
Listen to Creation
Chapel in the Park United Church
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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?

In the Bible, God shows up in powerful, tangible ways. 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 exodus myth God appears as fire to lead the Hebrews. From the book of Exodus, “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. (Exodus 13:21) In the Bible at least, wind and fire are sometimes used to symbolize God.

Now I know what you might be thinking. You are thinking that in biblical times, the options that people had for expressing their experiences of God were limited. 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 TV. Perhaps wind and fire in the Bible are just metaphors for experiences of God, and are not meant to be taken literally.

But before we take 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? What do you think? Are there any messages we can find in wind and fire today? Unfortunately, yes there are!

But first, a quick reminder. The church calendar is divided into “seasons”, like Advent, Lent, and what is simply called “Ordinary Time”. About 30 years ago churches

started to make space in the calendar to celebrate “creation”. Now, we recognize “Creation Time” which runs from Sept 1 to Oct 4. The intention of Creation Time is that “the Christian family unites for this worldwide celebration of prayer and action to protect our common home.”¹ And what are we supposed to protect our common home from? In general terms, from climate change and environmental destruction.

So what do we hear - today - when we listen to wind and fire? 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 relevant during “Creation Time”.

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 gospel reading, so I feel the need to ramble for a little bit.

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 despite a possible decrease in the frequency of storms.”²

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. That figure comes from the Clausius–Clapeyron equation, a widely accepted physical law established centuries ago long before any politicized debate on climate

¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vwVNYuzYgxp9OImWkU8tVfcz7XOvnQd/view>.

² <https://www.c2es.org/content/hurricanes-and-climate-change/>.

change.”³ Simply put, having more water in air makes storms more destructive because that air can hold more energy. It’s as simple as that.

The science behind Climate Change is now well-established (in spite of what some politicians are telling us), and more research is now being done on the implications of Climate Change. Particularly how Climate Change actually affects people’s lives through ancillary impacts, such as the ability of the planet to produce food. This phase which takes Climate Change as a given and explores its impact on humanity and the planet is called “Climate Justice” Climate is now a justice issue.

This is not new information. And yet, it is easy to feel disconnected from it. Climate change is often discussed in terms of statistics and projections. But the reality is much more personal. Climate change impacts people’s homes, lives, and holidays. As an example, I know someone who went to Banff just to hike at Lake Louise, but their hike was seriously hampered by smoke from forest fires. Climate Change is not something that just effects the environment. It affects our lives too.

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, 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.

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, Bolsonaro was encouraging the use of the rainforest for economic production, and this has led a a recent increase in the number of fires intentionally being set to turn the rainforest into short-term economic benefit.

According to the Guardian, “The Amazon hasn’t suddenly started to burn and degrade. It has been happening for decades. Nor is this the only conflagration: Siberia,

³ <https://time.com/4931586/irma-hurricane-season-climate-change/>.

Alaska, Greenland and Bolivia have also suffered massive wildfires in recent summers. 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

So - what is the connection between all these issues and our reading from Luke? Well, I’m sure that Jesus did not think about environmental issues in the way we do today. Today as a society we ourselves are struggling to wrap our heads around these environmental issues. And it’s difficult now - even with lots of scientific research to help us understand our situation. The authors of ancient books simply did not face the challenge we face today. The ancients also did not have the power to destroy their own environment on the scale we have today. Moreover, the ancients dealt with local problems and had no way to understand global problems.

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, 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 cast aside the status quo. That we need to be willing to change our way of living in ways we initially find hard to believe. That we need to rethink the status quo - big time.

This speaks directly to our need to change our lifestyle in response to the environmental crisis. Are we willing to abandon habits that feel comfortable and normal? Are we willing to reconsider how we live, what we consume, and how we care for the Earth? Are we willing to listen to the wind and the fire?

Jesus also 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 do not 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.

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

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 current government has already decided to take an extra \$1000 from every single Canadian to support the military in 2026⁵. 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.

It's not hard to find examples where our spending profiles do not match what we say our priorities are. You may recall that in 2021 the G7 countries offered money to Brazil to fight forest fires. 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 burned down, donations exceeded \$1 billion in only 2 days. 20 million dollars is peanuts.

One place where we seem to refuse to count the true cost of a project is how we 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 industry⁶. The rainforests are burning because people of means 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 planet - cannot afford to keep eating so much meat. The hidden costs of eating meat - like our national debt - are actually beyond what we can even pay. One study suggests that global meat consumption must be cut in half to

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/07/canada-increase-military-spending-nato>.

⁶ <https://www.rawveganginger.com/rainforest>.

meet climate targets⁷. “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 usage, land usage, greenhouse gas emissions, water usage and pollution produced”⁸

The fires we hear today are because of our collective appetite for meat. This is where Jesus’s message is very irritating. We must consider the full costs of our choices. Our diets, our consumption habits, our lifestyles - are not just personal preferences - they have global consequences. And research continues to show that reducing meat consumption is one of the most effective ways to reduce our impact on the environment.

I did not want to talk about meat today. I wanted to wait for “World Food Sunday” to do that. But as I said earlier, unfortunately, there is a message for us when we listen to wind and fire today. And that message is partly about what we eat.

We need to listen to the voice of God in the wind and fire and move beyond the status quo in other ways too. What else can we do to value creation? We are told all the time to minimize our carbon footprints. I recently heard from a person who is moving from their long-time house into an apartment - in part - because selling their house to a family with young children would be a better use for a house which was under-utilized by the current, aging, retired couple who could instead move into a smaller apartment. That’s one example of challenging the status quo! And I’m sure we all know stories like that.

I want to close with an invitation. An invitation for all of us to imagine how we can work - individually and collectively - for the healing of creation. There are so many workable ideas “out there”. I’m sure that many of us have simple, doable, practical ideas too. I want to talk about those ideas in the coming weeks.

We are all invited to look past the status quo to explore new ideas to honour creation. Listen to the wind. Listen to the fire. Listen to the voice of God in our midst.

Amen.

⁷ <https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2016/08/16/Cattle-consumption-must-be-halved-to-hit-EU-climate-targets>.

⁸ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/eddie-huang-announces-hes-going-vegan-because-of-amazon-fires_n_5d602ad1e4b02cc97c8d435a.