

Slouching Toward Crisis
Earth Sabbath
Dummerston Congregational Church

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Isaiah 24: 1-13
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Introduction: Our reading today 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. Some pastors want to be prophets. I'm not one of them.

I thought I knew a lot about Environmental issues. I thought I was informed. But five years ago, I was read an article that felt like a body blow and that changed my life, It added urgency to my concerns about the earth and determination to my commitment to make a difference. 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, the scientists 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. 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 not long ago.

When this conference of environmentalists was over, Mike McCarthy, the 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, reading this; 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 Isaiah 24 are sometimes called Isaiah's Apocalypse. You'll see why I didn't want to lead with it.

Let us pray before our reading of God's Holy Word. Holy God, Holy and Immortal one, we thank you for your Word which is a light upon our way and a guide to our footsteps. Grant us grace to hear, and hearts to respond with faith and hope. Amen.

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

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 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. Amen. Isaiah 24: 1-8, 11b,13

When I read this, I felt like I'd been hit by a wave. What is the faithful response to a 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; great hope, deep hope.

I took my title from Mike McCarthy's article about the British scientific symposium, 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, I believe 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. What kind of world do we want to live in? In what kind of world do we want our children's children to live? The signs are threatening. It looks like the earth as we have known it will be greatly changed, and not for the better. But people of faith are called to hope, and to live into hope.

Gus Speth, now a professor of Environmental law at VT Law School and formerly head of the Forestry Dept at Yale, has written a marvelous book on global warming, *Red Sky at Morning*, and a newer book called *Bridge at the End of the World*. If I could be anybody's groupie, I'd be his. He challenges and inspires and educates, and in his own way he preaches. He wrote, that *our mounting environmental threats...point to an emerging environmental tragedy of unprecedented proportions...* He's worried, he thinks we should all be, and warns, "all we have to do to destroy the planet's climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today... and the world in the latter part of the century won't be fit to live in." (pg. xii)

Reading Speth, I am convinced that the challenges that face us can't be solved technologically—they are too big. They can't be solved politically—they are too hard. I believe the challenges that face us are primarily spiritual challenges. This is the great moral issue of our generation. And I don't think we will be up to the challenge without another Great Awakening. But spiritual awakening is not only our legacy, it is our mandate: to live into God's new creation.

Delegates from all the New England UCC are meeting in May, I will be among them, to talk about how to respond to the challenges that face our earth. I think this is a mission that may revitalize the church. We have been marginalized, largely irrelevant to many. This is an issue on which we are needed.

I think that is almost a given that we will experience some form of cataclysmic environmental change in our lifetimes. I think the environmental shocks we will experience can turn us toward the good, toward sustainability, toward justice for future generations. But it will take inspired leadership. And it will take faithful people seeking for God's intent for us, and being willing to follow where God leads.

When the American people are polled, it is clear; we are disenchanted with our lifestyles of more and more, and longing for a different way of life. Aren't we all? Isn't God calling you to change? Even if we can't see the end, don't we know that something is beckoning that is better, deeper, truer, fairer, and much more lovely? We are called to a great work: a work of redemption, a work of hope, a work of transformation. Things cannot continue as they are. And they won't.

We don't have the option of change or no change. Gus Speth says we are at a fork in the road (p. 236) "beyond the fork... is the end of the world as we have known it. One path beyond the fork continues us on our current trajectory...and right now we're headed toward a ruined planet. That is one way the world as we know it could end, down that path and into the abyss."

"But there is another path and it leads to a bridge across the abyss...and in the crossing," he says..."we are carried forward by hope, a radical hope, that a better world is possible and that we can build it.

I can hear that other way calling, it is winsome, it is full of hope, it is challenging, but luminous. I think we can go there. I think we're meant to. I want to be part of the redeeming work that I believe God is longing to accomplish, partly through us. I want us to be a covenant community that takes God invitation to transformation seriously and joyfully.

I want my life to be different.

I want our life to be different.

I want to make a difference.

I think we can.

I think it will be the most exciting thing we've done in our lifetimes.

I want to figure out how to do this with you.

It will be a great way to spend the next decade.

The earth is at a crisis, and we are called to make a difference. We have to do it for Max, and for Nomi, for Noah and Katie, and Tillie and Molly and baby Bella, and so many others.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo, the Ring-bearer, follows Galadriel, the elf-queen, to a reflecting basin, a seeing stone, where she invites him to see many things: Things that were, and things that are, and some things that have not yet come to pass. Frodo looks into the mirror and sees Hobbitown burning, people he loves attacked and enslaved. Galadriel tells him, "That is what will come to pass if you should fail."

The Prophecy of Isaiah, the predictions of the scientists: this is what will come to pass if we should fail. But as Galadriel tells the Fellowship of the Ring, "The quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains."

Hope remains.

We have God's work to do.

And we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen