
Listen to Creation
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 22, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14:25-33

I have a question for you. If I told you that the spirit was about to show up in this sanctuary right now, what would you be expecting? What does the spirit of God look like, or sound like, or smell like, or taste like, or feel like?

Two very classic ways that God shows up - in the Bible - are wind and fire. For example, in the book of Acts (2:2) during the event we now call “Pentecost”. The disciples are hiding in a house “and suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind. And it filled the whole house where they were sitting”. And in the mythical exodus story (Exodus 13:21) God appears as fire to lead the Hebrew people. “God was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire at night, that the people may travel by day and by night.” In the Bible, wind and fire sometimes represent God.

Now I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that in biblical times, the options that people had for expressing their experiences of God were quite limited.

[image: fire, earth, air, water]

In classical thinking, reality was composed of only 4 elements: fire, earth, air, and water. This was long before we discovered new elements like hydrogen and frozen pizza. Ancient stories of God of course involved fire, earth, air (including wind) and water (including floods). The people who those stories were written for could not read. They did not have twitter. I did some research and discovered that they did not even have colour television. Perhaps wind and fire are just metaphors for experiences of God, and are not meant to be taken literally.

But before we write off wind and fire as simply metaphor for the voice of God, perhaps we should listen for the voice of God in the literal wind and the literal fire. Today. Now. We often say that God is still speaking. Shouldn't we at least give it a try? Are there any messages we can find in wind and fire today? Unfortunately, yes!

If we listen to the wind - for example the winds called hurricanes - we hear the voice of climate change. And if we listen to fire - for example the fires that are ravaging the Amazon Rainforest - we hear the voice of environmental destruction. Perhaps God does still speak through wind and fire after all. And perhaps the message we hear is about our environment.

I assume we are all keeping up with the news and know all about these environmental problems. But I need to stall for time while I try to figure out some connection between climate change, environmental destruction and the biblical readings. So I feel the need to ramble for a little bit.

My first stalling tactic is to ask, why are we talking about this today? Well, it is actually because of glitch in the calendar. It turns out that this year on June 5 we have 4 interesting themes. In the wisdom of the United Church, June 5 is supposed to include Environment Sunday, Union Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, and Pride Sunday. They are all great topics. So we could just have a 4 hour service on June 5. But Norma asked me not do that - I don't remember why. So instead, I am spreading the themes out. So today, we celebrate Environment Sunday. And that seems like an appropriate occasion to listen to the voice of God in the wind and the fire.

[image: hurricane]

Let's talk about wind. Our planet has always had storms, including hurricanes. But scientists are now convinced that climate change is changing the nature of those storms. According to the Centre for Climate and Energy Solutions, "Recent analyses conclude that the strongest hurricanes occurring in some regions including the North Atlantic have increased in intensity over the past two to three decades. For the continental United States in the Atlantic Basin, models project a 45-87 percent increase in the frequency of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes."¹

This is not news by the way. "Understanding the link really comes down to one [fact]: the air can hold 7% more water with every degree Celsius that the temperature rises."² When temperatures rise, air can hold more water. And having more water in air

¹ <https://www.c2es.org/content/hurricanes-and-climate-change/>.

² <https://time.com/4931586/irma-hurricane-season-climate-change/>.

makes storms more destructive because with more water, storms carry more total energy. If you've forgotten the equation, here it is - the famous "Clausius Clapeyron Equation".

[image: clausius and clapeyron equation]

And the most important thing about this equation - today - is simply to know who the creators were.

[image: clausius and clapeyron]

Rudolf Clausius and Benoit Paul Emile Clapeyron. Note in particular when they lived ... and died. The only reason I'm lifting this up today is to state that this relationship between air temperature and water-holding capacity has been known for almost 200 years. Which is "long before any politicized debate on climate change"³

[image: climate justice]

The science behind Climate Change is actually well-established (in spite of what some politicians tell us). So more research is now being done about the implications of Climate Change. Particularly how Climate Change will actually affect people's lives through secondary impacts. Such as the ability of the planet to produce food. This phase takes Climate Change as a given and explores its impact on humanity and the planet. This is called "Climate Justice". Climate is a justice issue.

