

Slouching Toward Crisis
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Earth Sabbath
John 8: 31-32
Isaiah 24: 1-13

Our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is from Isaiah 24, but I don't want to read it yet. It's such a strong word, and for me at least, so upsetting, that I want to set it in the context of my sermon. I brought a picture of my grandson Max to give me courage. Some pastors want to be prophets. I'm not one of them. But things are bad in our environment: worse than we want to know, and I thought Max's hopeful face, crawling confidently through a tunnel at Compo beach would help keep me faithful to my task.

John 8: 31-32

Then Jesus said to those who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' Amen.

Slouching toward Crisis

I thought I knew a lot about Environmental issues. I thought I was informed. But recently, preparing for this sermon, I was read an article that felt like a body blow. The article was by Mike McCarthy, the Environmental Editor for British paper *The Independent*.¹ He reported on an International conference of the best scientists in the world on climate change, called by Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, to update policy makers on climate change science. Listening to one another, participants were surprised by how much worse things were than they had expected. The temperature of the earth's surface is rising, dramatically. Even at the most optimistic estimate, there will be drastic consequences. Scientists there were not offering theories based on computer models of what might happen. but real data, of measurable changes, happening now.

There was a warning from the British Antarctic Survey that, "the vast ice sheet covering the western side of the Antarctica may be starting to break up. If it were to collapse into the sea, the West Antarctic Ice Sheet would raise global sea levels by more than 16 feet." Goodbye Westport. "Only four years ago scientists thought the Antarctic Ice Sheet was safe for probably 1,000 years, certainly until the end of this century;" now that judgment must be revised.

A group of American scientists calculated that there is now a greater than 50% chance that the Gulf Stream will collapse due global warming, disrupting weather patterns and perversely causing an ice age in Europe. The seas are turning acid, as billions of tons of carbon dioxide dissolve in sea water, and in a simple chemical reaction, become carboic acid. Scientists listed one after another the eco-systems and species that would disappear as global temperatures rose. "The overwhelming impression given by the conference, was that these things will happen. And much more quickly, with broader and more serious consequences than had been anticipated even a few years ago.

¹"Slouching Toward Disaster," *The Independent*, Mike McCarthy, February 12, 2005

And these big temperature rises are already "built into the system", because there is a time lag between the carbon dioxide going into the atmosphere and the subsequent rise in temperatures. Even if all emissions were stopped dead tomorrow all over the world, enough CO²; is up there to keep the temperature rising. But, of course, the emissions are not going to stop tomorrow. Even under the Kyoto protocol, the industrialized countries, without the US, are struggling to cut their emissions back to 5 per cent below 1990 levels; While controlling climate change would require a cut of perhaps 60 per cent.! And given the realities in the developing world, in the next 25 years global emissions of CO² are likely to rise by over 60 per cent, with devastating consequences that we are already beginning to see.

When the conference was over, Mike McCarthy, this seasoned Environmental Editor from *The Independent* and his counterpart on the *Guardian*, Paul Brown, "traveled home together by train, working out what the conference meant, and their terrible sense of the inevitability of what was going to happen." McCarthy wrote, "By the time we reached London we knew what the conclusion was. I said: "The earth is finished." Paul answered: "It is, yes." McCarthy asked his readers, "What will our children make of our generation, who let this planet, so lovingly created, go to waste?"

I was stunned. Shaken really.

And scientists aren't the only ones taking our stewardship of the earth seriously. Preparing for today, looking actually for another text, I came upon our reading from Isaiah. It was as though I had never seen it before. I know Isaiah. It's my favorite book in the Bible. I don't know how many times I've read it- many. But I read Isaiah 24: 1-13 with new eyes this time. These opening verses of Is. 24 are sometimes called Isaiah's Apocalypse. You'll see why I didn't want to lead with it.

Isaiah 24: 1-8, 11b,13

Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and God will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; ,as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with the master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer so with the seller; as with the lender so with the borrower, as with the creditor so with the debtor.

The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. All joy has reached its eventide; the gladness of the earth is banished. For thus it shall be on the earth and among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is ended.

When I read it, I felt like I'd been hit by a wave. What is the faithful response to word like that? We need to take it very, very seriously. We can't count on God's good nature to save us from the consequences of our actions.

