

“On Gardens and Climate”

Proper 19C (2019)

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; Romans 8:19-21; Revelation 22:1-2

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone's shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

Atmospheric Science Professor, Katherine HayHoe, tells of an experience teaching undergraduate students in Texas about climate change.<sup>1</sup> “It was my first year as an atmospheric science professor at Texas Tech University,” she says. “[My family and I] had just moved to Lubbock, Texas, which had recently been named the second most conservative city in the entire United States. A colleague asked me to guest teach his undergraduate geology class. I said, ‘Sure.’ But when I showed up, the lecture hall was cavernous and dark. As I tracked the history of the carbon cycle through geologic time to the present day, most of the students were slumped over, dozing, or looking at their phones. I ended my talk with a hopeful request for any questions. And one hand shot up right away. [I was encouraged. The student] stood up, and in a loud voice, he said, ‘You’re a democrat, aren’t you?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m Canadian.’” Katherine HayHoe continues, “That was my baptism by fire into what has now become a sad fact of life here in the United States and increasingly across Canada as well. The fact that the number one predictor of whether we agree that climate is changing, humans are responsible, and the impacts are increasingly serious and even dangerous, has nothing to do with how much we know about science or even how smart we are, but simply where we fall on the political spectrum.”

HayHoe goes on to speak of the first time she gave a talk on the climate crisis. It was at a Rotary Club in West Texas. “I’m not a Rotarian,” she says. “But when I gave my first talk [on climate change] at a Rotary Club, I walked in and they had this giant banner that had the Four-Way Test on it. Is it the truth [read the banner]? [Is the climate in crisis?] Absolutely. Is it fair [read the banner]? [Are the effects of the climate crisis fair?] Heck, no, that’s why I care most about climate change, because it is absolutely unfair. Those who have contributed the least to the problem are bearing the brunt of the impacts. [The banner] went on to ask: Would it be beneficial to all, would it build goodwill? Well, to fix [this crisis] certainly would. So I took my talk,” she says, “and I reorganized it into the Four-Way Test, and then I gave it to this group of conservative businesspeople in West Texas. And I will never forget at the end,” she says, “a local bank owner came up to me with the most bemused look on his face. And he said, ‘You know, I wasn’t sure about this whole global warming thing, but it passed the Four-Way Test.’”

Over the past few months a Climate Change Discussion group has been meeting at our church, working their way through Jim Antal’s book *Climate Church, Climate World*.<sup>2</sup> Jim Antal was here back in the spring giving our Ruth Foote lectures on the climate emergency. The climate discussion group emerged from those lectures; it’s a group comprised of thirteen people from our church and two more from other churches in town. Our church already

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[https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine\\_hayhoe\\_the\\_most\\_important\\_thing\\_you\\_can\\_do\\_to\\_fight\\_climate\\_change\\_talk\\_about\\_it/transcript#:t-6889](https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it/transcript#:t-6889)

<sup>2</sup> Jim Antal, *Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

draws electric energy from solar power, but there's more we can do, and this past Tuesday the discussion group presented action steps to our Church Council - action steps that include more education; observing Earth Day each year; reimagining our church's landscape - from tidy, mown lawns to something else that might decrease our carbon footprint; and talking more about the climate emergency in our liturgies and prayers, and in sermons on Sunday mornings. We are having these conversations at the same time as our denomination, the United Church of Christ, took a dramatic step back in June at General Synod in Milwaukee to adopt the Green New Deal, and completely overhaul how we use energy. The motion passed with a supermajority - nearly 100% of delegates voted in favor of it. I was one of them. The vote made national news.<sup>3</sup>

