

Sermon for the Twenty-Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 29A)

Christ the King

November 23, 2008

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-23

Psalms 95:1-7a

Matthew 25:32-46

Ringing 350, Restoring All Things

Today is a big-picture day -- a day we lift our eyes from the immediate concerns of our daily lives in order to see the big picture and take the long view. Where do we go when we want the big view? One good place to get the big picture is the Bible, and I will say something about that in a moment. Another good place is New York's American Museum of Natural History, which I visited two weeks ago. There you can wander through the Hall of the Universe, the Center for Earth and Space, and the Hall of Ocean Life. Big picture! You can walk through exhibits about forests and mammals and birds. You can walk through rooms where overhead you see bones of flying creatures and creeping creatures that went extinct long ago, and you can ponder enormous dinosaur skeletons with impressive teeth and claws and tails.

These days you can also check out a special exhibit on climate change, which features, as you walk in, a room with a red line on the wall that traces the levels of heat-trapping gases in the Earth's atmosphere. The red line begins at the year 1600, and the line is well below your knees -- where it has stayed steady for the past 2,000 years. As you walk across the room, the red line rises, and when you reach the other side of the room and get to the present moment, a mere 400 hundred years later, the line is well above your head and climbing steeply. As the exhibit points out, this is a level of carbon dioxide that hasn't been seen on earth for at least 800,000 years, and probably much longer. Of course we know that the climate has changed many times in the Earth's long history, but this time is different. This time, the global climate is growing warm because of human activities, and, as any scientist will tell you, whenever we see in the natural world something very sudden -- like that sharp spike in CO₂ -- then we know that an abrupt change of some kind is upon us.

A few days ago I listened to author and environmental activist Bill McKibben speak about what climate scientists have discovered in the last 18 months. One thing they have discovered is that the climate models are wrong. The impact of global warming around the world is taking place much faster than the

models had predicted and at a much larger scale. One of the signs of the times, said McKibben -- what really got the scientists' attention -- was the rapid melt of sea ice in the summer of 2007. It was, said one scientist, as if the ice had fallen off a cliff. The same thing repeated this past summer, when the Northwest Passage was open for the first time in the life of our species. The ice is melting 50 years sooner than the models had predicted.

Here is another piece of the scientific big picture. When we raise the temperature worldwide and start to melt the sea ice, the process begins to take on a life of its own. For example, the shiny white ice that reflects the sun's radiation is replaced by dark water that absorbs 80% of that solar radiation. The Arctic Ocean is now so warm that even in the winter, ice is melting from underneath.

This kind of feedback loop accelerates the rate of climate change that you and I cause directly when we burn coal and gas and oil to heat our homes, and turn on our lights, and run our cars, and power our engines. We know what is ahead if we don't find a way to change course quickly -- more droughts and floods around the world, more severe storms, a rise in infectious diseases, desperate shortages of water, millions of environmental refugees, and, as one study recently reported, a possible sea level rise of seven feet within this century. As McKibben pointed out, there is not enough money in the world to build walls and levees protecting every coastal city from that kind of rise in the level of the sea.

Big picture. Grim picture.

But we have a number. Scientists didn't know this number even a year ago. It is a very important number, and if we know nothing else about global warming, we should know this number. And we do. It's the number on the banner that is hanging from our steeple. It comes to us from James Hansen of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, our country's leading climatologist, whose latest research shows that any value for carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that is above 350 parts per million is not compatible with life on Earth as we know it. As Hansen writes, if human beings want "to preserve a planet that is similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted," then the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere must be no more than 350 parts per million."¹

¹ Michael D. Lemonick, "Global Warming: Beyond the Tipping Point," *Scientific American*, October 2008

'350' means that life as we know it can continue. What is the level of atmospheric CO2 right now? About 385 and climbing.

McKibben compares it to going for a check-up and your doctor tells you that your cholesterol is way too high. If you don't want to keel over from a heart attack or stroke, then you are going to have to change your behavior, and change it fast. Or we can think of 350 parts per million as representing our budget. Stay within our budget, and our lives function just fine. Go over that credit limit and we're in danger; we're in debt. Right now we're living way beyond our means, living on borrowed time.

That's why the world into which we were born is eroding before our eyes. That's why, as McKibben says, "We are diligently in the process of de-creation," reversing the story of Creation that is told in Genesis and taking down life forms all around us. Maybe half the world's species could be gone before the century is out, more bones to add to a museum of natural history. Unless we move swiftly toward energy conservation and efficiency, unless we make a transition to clean, safe, renewable energy, unless we re-design the infrastructure of our economy so that it is no longer based on fossil fuels -- and do this at top speed -- then we face runaway climate change. As one scientist put it on a recent documentary on PBS, "We are standing on the precipice of hell."

