

Shaped by Hope—In a Climate Crisis World

SCRIPTURE:

Romans 5: 1-5; Listen for the word of God:

^[1] Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ^[2] through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ^[3] And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ^[4] and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ^[5] and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Jeremiah 32:1-17 [the following scripture is incorporated into the sermon]

^[1] The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar. ^[2] At that time the army of the king of Babylon was besieging Jerusalem, and the prophet Jeremiah was confined in the court of the guard that was in the palace of the king of Judah, ^[3] where King Zedekiah of Judah had confined him. Zedekiah had said, "Why do you prophesy and say: Thus says the LORD: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; ^[4] King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; ^[5] and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says the LORD; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed?" ^[6] Jeremiah said, The word of the LORD came to me: ^[7] Hanamel son of your uncle Shallum is going to come to you and say, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth, for the right of redemption by purchase is yours." ^[8] Then my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to me, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself." Then I knew that this was the word of the LORD. ^[9] And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. ^[10] I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. ^[11] Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; ^[12] and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. ^[13] In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, ^[14] Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. ^[15] For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. ^[16] After I had given the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah, I prayed to the LORD, saying: ^[17] Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.

Let us pray:

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

After preaching on climate change for almost three decades, it's really quite something to be able to say that all around the world – leaders, institutions and governments are both naming the problem and committing to plans, programs and policies that will begin to make a dent in the greatest moral challenge humanity has ever faced.

Even here in our own country – the only place in the world where climate denial persists –

more and more people are recognizing that the science is settled... and what's needed now is leadership driven by both facts and vision.

So as we face this unprecedented challenge to all of creation, what's the most significant contribution people of faith can make – whatever their faith perspective? While we can and we must recycle, drive less, insulate our buildings and install solar panels, there's something more: Humanity's hope needs to be renewed.

We need to take to heart Jesus' most common instruction: "Fear not!" When it comes to the climate crisis – following Jesus' admonition – we need to fearlessly move forward: Unafraid to face the facts. Unafraid to speak with candor. Unafraid to name and go after what may seem to be impossible accomplishments because that is what is required to preserve God's creation.

To address the climate crisis, we need:

- a hope that goes beyond the personal concerns we each have;
- a hope big enough to embrace the world around us;
- a hope not limited to people but a hope that embraces all life;
- and not only all things alive today, but a hope so large that all generations to come are included. That's the hope that God gave Noah after the flood when God declared an everlasting covenant. God is not only concerned about us! In addition to us, God covenants with all future generations and with every living creature. (Genesis 9:12)

Now let me illustrate that hope with a story from the 32nd chapter of the Prophet Jeremiah¹. My reason for telling the story rather than reading the scripture is that it's written in such minute detail that it's hard to get perspective on what's important.

The year is 587 B.C.E. Jerusalem is under siege by the Babylonians, and they have placed the Prophet Jeremiah under house arrest. The Israelites are despairing. It seems that God is reneging on promise after promise. Then, a vision comes to Jeremiah: somehow, Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel shows up, and they talk about a field that's for sale back in Anathoth, the town where Jeremiah was born. And suddenly, the vision ends, and there is Hanamel! The guards had let him in. Hanamel tells Jeremiah that their hometown is also occupied by the Babylonians, and then he mentions the field. And without hesitation, Jeremiah buys it.

Now: Who in their right mind – when they are in jail and they learn that their home town is occupied by their enemies – who in their right mind would buy a field in that distant, occupied town?

Well – it all depends on how you answer this question: What does God want for us? When Jeremiah—while sitting in jail—buys that field he is declaring to all of Israel that a new normal is waiting to be born—beyond the barricades – beyond their hopeless captivity – God's covenantal promises are timeless. Indeed, Jeremiah's seemingly foolish action takes on a sacramental significance – or as Jeremiah says to God, "Nothing is too hard for you!"

Fast forward to the 21st century. Just as Jeremiah and the Israelites knew their beloved city had been taken over, we know that extreme weather like hurricane Sandy or the California drought is now common,² and that each passing year is likely to be the hottest year ever recorded³. Under these circumstances, our usual understanding of hope is insufficient.

So in the context of climate change, what does God want for us and what does God want from us? I will translate Jeremiah's hope to our times using two OR three examples.

Show of hands: who here has heard of the Keystone XL pipeline? The reason you've heard of it is because of thousands of people like me – and perhaps some of YOU as well!