And yet, I have hope. I took my title from Mike McCarthy's Article, which he called *Slouching Towards Disaster*, which fits his resigned conclusion that these things will happen. But as a person of faith, I hope, and I trust, that we are slouching toward crisis, not disaster. Disaster comes *from Dis-astare*: bad stars, a calamity, a bad fate.

But *crisis* comes from the Greek word meaning: to decide, to separate; a serious or decisive state of things: a situation whose outcome determines whether good or bad outcomes will follow; a tuning point; a crucial time; in medicine it's the turning point in the course of a disease which can go either way, toward recovery or death.²

We are in an environmental crisis. How much do we want to live in a world worth living in? How do we want our children's children to live? The signs are bad. It looks like the earth can't survive. But there are signs of hope. For one thing, there is a Greening of the Evangelical movement.² Increasing numbers of evangelicals have a deep commitment to creation care; and they are setting an ecological example in their churches that we don't begin to match, even turning off the heaters in baptismal pools, and using rain runoff to water organic gardens, and being really serious about recycling and energy conservation and renewable energy. And they are demanding different behavior from politicians. This has become a values issue for many evangelical, and the evangelicals have political power and the ear of those in power. They are insisting that government has a responsibility to safe-guard a sustainable environment. and they're calling for strict environmental rules, even at the cost of jobs or higher prices. One carried a sign at the last National Right to Life March that said "Stop Mercury Poisoning the Unborn."³ There is a paradigm shift among evangelicals,⁴ and that's a good sign. We should catch up to them.

I have hope because this nation has shown itself to be up to tremendous challenges. If we will, we can change the givens that seem to be determining our future. The question is how do we want to live? How do we want our children's children to live?

We have gotten too used to news of what we cannot do. But in World War Two, we were a nation unprepared for war, attacked and defeated at Pearl Harbor. Then we mobilized our resources, we changed civilian production to the war effort, we endured rationing and put first things first, we had a truly universal draft. The whole nation sacrificed for a great cause, and we prevailed. 3 1/2 years later we were on the beaches of Normandy. Victory was certain, Pearl Harbor really did wake a sleeping giant. We can change the givens. We just need to be committed to doing the things that need to be done to save the earth.

²*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*

³"Greening of Evangelicals," *Washington Post*, Blaine Harden, Feb. 6

⁴"Greens and God," *Boulder Camera Staff Writer*, May 19, 2000

I have hope because I believe the earth has a drive to life like the body, with deep regenerative powers. Look at the news of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, aka “The Lord God Woodpecker” Look at the hopes of a comeback for the American Chestnut Tree. Look at the times we’ve had an ecological disaster from which we thought we couldn’t recover, and then we did.

I have hope because this word in Isaiah is not a final word, this isn’t really an apocalypse, but a prophecy, it’s not about the end of the earth, but about God calling the world to see the devastated future and return to the God who is still in charge, and who sees a new beginning. AS this passage ends, we hear singing from the far corners of the earth as people return to God enthroned in the Temple.

Bill Moyers, in an essay called *There is No Tomorrow*⁵ listed all his frustrations with the bad news about the environment, and the lack of political will to do what must be done. He listed one terrible thing after another. Then he wrote, “I read all this and look up at the pictures on my desk, next to the computer - pictures of my grandchildren. I see the future looking back at me from those photographs and I say, ‘Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do.’ And then I am stopped short by the thought: ‘That’s not right. We do know what we are doing. We are stealing their future, betraying their trust, despoiling their world.’” And he asks himself, ‘Why? Is it because we don’t care? Because we are greedy? Because we have lost our capacity for outrage?’” “The news is not good these days,” he writes, then adds, “I can tell you, though, that as a journalist I know the news is never the end of the story. The news can be the truth that sets us free – not only to feel but to fight for the future we want. And the will to fight is the antidote to despair, the cure for cynicism, and the answer to those faces looking back at me from those photographs on my desk. “

“What we need,” Moyers concludes, “is what the ancient Israelites called *hochma* – the science of the heart ... the capacity to see, to feel and then to act as if the future depended on you. Believe me, it does.” Amen.

⁵ “There is No Tomorrow,” *The Star Tribune*, Bill Moyers, January 30, 2005

