

DEFIANT HOPE - OUR FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CRISIS

Epiphany

Psalm 24:1
2 Corinthians 3:1-6

A Sermon Preached by
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Speaking at University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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CENTRAL FOCUS:

Related to the Lenten theme of Band Together,
and closing statement of this weekend's Lecture Series on Climate Change.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

As we seek to respond to your word and will and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's first Scripture reading from Psalm 24, verse one.

Psalm 24:1²

The earth is God's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it

Rev. Todd Smiedendorf

Our second reading today gets an introduction to set the context that's so important. Of the many churches founded by the apostle Paul none was more fractious than the gathering of troubled believers in the pagan city of Corinth. In the passage we are about to read it's clear that Christians in Corinth are questioning Paul's authority. You can almost hear the whisper campaign, "I wonder if he's made it all up, all that stuff about meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus? Maybe he came up with that since he never actually met Jesus when Jesus was alive. What gives him the right to tell us what to do? Let's demand that he prove his authority to us. Let's make him bring a letter, a letter from Peter or from James the brother of Jesus. How else can we believe him?" But Paul doesn't take the bait. Instead he turns it around. Rather than respond defensively, Paul embraces his accusers. He says to them, "*You* are my letter of recommendation. *You* are the best evidence there is that my ministry has not been in vain."

Hear now this unusual passage from Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth beginning with chapter 3, verse one. Listen to the word of God for us today. Paul writes,

¹ The Rev. Dr. Jim Antal is Minister and President of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, and former Executive Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. From sojo.net/biography/jim-antal, accessed 4/3/2019.

² The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

2 Corinthians 3:1-6³

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts to be known and read by all; ³ and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that that we're competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, ⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of the new covenant, not of letters but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Pastor Jim Antal

Let us begin in prayer.

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all our hearts
Be acceptable unto you O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.
– Amen

Grace and peace to you in the name of our still speaking God who loves us just the way we are and loves us too much to let us stay that way.

I want to thank your ministers and your staff along with Betty [Spieth-Kroll] and Meighan Pritchard and your Sacred Earth Matters group, the Pacific Northwest Conference Environmental Justice team, the Earth Ministry, and any others I may have missed for your vision, for your organization, and for your hospitality. I've long known about University Congregational UCC, because your prophetic voice can be heard across the country. So thank you. Thank you for your ministry and your prophetic vision that has inspired me and so many others over the years.

For people of faith the world over, something important happened in June of last year and it didn't make the headlines. In the space of a week, the religious leaders of a quarter of the world's population hosted two symposia on climate change. The leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, convened the first symposium in Athens, and I was honored to represent the UCC at that gathering. Later that same week Pope Francis gathered the corporate executives of Exxon Mobil, BP, and other fossil fuel companies so that they could hear from his lips that humanity is facing a challenge of epochal proportions and that it was *their* responsibility to embrace this immense opportunity for rapid transition to clean, renewable forms of energy.

Last month when those same executives gathered along with the world's richest people in Davos, Switzerland, they were treated to an even more pointed message, this time from 16-year-old Greta Thunberg. Greta did not fly to Davos on a private jet. There were 3300 such private jets in the

³ Op Cit, New Testament.

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Switzerland airports. Greta took a 32-hour train ride after her ferry trip, so that she could arrive from Sweden. And when they offered her a swank hotel room, she said, "Thank you very much. I'll sleep outside in my tent." At 5°F!

Her message was unqualified and unnerving and I quote, "We must change almost everything in our current societies. The bigger your carbon footprint, the bigger your moral duty. The bigger your platform, the bigger your responsibility. I don't want your hope; I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act as if you were in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house were on fire, because it is."⁴

If you think Greta is a little over-the-top, listen to what the climate scientists are saying. In their most recent United Nations report they make clear the climate change is happening now, it's effects are already much worse than we admit to, and to avoid unimaginable catastrophe humanity must transform how all of society lives – including the world economy – at a speed and scale that has no documented human precedent. If that's too abstract, here a few specifics since 1950 the number of floods across the world has increased by 15 times; extreme temperature events, by 20 times; and wildfires, by sevenfold. Our oceans are warming a rate almost half again as fast as we thought only five years ago. The four hottest years on record are the past four years. In 2018 United States carbon emissions rose by 3.4%. And the ways our current leaders of the federal government are wrecking God's creation are simply too numerous to mention.