In 2011, the KXL pipeline was thought to be a done deal, until 350.org organized a civil disobedience action that resulted in the arrest of 1,253 people at the White House, and 63 of us spending 3 days and nights in jail. We did this because there's a pool of tar sands in western Canada that is the second largest carbon deposit in the world. Canada doesn't have the technology to turn this sludge into usable fuel, but we do. So the KXL pipeline was to carry that sludge from the Dakotas to Texas – right over Nebraska's Ogallala Aquifer⁴. Our hope was to get the attention of the nation... and particularly of the President since it can only be built if he approves it.

If you're thinking "David and Goliath" you're on track. Proponents of the pipeline have unlimited funds to spend on lobbying, falsely promoting the pipeline as a jobs creator, falsely suggesting that extracting and processing this sludge will bring America energy independence, and discrediting people like me.⁵

So... on Ash Wednesday in 2013 I was arrested again – this time with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr and his son, civil rights leader Julian Bond, actress Daryl Hannah, NASA climatologist James Hansen, Bill McKibben, and 40 others when we cuffed ourselves to the White House fence, and four days later 50,000 people marched past the White House.

And between 2011 and 2013, opponents of the Keystone pipeline confronted President Obama and his closest advisors more than 30 times.

Now, just as Jeremiah bought that plot of land under impossible conditions – I say to you what I have said to countless congregations: the Keystone XL pipeline will not be completed.

Ask yourself: In the context of climate change – what does God want for us and what does God want from us? Surely God does not want for us an earth that is uninhabitable. We've had a temperature rise of only 1 degree Celsius—and look what it's already brought: A California drought that threatens California's economy as well as 30% of America's food supply; A polar ice cap that's 40% melted; oceans that are 30% more acidic; and more. No – this is not what God wants for us.

And what does God want from us?

Thanks to our arrests and other activity, since 2011 the Keystone XL pipeline has become a household word.

At a minimum, our efforts have successfully delayed the completion of the pipeline by more than 1,000 days, and thus has kept more than 850 million barrels⁶ of Canadian Tar Sands from being processed and released into the atmosphere.

A new report⁷ calculates that tar sands producers have lost over 30 billion dollars in revenue from 2010-2013, and \$17B of it is due to citizen protest.

And then on July 1 (2014), TransCanada's permit to build the South Dakota section of the Keystone XL pipeline expired. Thanks to the delay achieved by activists, TransCanada has lost the required state-issued building permits in both Nebraska and South Dakota.

Now: When I say the Keystone XL pipeline will not be completed – I am exchanging the tiny hope that you will recycle, and perhaps walk or bicycle more, and get new light bulbs – I'm exchanging that hope for a much larger one.

- My hope is that as a person of faith, you won't let the Keystone XL pipeline be completed.
- My hope is that as a disciple of Jesus, you won't sentence your grand-children to an unlivable planet.
- My hope is that when you hear that God so loved the world – you're willing to take action. And not only you, but millions of others.

Now, some of you will hear in this the foolishness of Jeremiah buying the field. Believe me – I'm fine with that! It's an honor to be called "a fool for Christ's sake." (that's 1 Corinthians 4:10) But of the others of you who are connecting with the Author of creation – of you, I am 100% confident that God is already kindling in you a new found hope, and that you will add your resolve to that of hundreds of thousands of others. And this pipeline will not be completed.

Here's my second example of hope in a time of climate crisis.

Some of you know that on July 1, 2013 the UCC became the first denomination to vote to divest from fossil fuel companies. This began when your Mass Conference Board voted to bring the resolution I had written to Synod. In doing so, we were on the front line of what is becoming a larger movement that now includes close to 1,000 universities, cities, philanthropic foundations and faith communities⁸ whose investments together represent more than fifty billion dollars.⁹

Why divest from fossil fuel companies? Well – because the carbon they own – or have the right to tap – is five times what it will take to alter life as we know it¹⁰. If fossil fuel companies simply continue to carry out their mission, they will wreck the earth.¹¹

And as people of faith, not only do we believe that wrecking God's creation is morally wrong, we believe it's morally wrong to profit from wrecking creation.

Hours after the UCC vote, I received congratulations from a Nobel Prize laureate along with the head of a major Protestant denomination. And Archbishop Desmond Tutu also sent me his congratulations and added, "We hope others will follow your splendid example." Well – they are: Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Quakers, Lutherans, Unitarians and others—at the denominational and congregational level— are now engaged in divesting from fossil fuel companies.

And on November 1 (2014) the UCC became the first denomination to offer an investment fund that is free of fossil fuel companies.¹²

So what does God want for us and what does God want from us?