We are doing all of this because we recognize that the climate crisis is *not* a partisan issue - "the thermometer does[n't] give us a different answer depending on if we're liberal or conservative," says Katherine HayHoe. The climate crisis is a humanity and a planet issue, a survival issue, a moral and theological issue. The changing climate will affect people and species on our planet differently, but *it will* affect all of us. When policy-makers talk about the effects of a changing planet, they tend to speak in long timeframes, talking about what the planet will be like in the year 2100. And for many of us, when we hear "2100," we tend to think, "I won't be around to see it." Speaking for myself, I know *I* won't be around to see the year 2100, but both of my children might. And if I'm blessed with grandchildren, they almost certainly will. In fact, my grandchildren may be raising children of their own in the year 2100. What we do now is going to affect those who come after us, members of our own future families. We're taking action as a church on this important issue, because the smallest children of our church - the children with looks of delight on their faces as they painted blessings on us during the children's time - our church's littlest children, and *their* children, will inherit the planet we leave to them; and our littlest children and their children will be the caretakers of this church in the year 2100. But we're also taking action because the effects of the climate crisis are being felt *now* with more powerful hurricanes, more extreme temperatures, heavier rains, drier droughts, ongoing wildfires, decimated species that we depend upon for survival, and because in the coming decades, according to one estimate, many of us in this church today will see 200 million people in the world displaced from their homes because regions of the planet will become too hostile to support human life. Climate refugees.

People in our world are trying to take action. The Paris Agreement of 2015 is part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and is an agreement among nations to cap global temperature rise at 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the year 2100 - about eighty years from now. Babies I've baptized this year will likely be alive then, living the effects of what we do or don't do today. But two years ago, the journal *Nature* published two studies demonstrating that none of the major industrialized nations have stayed on track to make necessary cuts to their carbon emissions; and the U.S. is pulling out of the Paris Agreement entirely. The website, Climate Action Tracker, which measures global temperatures, projects that temperatures will likely rise by 3.5 degrees Celsius and could top 5 degrees Celsius by 2100.<sup>4</sup> Until I lived in Canada, I always thought about temperature in terms of Fahrenheit. 5 degrees Celsius is 9 degrees Fahrenheit - an increase that would place the *average high* August temperature in Ithaca at 90 degrees in the year

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-new-deal-christian-support\\_n\\_5d2ccf10e4b08938b0994486](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-new-deal-christian-support_n_5d2ccf10e4b08938b0994486)

<sup>4</sup> <https://climateactiontracker.org/global/temperatures/>

2100, about what it is in Orlando today. Such an increase would make Orlando unbearable in the summer, limiting Disney vacations to just a few weeks per year.

In his book *The Uninhabitable Earth*, published earlier this year, David Wallace-Wells describes the effects of rising temperature.<sup>5</sup> We are currently on track to see a 3.5 degree Celsius increase in temperature by 2100. “[But] at [just] two degrees [of warming, he writes,] the ice sheets will begin their collapse, 400 million more people will suffer from water scarcity, [and] major cities in the equatorial band of the planet will become unlivable ... [More than a] hundred coastal cities around the world [will be flooded] ... , [and] 40 million Americans will be at risk of catastrophic inundation. ... There [will] be thirty-two times as many extreme heat waves in India, and each [will] last five times as long ... . This is our best-case scenario,” he writes. “At three degrees [Celsius of warming, he continues, which is less than what we’re on track for,] southern Europe would be in a permanent drought, and the average drought in Central America would be nineteen months longer and in the Caribbean twenty-one months longer. In northern Africa, the figure is sixty months longer - five years. The areas burned each year by wildfires would double in the Mediterranean and sextuple, or more, in the United States. At four degrees [Celsius of warming, he writes, the cost of worldwide damages] ... could pass \$600 trillion - more than twice the wealth as exists ... today.” At five to eight degrees Celsius, which is the highest end of possible temperature increase by 2100, he writes, the sea level will rise by nearly 150 feet, “enough,” he says, “to draw a new American coastline as far west as I-95.” People living at the equator, he says, “would not be able to move outside without dying.” In upcoming sermons throughout this year, you’ll hear me talk about effects on insects and coral reefs, on glaciers and economies and food production and clean water. I’ll talk about Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*, which frames the climate crisis in theological terms; and I’ll talk about process theology and eco-theology and about hope and about how this issue has become *the* moral issue of our time. In their report to our Church Council this past week, the Climate Discussion group wrote this, “the climate disaster is now *the* central issue of our time, and it is a moral and religious challenge for our church. The climate disaster,” they write, “affects everything else, and intersects with every issue we’re involved in [as a church]: poverty, hunger, education, environment, children, youth, immigrants.”

