities around a vision of everlasting life, a living earth, for generations to come. More from 1 John: "Surely you know that Christ showed up in order to get rid of sin. There is no sin in him, and sin is not part of his program. No one who lives deeply in Christ makes a practice of sin. None of those who do practice sin have taken a good look at Christ. They've got him all backward." And we can seek the ways to live deeply, to abide in Christ, the ways our faith can draw us forward, give us the confidence to turn away from the temptations of a consumer culture, and toward a culture of love.

Finally, the Gospel passage concludes: "Thus it is written, that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Christ's name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." We know we have wandered away from the life God has prepared for us; we can turn around; we can find the path again. "What we do now and in the next few years is going to matter." And we know that already we are forgiven. "See what love God has given us." That is the Gospel, the good word.