Surely God does not want for us an earth that is uninhabitable. And so I say to you that we are going find a way to keep 80% of the known carbon reserves in the ground. And starting with a massive divestment campaign, we will add additional strategies, and soon, Exxon Mobil will no longer be regarded as a prudent investment. Within our lifetime, mining coal, drilling for oil, mountain top removal and fracking will all be as unthinkable as it would be to own slaves today. You heard me right: our generation is now engaged in a new abolition movement¹³.

Now: Some of you will hear in this the foolishness of Jeremiah buying the field.

But in the weeks and months ahead, others of you will sense what God wants from you – and I'm confident that you will join with others and together, we will revoke the social license that the Exxons of the world require to continue their "business as usual" approach as they profit from wrecking the earth.¹⁴

Sisters and brothers: we must not settle for a shriveled hope resigned to the inevitability of drowned cities, massive extinction, ruined crops, forests ablaze, melted glaciers, and repeat hurricanes. Just as Jesus faced down Herod, we must stop the Keystone XL pipeline and end Exxon's momentum.

Climate change is already testing our coastal cities, our farms, our national parks, our rivers. It's also already testing the poor, the marginalized, the elderly, the hungry and homeless. Now it's time for us to test our politicians. Now it's time to test any who would profit by wrecking God's creation.

And most importantly – now it's time to test our faith. I urge you to allow a great hope to enter your heart as you receive Jesus' most frequent admonition – "Fear Not!" Face this challenge, follow where God is calling you, and recognize that however impossible, however unlikely, however unreachable, nothing is too hard for God. Amen.

1. For some of the insight in my telling, I am indebted to both R. E. Clements Interpretation series commentary on *Jeremiah* and Walter Brueggemann's account of "hope" in his book *Reverberations of Faith*.

2. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/10/27/3585080/arctic-ice-melt-double-europe-winters/>

3. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/10/13/3579242/nasa-hottest-september-on-record/>
4. See in depth article by Prof. Michael Klare:
<http://www.nationofchange.org/presidential-decision-could-change-world-1360593401>
5. See WAPO blog, "Support for Keystone XL pipeline is almost universal" June 26, 2014:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/06/26/support-for-keystone-xl-pipeline-is-almost-universal/>
6. If built and fully operational, the Keystone XL pipeline plans to transport 830,000 barrels of Canadian Tar Sands a day. Almost 1,000 days have passed since the KXL pipeline was first delayed in October 2011. Had civil disobedience and other forms of protest not drawn large scale public attention to the extreme stakes associated with building the KXL pipeline, almost a billion barrels of tar sands sludge would have been processed.
7. <http://priceofoil.org/2014/10/29/material-risks-how-public-accountability-is-slowing-tar-sands-development/>
8. <http://gofossilfree.org/press-release/rapid-increase-in-institutions-pulling-money-out-of-fossil-fuels/>
9. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/us/heirs-to-an-oil-fortune-join-the-divestment-drive.html?_r=1
10. See Bill McKibben's cover article in the January 9, 2013 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine:
<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-12/playing-offense#.UOxk6d8aaDo.facebook>
11. <http://climatechange.worldbank.org/content/climate-change-report-warns-dramatically-warmer-world-century>
According to Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank, in their November 2012 report, "Why a 4 degree centigrade warmer world must be avoided". See also his January 24, 2013 Op-Ed piece in the Washington Post: [op-ed piece in the Washington Post](#). Many scientists now believe that before the end of the century, CO2 will reach 866ppm, and global temperature will rise over 5° Celsius. See 2009 MIT report: <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2009/05/20/204131/mit-doubles-global-warming-projections-2/> and 2012 Price Waterhouse Coopers report: <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/11/06/1144431/study-were-headed-to-11f-warming-and-even-7f-requires-nearly-quadrupling-the-current-rate-of-decarbonisation/>.
12. Christian Century, October 15, 2014; p. 15.
13. See Wen Stephenson's article in the February 20, 2013 issue of the *Boston Phoenix* "The New Abolitionists: Global warming is the great moral crisis of our time – Why the climate-justice movement must embrace its radicalism to fight it" <http://thephoenix.com/Boston/news/151670-new-abolitionists-global-warming-is-the-great/>.
14. Note that Bishop Desmond Tutu has called for fossil fuel divestment, citing the suffering of Africans from climate change. And John Huntsman, Republican Presidential candidate in 2012 and former governor of Utah (the reddest state in the union) had this to say about the divestment movement. "I think it's a good thing, and I can tell you, as serving on some big corporate boards, that when things like that happen, it's taken seriously."