Because we are living in an age of loss disguised as plenty, it's difficult to face our current reality. And yet more and more people are paying attention. Almost three out of four Americans now accept that global warming is happening and two out of three think it's affecting the United States.

So what does faithfulness look like in a time of climate crisis? It looks like state after state committing to transition to 100% renewable energy by 2045. Many states have made that commitment. Faithfulness looks like the "we are still in movement". Over 3500 governors, mayors, and business leaders representing over 9 1/2 trillion dollars [\$9.5 trillion] of the US economy have pledged to abide by the Paris climate accords. Faithfulness looks like ordinary people like you and me talking to our family friends and coworkers about the climate crisis every day. If it's the greatest moral challenge humanity has ever faced, how could we not? Faithfulness looks like 100,000 schoolchildren in cities all over the world not going to school on Fridays in order to inspire adults to take action on climate change. Students across the United States will join that movement on March 15. Mark your calendar.

Faithfulness looks like churches hosting community conversations about shrinking our personal carbon footprints and paying for carbon offsets.

And let's not stop there.

Faithfulness looks like people of faith recognizing that as we move from an age of loss to a time of consequences, we are neither choiceless nor powerless.

⁴ At the World Economic Forum January 23, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greta_Thunberg. Information accessed 4/19/2019

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Yes, it will take a lot to get Exxon, Mobil, Shell and the other fossil fuel companies to forgo anticipated revenues of \$33 trillion over the next 25 years. But in the last six years since the UCC synod became the first national body and the first religious body in America to vote to divest from fossil fuel stocks, investments worth over \$6 trillion have purged their holdings of fossil fuel stock. And now it's easy for an institutional or a personal investor to have a balanced portfolio free of fossil fuel stocks. Yes; it will take a lot to end America's addiction to oil, as George Bush put it.

But since I was arrested in front of the White House in 2011 with 1,253 others, the Keystone XL pipeline has yet to be built. And we have already prevented over two billion barrels of the *dirtiest* crude oil from being extracted and burned.

It's up to us, we been given this precious moment, we who now face this unprecedented crossroads, we who are living amidst unconscionable vulnerability, it's up to us to change what appears to be inevitable. While physics and chemistry are telling us that the arc of the universe is bending toward extinction, our generation has the power to bend the *moral* arc of the universe towards justice as we revive creation.

Faithfulness in the climate crisis era requires each of us and all of us to step off the business-as-usual treadmill. And what motivates us, what propels us to take that step is one of *love*, love for the miracle of God's creation and *grief* – grief over what we have gone and are doing to destroy God's creation.

Yesterday I reminded those who gathered that in July 2017 – one month after our president pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Accord – 97% of UCC delegates from all over the country voted to accept a resolution that I wrote affirming the clergy need to preach on climate change and that we have a *moral imperative to resist all expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure*. Not only back a few hours after that vote, I went to the microphone for one minute speak-out. I looked at the two or 3000 folks who were gathered in the room and I said this, "It's time for the United Church of Christ to make civil disobedience a normative expression of discipleship. If you are able, please stand if you have ever engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience." And as I looked around I began to cry. I expected 20 or 30 people to stand up but, no, 20 or 30% of the 600 delegates there stood.

I understood that in this season of Epiphany you've been encouraged to participate in the biblical story by taking intentional excursions outside of your normal comfort zone, right? I won't ask for a show of hands, but apparently you've been asked to sit in different pews than you're accustomed to. How's that working out for this congregation?

Well, let me tell you civil disobedience is just that. Even as somebody who's done it many, many, many times, it's *always* out of your comfort zone. Whatever form of witness you engage on behalf of God's creation, it's importance, cannot be overestimated perhaps else why for over two years I've been signing my emails "sharing the yoke of defiant hope". When we accept God's claim on our life God expands our imagination, unites us with allies, amplifies our hope, and provides us with opportunity. This is especially true when we find ourselves living in perilous times. Defiant hope believes that we are called by God to envision *new* possibilities and act on them as if they were inevitable and that God is given us everything we need to engage.