[image: amazon rainforest fire]

Let's talk about fire. The Amazon Rainforest - also known as the lungs of the planet, have always been cleared for land. In the past, this was done by subsistence farmers and loggers using hand tools, and had a fairly minimal impact on the overall forest. But by the 1980s, large international corporations started destroying the rainforest on a much larger scale. The primary application for the cleared land was raising livestock. But crops and mining also lead to deforestation. Many of the crops grown, particularly soybeans, are used to feed livestock. Palm oil production has also become a significant factor.

[image: amazon lungs]

As the loss of the rainforest increased, environmental pressures caused the destruction to stabilize around 2004, and even decrease afterwards. But in 2016 the Brazilian government decided to allow more exploitation of the forest. Brazil's president,

³ Ibid.

Bolsonaro is encouraging the use of the rainforest for economic production. And recently there has been a massive increase in the number of fires intentionally being set to turn the rainforest into short-term economic benefits.

[image: rainforest disappearing]

It is important to realize that “The Amazon has not suddenly started to burn and degrade. It has been happening for decades. Nor is this the only conflagration. Siberia, Alaska, Greenland and Bolivia have also suffered massive wildfires in recent years. The running down of resources and the destabilization of the climate are global problems. Europe, the US, Japan and Canada are all complicit in the destruction. It helped make the G7 countries rich.”⁴

[image: earth]

So - what is the connection between all these issues and our reading from Luke? Well, I’m sure that Jesus did not ever think about environmental issues in the sense we mean today. Climate change and environmental destruction are relatively modern issues. It is not that the ancients were better people than we are. It’s just that when the global population was a lot lower, and when having a power tool meant owning a human slave, the amount of environmental destruction you could do was limited. We are only capable of destroying the earth so quickly now because of mechanization, militarization, and access to global markets.

I was going to spare us this quote. But it ties in far too well.

[image: if earth history]

“If Earth's history is compared to a calendar year, modern humans have been around for 37 minutes and managed to use up one third of Earth’s natural resources in the last 0.2 seconds.”⁵ Our problems are very modern.

However, in today’s gospel Jesus did make some points that seem relevant today. First off - “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” That’s a bit harsh,

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/25/g7-cant-turn-blind-eye-to-amazon-ecocide-forest-fires-indigenous-tribes>.

⁵ https://www.theworldcounts.com/stories/amazing_environmental_facts

isn't it? But perhaps what we can take from those words is the idea that we need to abandon things that we consider perfectly normal. That we need to be willing to change our way of living in ways we initially find hard to imagine. That we need to rethink the status quo - big time.

And secondly, Jesus said, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether they have enough to complete it?" That sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Of course we don't want to start a project if we have no hope of finding the resources we need to finish the job. And yet, we actually do that all the time as a society. As one example, how many of us have an extra \$1000 in our pockets to give away? A recent survey suggested that about half of all Canadians - even people who care about climate change, are not willing to pay an extra \$100 a year to fight it. But our Federal government has already decided to take \$1000 from every single Canadian to support the military in 2026⁶. Canada is creating a debt burden it has no idea how to recover from. The idea - as Jesus says - that we should count the cost of a project before beginning is a long way from how the world works. Once again we see that Jesus's words are still radical.

[image: cowspiracy quote]

It is not hard to find examples where our spending does not match what we say our priorities are. You may recall that in 2019 the G7 countries offered money to Brazil to fight wildfires in the rainforest. And the big news was that the Brazilian government initially refused to take the money. I noticed that news for a different reason. The G7 only offered \$20 million. That's ridiculous. When Notre Dame Cathedral burned down, donations exceeded \$1 billion in only 2 days. And yet the G7 countries, which have extracted vast amounts of wealth from Brazil and plundered its natural resources for decades could only offer a measly \$20 million ... a ridiculously small amount of money given the magnitude of the problem - a problem that the G7 countries created themselves! A problem that we ourselves have created. It's almost as if we do not actually want to solve the continuing problem of the burning of the rainforests.

