

September 29, 2024
Sunday Sermon
The Rev. Sukie Curtis

Readings:

Steven Charleston, "Do not doubt what you see" from *Ladder to the Light*
Mark 4: 26-32

In the name of the Creator and Giver of all things, Amen.

Back in August, I set about finding a good book for the St. Bart's Book of 2 Months Club Creation Season selection. Amanda and I had discussed finding a book that could help us talk about climate change, and I had kind of a "Goldilocks" mindset about it—and I wanted it to be science-based but not too dry or heavily scientific; I wanted it to be realistic, but not too overwhelming or depressing. Not too long; print not too tiny; book not too expensive. A little humor and hope would be good, too. You get the idea.

My search included emails to a climate scientist and also a well-known climate activist as well as visits to a few local bookstores. One afternoon I went to the Maine Audubon store and browsed for a while before deciding on a thick book (probably too thick for Goldilocks) called *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*.

The salesperson took one look at the book and said, with obvious sarcasm, "That'll be a good read."

Slightly stunned, I said, "Well, actually, I'm hoping to find something to read that's not too depressing."

"Good luck with that," she said. Her tone spoke volumes.

I walked to my car with the book and a growing bad mood. I had gone to Maine Audubon hoping to find a support, and I left feeling deflated and annoyed. Did I honestly need to be reminded that climate change can be depressing, overwhelming, and hard to talk about? I wanted emotional support! An Audubon cheerleader! I wanted an infusion of courage!

This world, this planet on which we live, entrusted to us by God the Creator, is so beautiful, so full of wonders, and so astonishing and generous in its ability to sustain a vast, complex, and interconnected web of life, from microbes and fungi we rarely see or think about; to insects—that E.O. Wilson famously called "the little things that run the world;" to flowering and fruiting plants and trees, lovely, flavorful and nourishing, absorbers of CO₂ with roots that filter rain; to birds, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and mammals small and large, including us humans with our outsized presence on this earth of God's making. As astrophysicist Kate Marvel says: "Earth is the best planet!" (from *What if We Get it Right*, pp. 16ff)

So, of course we don't want to think about or talk about the possible demise of this place that is our only home; of course we'd rather turn away from news of storm surges and floods, as from Hurricane Helene just past, or wildfires, drought, and heat waves or extreme heat around the globe. Of course we don't like imagining our children, grandchildren and their children facing an unlivable world. And of course we ache and grieve at the losses of species and habitats already damaged and diminishing, or to imagine further losses of things we hold dear. We're not monsters, after all! We are feeling-thinking-loving-embodied creatures who care about our loved ones, including beloved other-than-human beings, beloved landscapes, beloved habitats. And we depend on this nurturing planet with every cell of our being.

One author whose book I sampled argues that we avoid talking about climate change because of political polarization, but I'm not so sure that's the primary reason. I know I avoid talking about climate change because it feels so, so hard; it puts me, and you, face to face with grief, sadness, fear, probably some measure of guilt, and sometimes even despair. And it can feel so huge, overwhelming, and depressing, we don't know where to start, or we can't imagine that there's anything much we can do to make a difference.

Thankfully, there are other voices speaking beyond our own (privileged) inner dialogues, if we pause to listen. Voices such as those of "the spirits of earth and sky, of wind and rain, of deep seas and tall mountains," in the shapes of all manner of created beings, as related to us by Steven Charleston, a retired Episcopal bishop and citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

"Do not turn away," they ask of us.... "do not pretend not to see, but speak the truth and set the spirits free to heal the world."

The challenge we face is immense, and our call is clear, our charge as people of God, to be stewards of God's earth, our beloved island home—stewards of the earth on behalf of all its inhabitants; just and compassionate stewards, mindful of those already suffering from the climate being out of whack, especially those who have done the least to cause it to be so. We are called to be stewards not only on behalf of our present-day families and neighbors, but also mindful of future generations, people whom we will never meet and creatures and habitats which we may never see.

