

WARMING UP TO A NEW ETHIC

A sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell

The First Parish Church in Weston

Unitarian Universalist

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Blessing of the Animals

THE FIRST PARISH CHURCH IN WESTON

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Weston, Massachusetts

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell at the First Parish Church in Weston.

Opening Meditation:

What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it upon?
~ Henry David Thoreau

Readings:

Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15
Psalm 8

I want to begin with a question for those of us here this morning – one that may not be asked very often in a church like this one: have any of you been to Disney World? It's okay; we won't tell anyone. Unitarians and Mickey Mouse *can* mix. As the father of three children, I actually found myself there a few years ago while I was on sabbatical. I had not been there since I was a child.

Disney World is an amazing place, in many respects. It is a super clean, super safe, super well-run amusement park, but it is also a place where you don't have to worry about a thing. If you get hungry, there is always a restaurant nearby. If you get thirsty, there is always a place to grab something to drink. There are rides and amusing diversions and pavilions around every sunny, well-swept corner. It is easy to walk into the park and get carried along from one fabulous attraction to the next, all with music playing in the background, even though you don't see a speaker anywhere. If that's not enough, it may be the only place in central Florida where there are no bugs. I have no idea how they pull that off in the middle of what is basically a swamp! As a result, the theme park becomes a better-than-real reality for those amidst the experience. It is almost intoxicating in a way, especially if you are not worried about how much money you are spending.

For those of you who have not been to Disney World in Orlando, perhaps you have been on a cruise ship, where a similar all-encompassing experience is part of the attraction. Or maybe it is a resort casino or spa. There are plenty of venues and human-contrived destinations in this country to choose from. In each case, there is a certain lack of concern and a carefree attitude that is being marketed. "Come to Disney World!" "Have a great time and don't worry about anything else." This is the basis for many successful marketing campaigns.

Not that there is anything wrong with that... I do not want to pick on this sort of experience or business. All of us benefit from a little rest and relaxation. All of us need to have times when we leave our regular lives behind, if only for a short while, and find some rest and recreation. A little time off and away – especially someplace warm – can rejuvenate the mind, body, and soul. It can help us be better able to face the challenges and travails of our regular lives.

There is a temptation, however, that we will wish never to leave "vacation mode" – though for most of us that happens out of necessity when we go over our budget! We wish that the ease, the loveliness, and congenial services of the park would never end. Wouldn't it be nice to stay on the cruise ship or at the theme park? Wouldn't it be tempting to stay at Disney World, or Epcot or Universal Studios or the spa for another week?! Wouldn't it be great if we didn't have to worry about returning to the necessities and realities of our lives and existence? The easy road can be very tempting, especially if it's packaged and presented so attractively.

Now, I go into this for a reason this morning: I am struggling with ways to understand the current situation here in the United States. I have been struggling to comprehend how some people in this country and in other industrialized countries can simply deny the growing threat and challenges of climate change. I am trying to understand how and why certain people, in the face of increasingly dramatic evidence and dire warnings, still insist that climate change is not real. I can only conclude

that some portions of our society don't want to "wake up" to this reality, especially if they have an emotional or financial stake in the status quo.

We live during a time of great changes and fluctuation. Traditional weather patterns are being thrown into disarray. Just last week the East Coast experienced yet another hurricane, this one slamming into the panhandle of Florida after intensifying to a Category 4 storm over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico in just 24 hours, something that may be unprecedented. In the last 13 months, the US has been faced with hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, record heat and drought, and record-breaking hurricanes. In the last few years, we have seen record heat and wildfires out on the West Coast and record cold temperatures and flooding here on the East Coast. There is a reason that scientists call it climate change and not global warming, since an atmosphere with more energy in it will result in greater extremes of both hot and cold at times. Although, make no mistake: the overall trend in terms of global average temperatures is definitely warmer. The three hottest years on record here in North America, since we have been reliably tracking temperatures in the 1870's, were 2015, 2016, and 2017. And 2018 is probably shaping up to be the hottest yet.

And this is happening all over the world: in the last few years, heat and wildfires have wiped out the wheat crop in Russia while monsoons storms have swamped one-fifth of Pakistan and portions of India, making those areas temporarily uninhabitable. The Philippines was hit by the strongest typhoon ever measured last year in terms of wind speeds, and portions of Somalia and Yemen are in the grip of the region's worst drought in decades, one that has left hundreds of thousands of people – about half of them children – dead from malnutrition or starvation.

Now there is a chance that the weird weather all over the world is a statistical fluke. It's possible I suppose, albeit remotely, that the dramatic rain, heat, and wind events all over the planet are the function of random variation and that the earth will calm down next year. It's possible that this year is shaping up to be the warmest year on record – ever – by chance.

But it is also possible, and in fact very likely, that the predictions and rigorous consensus of the world's scientific community are correct, or mostly correct. These sorts of phenomena have been predicted, and the expectation is that what we have experienced in the last year is only the beginning. There is real and legitimate concern out there, namely among the world's scientific community, which is documenting changes in the earth's climate even as they accelerate.