One place where we seem to refuse to count the true cost of a project is how we

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/07/canada-increase-military-spending-nato>.

choose to eat. Both climate change and the destruction of the rainforests are driven by many factors. But current research shows that the number 1 driver of both climate change and rainforest destruction is animal agriculture. It has been calculated that “91% of rainforest destruction is caused by animal agriculture (grazing and GMO soybeans)”. In addition, 1,100 activists (including nuns) have been killed in Brazil over the past 20 years to “protect” the livestock industry⁷.

[image: dorothy stang]

One of those nuns who were murdered so that we can keep eating meat was Dorothy Stang. I want to quote from the website of the “Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur”. “Sister Dorothy repeatedly asked the city, state and national government for protection for the people but she was always refused. Then on February 12, 2005, on a dirt road at the Boa Esperanca settlement in a rural area in Para, two hired gunmen fired six shots and killed Sister Dorothy. She was murdered because she had put into place programs that created self-sufficient communities of people committed to their own independence as well as to the sustenance of the rain forest. As the gunmen approached Sister Dorothy, she took her Bible from her bag and began to read the Beatitudes: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice...”⁸

“Hired killings of human rights advocates, environmentalists, and farmers account for one-third of the deaths in the region each year. The goal of these calculated murders is to eliminate opposition to the clear-cutting and burning of the forest so that fields of soy beans can be planted, trees can be logged, and cattle can graze. Another goal of the killings is to eliminate those who empower and educate the peasants; and finally the killings are meant to intimidate the farmers and keep them ensnared in an endless cycle of debt, akin to slavery.”⁹

The main reason the rainforests are burning is because rich people around the world want to eat meat, something that seems very normal to most of us. Something that is decidedly part of the status quo in North America. Simply put, we - meaning we as a

⁷ <https://www.rawveganginger.com/rainforest>.

⁸ <https://www.sndohio.org/sister-dorothy/expanded-story>

⁹ Ibid.

planet - cannot afford to keep eating so much meat. The hidden costs of eating meat - like our national debt - are beyond what we can even pay. We are creating a debt load that our children and grandchildren will have to pay off - if they can. “Research consistently shows that drastically reducing animal food intake and mostly eating plant foods is one of the most powerful things you can do to reduce your impact on the planet over your lifetime, in terms of energy required, land used, greenhouse gas emissions, water used and pollutants produced”¹⁰

I just need to offer a personal note here. Four years ago when I started actually learning about food, it drove me to move a long way towards being vegan. I am not a purist. But Marjorie and I eat very little meat, dairy, and eggs. And I have the intention of not being too irritating about it. But the simple truth is that if we want to talk about “Environment Sunday”, we just cannot avoid a conversation about food.

[image: you can't call yourself an environmentalist and eat meat.]

20 years ago it was much easier to preach on this topic. It was simple then. Change your light bulbs. Don't run the water while you brush your teeth. Use your blue box. Simple things that did not call on us to change our lifestyles. But those efforts have not been adequate. Now, we need lifestyle changes. We need to challenge the status quo. Our governments are not providing real leadership here. That job is apparently left to other community leaders. Perhaps this is a role the church would like to embrace? Next week is our Regional Gathering. The title of this gathering is, “Be bold. Be brave.” I wonder we are actually willing to do that? Or will we - like our government - take the easy but ineffective path.

As one example we are now being asked to stop using disposable plastic straws because of plastic waste.

[image: great pacific garbage patch]

Our government says that plastic straws end up in the massive floating plastic island called the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch”, right? Well maybe. But over 50% of the plastic in those floating plastic islands is discarded nets and other waste from the fishing

¹⁰ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/eddie-huang-announces-hes-going-vegan-because-of-amazon-fires_n_5d602ad1e4b02cc97c8d435a.

industry. We are being told to stop using plastic straws which is fair. But we should also be told to stop supporting the fishing industry.

I do not enjoy being this irritating about food. Particularly about meat. But we are in a crisis. Jesus said, “the truth will set us free”. Do we want that freedom? Do we really want that truth?

[image: earth]

God is still speaking. We can hear the voice of God in the wind and in the fire. Today. Now. And that voice is calling us to wake up to the problems that the “status quo” ways we live are killing us all. That voice is calling us to consider the full cost of the lifestyle decisions we are making.

God is still speaking. The question is: are we listening? Listen to creation.

Amen.