What if it's true that things are always darkest just before the dawn? Don't you think that Good Friday was darker than any of the darkest days Jesus' disciples had ever experienced?

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Let's remind ourselves of what we're actually capable of, and if you were here yesterday this is worth hearing again:

In 1939 if FDR had gone to Edsel Ford and said, "Edsel. Listen up. I want you to build something for me: the biggest manufacturing complex in the world. Oh, by the way, I want you to make something in there you've never made before, something with – oh, I don't know – 1.2 million parts. And I'd like you to get this complex built within six months and then every 24 hours be churning out one of these things that you've never built before. Edsel, do you think you could do that for me?" Edsel Ford would've said FDR, "Mr. President, you are out of your mind."

But when FDR said that to Edsel Ford in 1941, things had grown much darker. And Edsel Ford said, "Yes, sir." And six months later the Willow Run manufacturing complex was completed, and every 24 hours it was churning out a B-24 liberation bomber.

Do you see what I mean when I say, "We can do this." Could you say that with me:

"We can do this."

But to do this every day, each one of us needs to do two things: we need to face the challenge and we need to join with others to take some action. And one thing more, defiant hope inoculates us against the epidemic of despair that so often accompanies the release of the newest climate science or the shock when a government official denies it. But this reality is not the final word because the future is not yet been written. And if any government official denies science or deletes climate data or forbids the sharing of ongoing scientific investigation, or supports policies that will rob our children of their future, none of this is the final word because the future has not yet been written. Can you say that with me:

"The future has not yet been written."

Yes, God is calling us to change what appears to be inevitable, and remember that God is given us everything we need to engage. And while God doesn't promise success, God promises unswerving support while we engage our calling.

The best example of defiant hope that I know of are a group of teenagers known as Our Children's Trust.⁵ These teenagers have teamed up with some attorneys and scientists and together they have built a legal case showing that it's the duty of government to protect the climate and that they have a constitutional right to a future not wrecked by climate change. They've taken legal action in almost every state. This is not only a legal campaign, it's a *moral* campaign, seeking to expand the universal moral principle of the Golden Rule to include future generations as our neighbors, something that I call Golden Rule 2.0.

Since filing their federal lawsuit four years ago, Our Children's Trust has been blocked by the Trump administration over half a dozen times. Nevertheless the case has become a model for similar cases in thirteen other countries. In September 2018 the UCC issued a challenge for 1000 sermons to be preached on Our Children's Trust and for most of them to be preached by teenagers. Please share this invitation with people you know who are affiliated with other congregations.

⁵ For more information see www.facebook.com/youthvgov/about.

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And tonight if you want to turn on "60 Minutes", the chief plaintiff, Kelsey Juliana, will be the principal interview on "60 Minutes" tonight.

So this is how we write the future. This is how we shape history: by envisioning new possibilities and acting on them as if they are inevitable – and all the while remembering Gandhi's wise counsel,

"First they ignore you;
then they laugh at you,
then they fight you,
and then you win."

Now let's be clear: Gandhi doesn't offer a timeline, and many of us may not live to see the fruits of our action to protect God's creation. But we *know* that moral witness will inspire others as they receive the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that brings me to today's epistle reading. Just as Paul declares to the Christians in Corinth, so I say to you: "*You are my letter.*" And more importantly you who have taken Christ's name as your own, you are the letter that Christ is writing to the world. You are the means by which the world will come to know and experience Christ's supreme work of reconciling humanity to God, to one another, and to all of creation. And so I say to you in all of your endeavors, be a sign of defiant hope, awash in gratitude, infused with joy, propelled by wonder, and always seeking truth, because the truth *will* set you free: free to make full use of all your gifts and capacities in partnership with others, guided by the Holy Spirit to protect God's great gift of creation.

-- Amen

UCUCC: JA

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 04/19/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed.