

Killing the Messenger: A Sermon for Earth Day

The Mt. Carmel Congregational Church, U.C.C.

Acts 7:66-60, St. John 14:1-14

The first reading today was about the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Poor Stephen. He was a beautiful person, a simple, gentle soul. Earlier in the chapter he is described as “angelic”, a true innocent who loved life and people. How could anyone not like Stephen? You never saw him without a smile on his face. He was always willing to do anything asked of him. It is for that reason that the disciples chose him and six others to be the first deacons of the church. He was truly one of the meek, destined to inherit the earth! And yet his young life was brutally cut short. It was as if people could not bear his goodness and kindness.

Why do people kill and destroy what is good and beautiful in their lives? Where does this hatred come from; this urge to pick up a stone and throw it at someone? Put yourself in their place. What would it take for you to pick up a stone and throw it? Let’s be honest! I feel that we are all vulnerable and meek creatures who latch onto some idol for strength. When that idol is attacked we become enraged. If we see someone truly happy and joyful, living a life more full than us, we become annoyed. A person like Stephen shows up our failures, weaknesses, and lacks. He questions our beliefs! Who would not be angry!

Clutching onto our idols we have accommodated ourselves to a life half-lived, a promise never fully realized. Fearful of the unknown and risking possible failure once again, we do not want to change. Instead of trying to change we ignore, defy, and resist the agent of agent. We kill the messenger!

Just before he died Stephen had a beatific vision: he saw Jesus in all his glory up in heaven standing by the right hand of God. Stephen reminds us that Jesus is always the way out of our misery, our fate. He is the one we need to clutch onto.

Stephen was a visionary and a prophet. He had just been addressing the Sanhedrin, the council of religious leaders, chastising them for not believing in Jesus Christ even though scripture had all foretold his coming. He accused them of being stiff-necked and hard-hearted, resisting the Holy Spirit, and killing the prophets! I am sure they asked themselves: “Who does this pip-squeak think he is telling us what to do? How dare he accuse us!”

Prophets call us back into relationship with God. They call on us to repent and change our ways! But the Sanhedrin did not want to hear Stephen. They did not want to change and instead they killed the messenger. They would much rather live in the darkness of their self-imposed prison than step out into the marvelous light of the promised life!

We in the church today decry the lack of modern day prophets! The church is in desperate need of them calling us back into relationship with God and each other! But they are here and we have chosen not to listen to them! They have a slightly different message. They are calling us back into relationship with the earth, God’s Creation, warning us that this relationship has gone terribly askew resulting in terrible consequences. However, we ignore them, and turn our backs on them. We might as well be stoning them.

Bill McKibben is one such prophet. He is called the country's most important environmentalist. He is a delightful man. I met him at the beginning of the month at the "Partnering with a Green God" environmental conference at Silver Lake. He is very down to earth, sincere, and dedicated to his beliefs and cause. He is a fellow New Englander having grown up in Lexington, Massachusetts, the birthplace of liberty!

Bill McKibben has been in the prophecy business for the last 20 years, when he wrote his first book about global warming called, "The End of Nature." Then he was a lone voice crying in the wilderness, now, people are finally beginning to listen to him and his following is growing. He has organized world-wide events to bring attention to global warming and climate change; and founded a group called "350.org".

Three-fifty is a significant number for climate scientists. It is the concentration in parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, above which we can no longer sustain life on this planet as we have known it for the last 10,000 years. Unfortunately we have gone beyond that number and are approaching 390 ppm. The hope is to stop that trend by reducing the burning of fossil fuels, the greatest contributor to global warming.

In case you missed it, yesterday was Judgment Day! I almost did not make it here today. I was hoping I would be somewhere else. Actually, I am surprised to see most of you here! In our modern mind set, prophecies about the apocalypse are just too incredible to believe. After all, the same fellow who declared yesterday Judgment Day, made the same prediction back in 1994! He admitted he miscalculated then, but was sure he had it right this time!

But in fairness to him, his proclamation was not that the world would end in one big bang, but only begin to end. Some scientists would agree with him on that. It is certainly the beginning of the end of weather patterns as we know them. Our climate is changing for good and there is no going back! It is Judgment Day in slow time with the earth as judge.

The average worldwide temperature has increased by one and a half degrees Fahrenheit over the last one hundred years. It does not sound like much and yet it is already having dramatic consequences. The polar ice caps are melting, glaciers are shrinking, some even disappearing entirely, the sea level is increasing, the tropics have moved two degrees latitude north. Pine beetles are now able to survive Colorado's winters and are destroying its lodgepole pine forests.

Higher temperatures means the air holds more moisture. Water evaporates more in dryer areas making those areas dryer and rainfalls in wetter areas have become flood-causing deluges. West Texas's drought is so severe that scientists are saying it is no longer a drought but represents a permanent change, the beginning of a new desert. The tropics are expanding northwards and southwards, bringing new disease with it and altering ecosystems. Less rain has fallen in the plains states and other grain-growing regions of the world reducing harvests and resulting in world food shortages.

In the South Pole global warming has been more extreme. There, the mean winter temperature has increased nearly 11 degrees killing off the phytoplankton, which feed the krill, which feed the penguins. The Adélie penguin population has been decimated 90%. The colonies of Emperor penguins there are gone forever. Even here in Connecticut, the annual rainfall has increased ten percent in the last one hundred years, accounting for greater flooding.

Never mind global warming, just look what energy companies are doing to our environment as they try to squeeze the last drop of fossil fuel from the earth. They are drilling deeper undersea risking future blowouts like the BP oil spill in the Gulf. Mountain-top removal in West Virginia has already destroyed 400 mountains. Hydraulic fracturing in Pennsylvania where they inject a toxic brew of substances to recover gas trapped in underground shale has contaminated underground aquifers. Recovering oil from the Alberta Tar Sands has stripped away hundreds of square miles of boreal forest and produced man-made lakes of contaminated, untreatable water.

The earth is in convulsions: hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, tornados, and wildfires. We have abused it for too long! God calls us into relationship with Him, each other, and the earth. However, we have turned our back on God's Creation and God, too! It is time to reestablish our relationship with the earth! We really do not have a choice!

In the last reading today from the Gospel of John, Jesus comforts us with these words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, Believe in God, believe also in me" and later in the passage, he says, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact will do greater works than these!" We can only hope that with this kind of faith we can change and begin to take those incremental steps necessary to realize a new way of life that is less dependent on fossil fuels. Or we can just pick up that rock!

Ian Skoggard

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