All three of today’s scripture readings talk about creation. But what makes all three of them interesting to me is how they interweave creation and salvation - *salvation*, that ancient theological term rooted in an old story about the exodus, a story told and retold over centuries around campfires and at Passover meals about how God delivered, rescued, freed, liberated, the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and then charged them to *be* a community of deliverance and rescue and liberation for others, *and also* for their land. The Israelites had rules about how to farm and tend the land, including when to let it rest, a Sabbath for the land every seven years. God’s creation was seen as a gift - a garden - to be nurtured and loved. And when the Israelites faced exile, both people and land suffered, according to the old stories; and both needed a new exodus, a new salvation. Ezekiel in today’s Old Testament reading envisions a great healing river, lined with fruit-bearing trees on its banks, flowing from a newly built temple in Jerusalem after the people and the land had been broken by exile. Water, trees, fruit, temple. Ezekiel weaves together creation and salvation, worship and garden. Today’s reading from Revelation borrows Ezekiel’s eco-theology, calling the river

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<sup>5</sup> David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019). The following data points are drawn from several places in this book.

“crystal-clear,” calling the fruit-bearing trees a “Tree of Life” - like the tree in Eden way back in Genesis - and the leaves of the tree, says the writer, following their seasonal rhythms, will, he says, “heal the nations.” Creation and salvation. And St. Paul, in today’s reading from his Letter to the Romans, in a single verse buried in the middle of this dense book, says creation itself will experience an exodus - it will be “set free from decay,” he writes. These visions, says one commentator - visions of creation and salvation, of worship and garden, of land and exodus - these visions, writes Old Testament scholar Stephen Cook, are too imaginative to be literal; instead, he writes, they talk about what the children of God should value: a well-tended earth, set free from bondage; earth like a garden, lush and thriving; and humanity - colorful and beautiful, like flowers in the garden.

Sometimes it takes imagination - the imaginations of Ezekiel and the writer of Revelation and of St. Paul - sometimes it takes a big imagination to inspire us to value what God values. A big imagination, like that of Greta Thunberg - the 16 year old climate activist from Sweden - who spent two weeks in August sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to attend the United Nations Climate Action Summit.<sup>6</sup> She sailed to avoid the greenhouse gas emissions from flying on a commercial jet. On Friday, Thunberg joined a protest outside the White House where people held signs that read “Denial is not a policy,” and “Raise your voice, not the sea,” and “Make Earth cool again.” And this coming Friday, she will join millions of us - students and adults - from around the world as we walk out of our schools and workplaces, demanding an end to the fossil fuel age. “Our house is on fire,” says one website promoting the event, so “let’s act like it.”<sup>7</sup>

...I began this sermon with a story told by Katherine HayHoe, Atmospheric Scientist and climate activist. Let me close with her words about what inspires her to take action. “For me,” she says, “one of the most foundational ways I found to connect with people [and talk about this issue] is through my faith. As a Christian, I believe that God created this incredible planet that we live on, and gave us responsibility over every living thing on it. And I furthermore believe that we are to care for and love the least fortunate among us, those who are already suffering the impacts of poverty, hunger, disease and more [from the changing climate]. ... I truly believe,” she says, “after thousands of conversations that I’ve had over the past decade and more [with people], that just about every single person in the world already has the values they need to care about a changing climate. They just haven’t connected the dots. And that’s what we can do through our conversation[s] with them. [We can speak personally about why a changing climate matters to us.] The only reason why I care about a changing climate is because of who I already am,” she concludes. “I’m a mother, so I care about the future of my child. I live in West Texas, where water is already scarce, and climate change is impacting the availability of that water. [And, I care about this issue, because] I’m a Christian ... .” Amen.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/28/754818342/teen-climate-activist-greta-thunberg-arrives-in-new-york-after-sailing-the-atlan>

<sup>7</sup> <https://globalclimatactive.net/>