That is one big picture of reality. Here is another that is just as real. God is the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. "In [God's] hand are the caverns of the earth, and the heights of the hills... also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands have molded the dry land" [Psalm 95:4-5]. Our Creator God loved the universe into being -- every leaf and twig, every dolphin and galaxy. God in Christ redeemed it all, and fills it all, and longs to restore it all. And God the Holy Spirit empowers and emboldens us to become healers of the Earth, and to take action especially on behalf of those who are weak and marginalized and poor, for they are the ones with whom Jesus particularly identifies.

Here on this last Sunday of the church year, we lift up God's well-beloved Son as King of kings and Lord of lords, the one whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, the one who searches for the lost and rescues the scattered, the one who brings back the strayed and binds up the injured, and gathers everyone and all Creation into a community of justice and love.

At the end of our service this morning, we will ring our bell 350 times. You should have in your pew a leaflet that briefly answers the question, "Why ring our church bell 350 times?" The fact is: there are as many answers to that question as there are people and places that we love.

We ring our bell to bless the mountains of Appalachia, whose tops are being blown off so that coal companies can extract the coal that generates most of the electricity in this country.

We ring our bell to bless the millions of acres of pine trees that have been killed from New Mexico to British Columbia by the mountain pine beetles that no longer die off in winter because the winters are no longer cold enough.

We ring our bell to bless the tens of thousands of acres in California that burned to the ground this month by wildfires exacerbated by the droughts and changed weather patterns that are linked to climate change.

We ring our bell to stand with our brothers and sisters in Haiti, a country not so far away but by far the poorest country in the western hemisphere, a country that was battered from mid-August to mid-September by two hurricanes and two tropical storms, storms that are typical of what we can expect from global warming.

We ring our bell to stand with the poor in faraway countries who are already affected by climate change, with the men, women, and children who are on the move in sub-Saharan Africa because Lake Chad has dried up, and with those forced to leave their homeland on the Pacific island of Tuvalu, because the sea is rising.

We ring our bell to stand with the poor in this country who struggle to pay high heating bills and who need help to weatherize their homes.

We ring our bell to express support for the U.N. climate negotiators who will soon meet in Poland to work out a framework for a new international treaty to stop global warming.

We ring our bell to express support for the growing climate movement in this country and our hope that it will stand up to the corporate powers that be. As Bill McKibben observed, "ExxonMobil made more money last year than any company in the history of money."

We ring the bell for polar bears, and for every species that is threatened with extinction because of climate change.

We ring the bell for our children, and our children's children, because we love them and we want to leave them a habitable world.

We ring the bell because we want to be filled with and to manifest in our own lives the love of God in Christ that reaches out to every human being and extends to every creature on this planet, weaving us all into one web of life.

Above all we ring the bell because Jesus is Lord, because at the end of the time we will be judged not by how much money we made or how many awards we achieved, not by how rich or thin or smart we were, not by whether we belonged to the right church or believed the right thing or confessed the right creed, but by one thing, and one thing only: by whether or not we learned to love. The mystery and the surprise of our Gospel reading this morning is that when we feed and hungry and clothe the naked -- when we reach out to our fellow creatures who are in need - - it is Jesus himself that we meet, Jesus himself that we serve.

How wonderful it would be if, fifty and one hundred years from now, our descendants looked back at us with gratefulness for having stepped up boldly in the face of the ecological crisis and for having responded swiftly and lovingly to protect life on this planet. That would be a judgment that would make our hearts sing.

If you would like a turn at the bell, let me give you two instructions.

First, after the service, please form a line on the organ-side aisle. A shepherd will guide you, an acolyte will keep count, and at 12 Noon we will begin to ring. If you want to attend the Forum and hear Sandy Muspratt speak about his recent trip to Haiti, please stand near the front, and, after ringing the bell, head straight to the Parish Hall.

Second, please take a moment to bring to mind a child you love, or a place in nature, or a species that is at risk. I invite you to dedicate your bell-ringing to that person or place or species. If you like, when you ring the bell, say its name aloud or call on the name of Jesus, so that your loving intention as you ring the bell can be as clear and focused as possible.

May God bless our ringing, and may the power of this symbolic action inspire and bless and strengthen everyone who hears its sound.