

Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Easter/Earth Day
 April 20, 2008
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Acts 7:55-60

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” What reassuring words these are, words of comfort as Jesus says farewell to his disciples. But this consoling message may be difficult to absorb as we honor Earth Day today and look very soberly at what human activity is doing to our planetary home. How can our hearts *not* be troubled as we hear the increasingly grim reports of climate change? To cite just one example, more than half the Arctic Ocean was covered with ice year-round in the 1980’s. Last summer we watched the Arctic melt, and last September the entire Northwest Passage between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans was ice-free for the first time in recorded history. Last week NASA released its latest satellite data on the deteriorating condition of Arctic ice, and, as someone working with Greenpeace remarked, “The rate of sea-ice loss we’re observing is much worse than even the most pessimistic projections led us to believe.”¹

James Hansen, our leading climatologist, just issued what may be the most important scientific assessment of global warming in years. He argues that significant greenhouse gas reductions must be made immediately “if humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted.” We need, he says, to limit carbon concentrations in the atmosphere to under 350 parts per million. 350 -

¹ Carroll Muffett, deputy campaigns director with Greenpeace USA.

that's the magic number, the amount of CO₂ that the atmosphere can tolerate if we're going to sustain life on Earth as we know it. What is the current amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere? 385 parts per million, and climbing.

We have work to do.

Global warming makes us anxious - and with good reason. Two years ago, when the reality of climate change finally broke into the popular media and into the consciousness of the American public, the cover of *Time* magazine [April 3, 2006] was emblazoned with the headline, *Be Worried. Be Very Worried.* I'm no advocate of worry, but I must admit to thinking if fear was going to galvanize the American public to demand the urgent changes we need to make, then maybe fear was not such a bad thing. As they say, if you're not worried about climate change, then you haven't been paying attention.

But fear can only sustain you for so long, and a steady diet of anxiety can erode the soul and cloud the mind and leave us helpless in a heap of despair. Besides, fear is not the Gospel truth. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus says to us, and this from a man who knew he was soon to be arrested, tortured, and killed. Jesus was hardly in denial about the reality of malice, greed, and other forms of sin, and he faced squarely the fact of suffering and death. Yet his consistent message was one of hope, not fear. Why was that? Because he was rooted in the love of God. Because he knew that nothing could separate him from the love of God. Because he had a vision of how human beings could live well on this earth in obedience to God, a vision of a beloved community of brothers and sisters living together in justice and peace. "I am the way," Jesus said to his friends. "I am the truth and the life." And from his words and actions, from his passion, death, and resurrection, a movement sprang up - a movement of passionate men and women who were convinced of the way of self-giving generosity and kindness, committed

to the truth of love, dedicated to a life of praising and serving God, whatever the cost might be.

Last week I flew to Seattle to take part in a national Episcopal conference entitled "Healing Our Planet Earth." In a stunning couple of talks on climate change, our Presiding Bishop remarked that "the partner of urgency is hope," and that "sharing the work and sharing the dream always engenders hope." That's what brings us together every Sunday - to share the work, to share the dream, and to engender the renewed flowering of hope.

You might think that fighting global warming is a technical business that requires enormous skill and expertise. But in fact many of the tools for stabilizing the climate are very ordinary and simple. If we want to re-build this beautiful world of ours, if we want to be healers of planet Earth, we need a set of tools, and as it happens, I brought a sample tool kit with me.

Let's start with the compact fluorescent light bulb - you knew I was going to pull out one of these, didn't you? They last up to 10 times longer than regular incandescent bulbs and use $\frac{1}{4}$ of the electricity, so they save both money and energy. By now your house and work place are probably full of these bulbs, and if they aren't, they should be. During coffee hour we've got a display of compact fluorescents to show you, but I suppose it's worth adding that no matter what kind of light bulb we use, the best way to save electricity is to turn off unused lights. If no one is in the room, why is the light on?

Here's another tool: a sweater. In the winter and on chilly days, we can put on a sweater instead of cranking up the furnace to burn fossil fuels. Since we're heading into warmer weather, using the air conditioner as rarely as possible will also reduce carbon emissions.

What else? A rope. String this up between two trees and you've got an instant, solar clothes dryer - sun and wind will do the job for free. Standard

clothes dryers suck up enormous amounts of energy, and quite a few of us have given them up entirely. If you like, put duct tape across the front of your clothes dryer, to make it clear to your household what the deal is.