Bill McKibben, a noted writer and climate activist (and a former Methodist Sunday School teacher), has often stated that the most significant thing any of us can do for the climate is to "Stop being an individual (and) join something"—to seek and foster community, to care for others and be cared for by them. And to move from asking "what can I do?" to asking "What can we do together?"

Behind McKibben's advice is the truth that **NONE OF US CAN CREATE A MORE LIVEABLE, SUSTAINABLE WORLD ON OUR OWN**, although our individual and family choices **DO** matter.* But there is so much more that we can do together, in widening circles of "us," that we can't do alone. We are stronger, more imaginative, more powerful politically, more hopeful, more

courageous, and more joyful when we work together! **We need each other, both to accomplish what needs to be done AND to support and inspire one another in the doing.**

And we need all kinds of voices: like Kristina, a character in the novel *The Great Transition*, who tells her daughter as she looks back on the worst years of the climate crisis from decades in the future: “It may have felt hopeless, but even then, there’s nothing better than being part of a cause larger than yourself. Nothing comes close. . . . It’s the most powerful emotional force, Capable of pushing us to extraordinary acts. Things that no individual could ever dream of accomplishing alone.”

Or a voice like Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a distinguished scholar at Bowdoin, who asks us to imagine in her new book about climate action: **“What if we get it right?”** (The book is *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures*, just released by One World, New York.)

We are nearing the close of our celebration of Creation Season; the overarching theme of the season has been “To Hope and Act for Creation.” I confess to having had mixed feelings when I first heard that theme. My ambivalence largely fixed on the word “Hope,” knowing how in common usage hope can be rather wimpy and passive: “I hope you have a good trip.” Or “I hope the weather is good tomorrow.”

But put those two verbs together—TO-HOPE-AND-ACT—that’s different! Hope in this sense overcomes inertia and gets us moving. Or as Rebecca Solnit states, “Hope is an ax we break down doors with in an emergency!” (in *Not Too Late*, p. 5) And we often discover the mysterious truth that action multiplies hope! Some would say that action even CREATES hope as well as joy, and then becomes contagious, helping the hesitant to roll up their sleeves and join in. One hopeful action can be like the mustard seed to which Jesus’ parable points: “the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown, it becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 4: 30-32)

As I thought about the St. Bart’s community and our call to hope-and-act for-and-with God’s creation, I wondered what it might be like to represent visually all the various actions we ourselves have taken and continue to take on behalf of the earth, whether to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in our homes or cars, to support biodiversity where we live, to help the greening of marginalized communities, or to push banks to stop funding fossil fuels. Maybe we would be surprised to see what WE are doing when our individual actions are gathered in one place. Maybe that’s one way to move from being individuals to being a community, to move from asking “what can I do?” to “what can we do?”, and to be inspired by our collective impact.

In the narthex, on what is usually the Youth bulletin board, with their future in mind, I have attached a large cut-out tree, and beneath it are four envelopes with cut-out paper leaves of various colors, yellow, green, blue and red, each representing a different sector of climate action, with colored push pins to match. And I have generated a long but by no means exhaustive list of actions that any of us can take (and likely many are already taking) to support the health of this planet. I am confident that every one of you has done at least one item on the

list, and that none of us has done them all. (If we run out of leaves—hooray!—you can help me cut more, from recycled paper, please!)

So I invite you to visit the tree, whether this morning or in the next couple of weeks, to add your “action leaves” to the tree, so that we might see and celebrate what we are already doing, grow in our hope *and* action as a community, and be inspired to do even more for the sake of God’s creation and all people and creatures who make this planet their home, now and in the future.

AMEN

*Climate scientists insist that “every fraction of a degree of warming avoided matters; every metric ton of CO₂ we prevent from entering the atmosphere lessens the severity of impacts to our climate system.” (Joelle Gergis, in *Not Too Late*, p. 40).