



NATIONAL PREACH-IN ON GLOBAL WARMING FEBRUARY 13•15, 2015

This is an example sermon that was given at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Tulsa, OK on January 25, 2015

The Urgency of Now: A Sermon on Climate Change

Readings: [Jonah 3:1-5, 10 and Mark 1:14-20](#)

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there “is” such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

As much as I would rather relate to Jonah in our Hebrew scripture this morning, I think that we as a society are much more like the people of Nineveh. If we do not repent quickly from the way we are behaving towards each other and towards the planet, we will face very negative consequences – very quickly (In fact we already are). In our passage from Jonah, we are reminded of the need in a time of crisis caused by our own making that we must repent in order to bring healing and reconciliation with each other and the planet.

And like the disciples in our gospel lesson this morning, we find ourselves called to recognize the opportunity of following Jesus for the transformation of the world. This is an urgent opportunity, and it calls us to drop some or many of the things that might hinder us from fully taking this opportunity to transform the world. We are living in a time of both Crisis and Opportunity, and today I want us to reflect on how it is that we like the people of Nineveh will repent from our sins and move to new life and on how we as followers of Jesus might find ways to drop those things and ways of being that keep us from following his ways of life, love, and justice in the world. And I want us to do this while reflecting on what I believe to be the most urgent challenge for our church and society in the 21st Century – the challenge of climate change.

Recently, one of my heroes, Bill McKibben (a lover of wisdom, one of the most effective and committed climate change activists, and founder of 350.Org) pointed out that when it comes to addressing climate change it is like we are in the last half of the fourth quarter of an American football game, and we are down by the two or three touchdowns. He said that we are at a point in the game when we can no longer afford to rely on solid ground gains through the line. What is needed, McKibben rightly claims, is for us to make some surprising passes, or it will soon be “game

over” in relation to doing anything to mitigate the most extreme consequences of climate change. McKibben’s football analogy is a clear way of highlighting the great urgency of now when it comes to the needed action to reduce dramatically the emission of greenhouse gases. (See McKibben’s analysis [here](#)).

Taking this analogy further, not only do we need some surprising passes to win in this most important challenge of our time, we need the passes to be the best possibly thrown passes we can throw. The passing routes need to be run to precision, and the plays that are called must be the most effective and strategic plays that we can possibly call. Our team must work together as well as ever to make the great climate responsibility comeback that is needed. We cannot simply throw the ball up for grabs. That may be needed in the last seconds in the game (hopefully we are not there yet – sadly we may be). Unfortunately, long passes to the end zone with seconds left are rarely effective.

We need a sense of urgency combined with strategy to complete the surprising passes we need – Strategic Urgency. We also need all of the players to give their all to their particular roles and positions in the game. We are not all quarterbacks, receivers, or coaches; but we all have extremely important roles to play. It is time (past time) to be all in! We may not be able to make the systemic changes needed to address climate change (the situation is both dire and extremely complex, with powerful forces attempting to make our passes incomplete), but we certainly will not prevail if we do not give it our all. In the end, if we can come together to complete the passes needed, all persons and all life will be the winners – even the opposing team.

As with all analogies, this one has its limitation. Football is primarily a sport for men, and the work of addressing climate change is clearly the work of all persons. Also, football is one of the most violent games of our time. The work of addressing climate change should be non-violent, creative, and appeal to the best, most loving, and most just aspects of our humanity. We should not lose our humanity in the effort to save humanity and all life. That being said, we do need to be all in, and we do need an intense sense of strategic urgency.

If we do not do all we can to address climate change; there will be less peace, less social justice, more animal suffering, more threats to human rights, more poverty, less racial equality, lower quality healthcare, more hunger, more homelessness, greater suffering for children, less flourishing for persons who are LGBTQ, fewer opportunities for women, less biodiversity, and greater suffering for future generations of all life.

If we do not work for social justice, peace, the well being of all life, the rights of all persons, racial equality, the eradicating of poverty, quality healthcare for all, ending hunger, ending homelessness, the well being of children, equal rights for women, equal rights for persons who are LGBTQ, preserving biodiversity, and the flourishing of future generations of all life; then the planet we save by addressing climate

change will be so diminished in value that it will not be the flourishing home it can be for all life and for ages to come.

We have just experienced the warmest year for combined land and ocean temperatures since record keeping began in 1880 (and this happened in a year without El Nino). February 1985 was the last month in which we experienced a colder than average month globally (1). The greenhouse gases of carbon dioxide and methane that contribute most to this warming continue to be on the rise, with methane showing a pronounced spike since 2007 (2). Currently 258 billions tons of land ice are lost annually, and every major climate indicator points to continued warming unless there is a significant shift in how human beings produce and use energy (3). The consensus among climate scientists across the globe is that climate change is real, it is now, and if we do not act with great urgency and effectiveness, climate change will bring catastrophic consequences for human civilization and all life on earth.

With evidence like this, one would think that we would be experiencing a sense of unmatched urgency to stabilize the climate through the most massive shift in energy use and energy production seen in the history of humankind for the sake of all generations of humans and all life to come. Instead, we have witnessed a systematic and well-funded digging in of the heels of those who still have trillions of dollars to make on the exploitation of fossil fuels at the expense of future generations. Here in the United States, we continue to further the goals of the fossil fuel industry while minimizing the reality of climate change. And some of the greatest denial and of climate change comes from the leadership of our own state of Oklahoma. The United States and Canada collectively have our heads in the sand (or heads in the oil sands) while the planet is facing its greatest threat since the beginning of human existence.

We have moved beyond the point of climate change denial to a climate of betrayal of future generations for the sake of current comfort and greed. With the evidence for climate change so overwhelming and the urgency for action so obvious, we must begin to ask ourselves if our generation is growing ever more guilty of the premeditated murder of billions of human and non-human lives. Such a claim will surely be ridiculed by the fossil fuel industry in the name of energy independence and economic development, but the climate science and the facts of climate change and its consequences will judge us otherwise. Make no mistake, no matter how slowly the consequences unfold, we are committing an act of great collective violence with our inaction in the face of climate change. Much like the human actions of the past that have led to the destruction of so many human lives, we cannot use the excuse that "we did not know." We know, and we have chosen a climate of betrayal of the future. We are the last generation with the opportunity to make a significant impact on climate change.

Up until now, we have exhibited a massive collective moral failure characterized by a glaring lack of empathy for each other and generations to come. One has to wonder what it will take for us to care enough about each other and the rest of life

to change the way we live our lives. Our generation is pulling the trigger on the climate change gun while billions of persons of current and future generations have their hands up pleading for us not to shoot. Like the people of Ninevah, let us repent of our sins against each other and the planet that we might find new life and forgiveness, and like the disciples of Jesus let us leave our nets and follow Jesus's way of peace, justice, and caring for all creation for the sake of all present and future life and for the transformation of the world. Amen.

1. <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/2014/13>
2. <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/343/6170/493.figures-only>
3. <http://climate.nasa.gov/>