Another tool: a shoe. Putting one foot in front of the other is a way to walk the talk. One hundred years ago, 99.9% of people got by without cars.² They rode a bicycle, they used the train, they lived near their workplaces - and they walked. Do buy a fuel-efficient car, if you have to drive, but we can save even more fuel simply by driving less.

Another tool: a stainless steel bottle filled with water from the tap. We need to quit the bottled water habit. Americans now drink more than 30 billion single-serving bottles of water a year, an indulgence that consumes vast amount of fossil fuels - and most plastic bottles never get recycled. Instead, we can carry a refillable stainless steel bottle. And when we feel the urge to grab bottled water, we can imagine the bottle being $\frac{1}{4}$ full of oil - for that's what went into its being manufactured and shipped and chilled.

And how about the bag itself? That's another tool. When we bring re-usable canvas bags with us when we shop, we waste neither paper *nor* plastic, conserving both trees and fossil fuels.

When you have a moment, do take a look at the list compiled by Lucy Robinson that is in your service leaflet, for there you'll find more tools for personal action to join the battle to save the Earth.³

It's important that as individuals we do what we can in our household and workplace. But the scope of the challenge is so vast, and the time for effective action so short, we also need to join hands and work together in larger groups. We need bold political

² World Wildlife Fund, "10 Simple Things You Can Do to Help Save the Earth!"

³ The list is based on David Gershon, *Low Carbon Diet: A 30 Day Program to Lose 5000 Pounds*, Woodstock, NY: Empowerment Institute, 2006.

action. We need to demand that our country join an international treaty within the next two years that cuts global warming pollution by 90% in developed countries and by more than half worldwide. We need to stop building coal-fired power plants that don't have the capacity to safely trap and store carbon dioxide. We need to create millions of green-energy jobs.

Religious communities also have a part to play. Last year, Bishop Steven Charleston, the President of Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge and a Native American elder, began to ask himself, what if we could move beyond particular parishes taking individual action here and there to reduce their carbon footprint? What if not just a handful of Episcopal churches - such as Grace Church - but *all* Episcopal churches took big strides toward energy conservation and efficiency? What if the national leadership of the Episcopal Church made a commitment to cut in half within ten years the carbon footprint of every facility it maintains - not just its churches, but also its camps, schools, offices, and seminaries? And not only that - what if the top leadership of every faith tradition across the country, Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist - what if every national religious community in the United States made the same commitment to reduce its emissions and worked together on a single, unified effort to stop global warming?

Thus was born the Genesis Covenant, which was officially launched in Seattle last Saturday. I am on the steering committee of the Genesis Covenant, and if you go to genesiscovenant.org you can read how it works and how you can help to bring it to life. We're depending on your help, for the Genesis Covenant is a completely grassroots movement with minimal organizational structure. We're praying that the Holy Spirit will take hold of this moment to breathe new life into us and give us new energy for action.

For if ever there were a time to bear witness to our faith, now would be the time. If ever there were a moment to hold fast to our vision of a world in which human beings live in right relationship with each other and with our fellow creatures, now would be the time. Now is the time, as theologian Sallie McFague said at the conference in Seattle, to recognize that the world is not a hotel, but our home. When we visit a hotel, we may feel entitled to use copious amount of hot water, to throw towels on the floor, to use and discard everything in sight and then to head to the next hotel - in short, to exercise what she called the "Kleenex perspective" of the world. But when we realize that in fact the Earth is our home - that God created it and loves every inch of it and entrusted it to our care - then everything changes. We realize that we live here; we belong here; we can no longer tolerate a life-style that exhausts the planet's resources and that treats land, sea, and sky alike as receptacles for waste.

I don't know if human beings will act quickly enough to prevent the most catastrophic effects of climate change, but I can't think of a mission more inspiring than to stand up for life on this planet. What you and I need to create is the most diverse, bold, visionary, wide-ranging, powerful, hope-filled, hands-on, feet-on-the-ground, shoulder-to-the-wheel social movement that humanity has ever seen.

Jesus whispers in my ears, and in yours, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. I am with you always."

I heard another climate activist say something that I want to pass along to you.⁴ We want to be able to say to our children and to our children's children:

I give you – polar bears.

I give you – glaciers.

I give you – coral reefs.

⁴Eban Goodstein, founder of Green House Network and Focus the Nation, speaking at UMass, Amherst in 2007.

I give you – ice shelves as big as a continent.

I give you – moderate weather.

I give you – a stable climate.

Thank you, thank you, thank you for sharing this mission with me.

Do not let your hearts be troubled.