

“Earth, Wind, and Fire”  
September 20, 2020

Jeremiah 30:18-24  
Matthew 7:24-27

Last September and October we joined with many other congregations across the United States and around the world in marking the Season of Creation, a few Sundays in these longer green weeks after Pentecost. Because of the pandemic, I thought it might be best to skip such an observance this year. There were other things on my mind—and probably on yours—than the celebration and care of creation.

Then I thought further.

This year, amid crises that have shaken our world, we’re awakened to the urgent need to heal our relationships with creation and each other. During the Season of Creation this year, we can enter a time of restoration and hope that requires and offers new ways of living with creation.

In the midst of this ongoing pandemic, as the unprecedented push for racial justice gains strength, as unemployment continues to affect millions in an uncertain economy, as worries about possible election chaos mount, recent weeks have reminded us—if we had indeed forgotten—that climate change is a continuing. We are confronted by this reality even if we as a nation will not recognize it, even if our leaders will not acknowledge it and the great damage that we are causing to the earth.

The wildfires engulfing much of the West Coast are the most pressing reminder of this right now. In religious sounding language they are described as an “inferno,” as a “hellscape.” The film and photographs of the blazes confront us with the terrifying power of these fires, as do the images of houses and indeed whole neighborhoods destroyed by the flames.

Many saw this coming.

Back in June, after the previous month had tied the record for the warmest May in recorded history, scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration told us that—on top of everything else—2020 was on track to be one of the top five warmest years in the agency’s 141 years of records

*The Washington Post* reported the result “Warm temperatures dried out vegetation during a record-shattering heat wave...Recent blazes exploded in size...Gusts pushed flames down canyons, through campgrounds, past highways and into neighborhoods.”

Studies have documented an increase in acres burned in large fires across the West because of global warming, and projections show trends toward hotter and drier conditions that will leave the region more susceptible to massive blazes.

While visiting California last week, however, the President shrugged all of this off, saying: “It will start getting cooler. You just watch.”

And, yes, it will. But that does not change the pressing reality of climate change.

The science is in on this. Human-caused climate change is making the fires more extreme and unpredictable.

Wade Crowfoot, the Secretary of California's Natural Resource Agency, told the President: "I wish science agreed with you."

Of course, it doesn't.

Many saw these fires coming.

And these destructive infernos will increase and get worse.

In the same way, the destructive power of hurricanes increases with each year.

While we can't attribute the strength and devastation of any single hurricane to climate change, there is a link between the warmer waters of the ocean and the intensity of the storms. As with previous storms, the recent Hurricane Laura gained strength because of the warmer than usual Gulf waters.

*The New York Times* reported last week that "not long before Hurricane Sally landed in Alabama,...Tropical Storms Teddy and Vicky were designated in the Atlantic as the season's 19th and 20th named storms, each moving closer to the end of the alphabet. The Atlantic hurricane season this year has stirred up storms at such a rapid rate that there is now only one entry — Wilfred — left on the 21-name list that meteorologists use for each season."

Any discussion of natural disasters would not be complete without a mention of our own "land hurricane," the derecho that rushed through here during the afternoon of August 10. Its sustained winds of up to 100 miles per hour—comparable to a Category 3 hurricane—are seen about once every ten years.

This destructive storm's connection to climate change is not a straightforward. Some say that the warming of the earth's surface could increase atmospheric instability and cause more frequent and stronger derechos. On the other hand, warming in the upper atmosphere—also a climate change possibility—could increase atmospheric *stability*. So Alan Czarnecki, a meteorologist at the University of Northern Iowa says: "It's a straightforward question with an uncertain answer."

Then again, who wants to take chances, given our human track record with climate?

Derecho aside, a recently published map shows Johnson County at a high risk of heat stress in the coming years and at a high risk for water stress. (It also shows that we are at no risk from hurricanes or sea level rise, so we've got that going for us.)

Confronted by conflagration, flood, and wind, I am reminded of the prayer from the Presbyterian tradition at asks of God: "Keep us from calling disaster your justice."

And we Congregationalists are pretty good at avoiding just that. After all, we're not inclined to walk down the path trodden by other Christians who see the judgment of God in nearly every catastrophe. We talk far more about the forgiveness of God than the judgment of God—and with good reason.

But at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts us with another reality: the judgment we bring upon ourselves.

He tells of two building projects based on home construction in ancient Palestine.

Houses were built during the dry season. With no rain falling, these structures appeared secure. In this case, both builders seem to be doing just fine. They have sound houses in which to live. All is well.

There is something in this parable that speaks of our situation before the pandemic.

A lot of people didn't think about health care or emergencies even though millions were without health insurance and had no financial resources to draw on if faced with an immediate need.

A lot of people didn't think about the social safety net that was fraying in so many places for so many people.

A lot of people didn't think about race relations or racism or police violence or widening economic gaps although such issues were a part of everyday life for many.

And a lot of people continued to think that climate change was something that could be ignored as we continued to pour the carbon dioxide from the fossil fuels that power our lives into the atmosphere.

All was well—even if it wasn't. We had built on a foundation of sand.

Then, in ancient Palestine, the fall storms would come. When all was not well, the wind and rain and flooding would reveal the wisdom or foolishness of the builders.

And while the first is to be our model, let us consider for a few minutes the second. A foolish man built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall.

If we are not comfortable speaking of the judgment of God, if we do not want to equate disaster with God's justice, we need to recognize that, if nothing else, we are beginning to feel the judgment of Nature upon our actions and our lives. Like fools who built on sand, we are experiencing in the fires and storms of this year the natural and expected results of our human actions.

What's that line from *The Sun Also Rises* when one of the characters is asked how he went bankrupt? "Two ways," he answers. "Gradually, then suddenly."

In the same way, global climate change did not happen all at once, but suddenly the results are disastrous.

Now, bear with me for a few minutes as on this beautiful late summer day as I do speak about the judgment of God—for it is in judgment that we might find hope.

The German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, offers the helpful suggestion that "Only believers are aware of the wrath of God." It is a circumstance we affirm only by faith. Only because we have faith do we also have a sense of sin—that which separates us from God, our neighbor, and the best in ourselves—and of God's judgment on that sin.

Paul Tillich reminds us that speaking of the "wrath" of God gives us a way to talk about the "awareness of the self-destructive nature of evil."

Judgment, then, is how we as people of faith can express our sense of sinfulness, our awareness of the self-destructive nature of our actions, and also the unending love and compassion of God that calls us to turn in a new direction—to repent!—and to build new lives and a new world beyond our actions that tear down and destroy.

Today—and in the uncertain and tumultuous and wearing days ahead—look! Look once more at the smoke obscured setting sun, at the crops lying broken in the fields around us, at the scenes of fire and flood and storm that we have brought upon ourselves and upon this earth our home.

There is time to change. Time to turn. Time, as we say in faith, to *repent*.

Our care of creation is a central part of our way *through* these days—not *back* to the way things were in February, because, in all honesty, they weren't *that* good then—but the way through these days to the new world that we seek to build.

The care of creation can bring with it the healing of the nations.

The care of creation can bring with it the healing of much racial injustice.

The care of creation can bring with it economic well-being.

The care of creation can bring with it a new wholeness to our nation.

Let us continue with the work that we have begun.

Let us strengthen our actions and bring others along.