For example, it turns out that the polar ice cap is melting at a fantastically accelerated rate. This phenomenon was first observed 20 years ago, when it was predicted that there might be a North Pole without ice in summer months by 2100 or later. This prediction has since been revised downward in the last 10 years, suggesting this might be a reality in 2050. Then a few years ago, it was predicted that by 2025, this could be a reality. Now, the latest estimates are that within 5-10 years' time, major parts of the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free. This would be first time that has occurred in at least 10 million years, maybe longer. Were this to happen, and it appears increasingly likely, this could potentially unleash a variety of cascading reactions that could lead to dramatic climate change, with the earth's average temperature rising 8-10 degrees Fahrenheit. Why? Because, the ice cap that covers the Arctic Ocean is the planet's "air conditioner." The white ice reflects back into space a significant amount of the sun's light (or radiation), keeping our planet relatively cool. (The albedo effect, for you science-types here this morning.) If that white ice melts, leaving behind a darker ocean below, much more solar radiation will be absorbed, warming up the entire Arctic Circle.

If this happens, it would potentially change weather patterns, resulting in massive food shortages and water crises all over the world as crops fail and dependable precipitation patterns abruptly alter. As a result, the world could experience huge waves of refugees fleeing impacted areas in search of adequate water and food. It would also accelerate the extinction of thousands of animal species beyond what is happening right now as we sit here, which is itself alarming – something worth pointing out on the day when we host our Blessing of the Animals here at First Parish.

And as one of the great ironies in future world history would have it, the people least responsible for such a future state of affairs will be the ones most affected and injured. Meanwhile, the one billion or

so of us most responsible for climate change, those of us who might make it at least once in our lives to Disney World, will be the least impacted. Those of us here in the wealthy developed world are in the best position to ride out the great climatic changes we are about to experience, even as billions of people in the developing world pay dearly for our sins of E-mission.

The question of what to do about this has been the mission of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change since it was first founded in 1994. The IPCC, as it is often called, is a partnership between the World Meteorological Society and the United Nations. This is the largest group of scientists ever assembled to study any issue in the natural world in history. Every 5-6 years, they publish the latest results of their findings, making recommendations about what the nations of the world need to do to address climate change.

This last week, the IPCC published their latest report, this one dealing with the question of what the world needs to do in order to keep average temperature increases below 2.8-degree Fahrenheit (or 1.5 degrees Celsius). The data show that worldwide temperatures have already increased an average of 1.8 degrees Fahrenheit. While this doesn't seem like much, we are already seeing dramatic changes in our weather around the world, including more ferocious tropical storms, such as the one that hit Florida this week, and the melting of glaciers at the polar ice caps and on mountains all over the world. (Just one aside – we forget how important the seasonal ice melt of mountaintop glaciers is to the health and integrity of river systems all over the world, including the drinking water of billions of people in Southeast Asia...)

The IPCC was given the task of answering the question, What do the nations of the world need to do in order to keep average temperature increases to 2.8 degrees F in order to avoid the worst potential impacts of climate change? And after reviewing thousands of studies and conferring with some of the world's best scientists and engineers, they published their findings. Their recommendations are not surprising to those of us who have studied climate change, but they are striking, nonetheless. They call for the industrialized nations of the world – and that means the United States and others – to make pervasive changes to our society and economy so as to reduce our carbon emissions from burning fossil fuel by 45% by 2030. That's right: the report calls for the United States to reduce its emissions by almost half in 12 short years.

This is almost hard to fathom and seems like it is almost impossible to achieve. After all, the leaders of one of our political parties are practically tripping over themselves to deny the reality of climate change, and our president is encouraging the oil and coal industry to continue with their wholly unsustainable business practices. There has been a deliberate, comprehensive campaign to sow seeds of doubt about climate science and the work of the IPCC, which won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. This campaign is mainly bankrolled by oil and gas companies in this country, with the help of politically conservative think tanks and advocacy groups supported by very wealthy individuals and investors such as the Koch Brothers. None of this should be controversial to say, since it is true.

Clearly, the stakes are huge. On one hand, the most profitable corporations in modern history are exercising their influence on our government and society, and on the other, the earth's natural systems are showing signs of spiraling out of control in a way that we cannot entirely predict. Rarely is it mentioned in the American media what we need to do as a country in order to avoid the worst future impacts of climate change – which is to dramatically cut our CO₂ emissions by 45% or more by 2030 and 80% or more by 2050.

And yet our elected leaders are siding with the fossil fuel companies. Massive corporate profits are being prioritized over protecting a stable climate and protecting our children and descendants and millions of species on this planet. The necessity of reducing greenhouse gases is being ignored. We cannot continue to burn more and more fossil fuels on one hand as we prepare for impacts of climate change on the other. The stakes are just too high.

We all know the status of the debate in this country – or lack thereof – with pollsters I am sure telling the president that climate change is a bad issue with the American electorate. And I guess this is somewhat understandable; tragic, in a way, but understandable. Many of us in this country are still

lulled into a false sense of complacency and do not want to hear that our lifestyle as Americans is predicated on a wholly unsustainable use of fossil fuels. Many of us wish to remain in the “amusement park” and not hear that our copious use of energy has a dark side. Many of us would prefer not to acknowledge that our lifestyles and complete reliance on fossil fuels are leading to extreme weather events and a dramatic alteration of our planet’s natural systems that will adversely impact half the world’s population in the next 10 years. No, it’s much easier to drive up to the amusement park in our SUV and have a nice day and listen to the news channels that tell us not worry, that everything will be okay.

And yet, and yet, it’s time. It’s time for all Americans, those on the left and those on the right, to realize we are all in this together and warm up to a new ethic, that of living more lightly on this planet, our only home.

It's interesting: several years ago, I attended an event where the director of the IPCC was speaking. The director’s name is Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, and he grew up as a Hindu in India. In a discussion about why climate change is still questioned by certain political groups in the United States, he cited an old Vedic saying from his native India: *“It is easy to wake someone up who is asleep. However, it is much harder to wake someone up who is pretending to be asleep.”*

And yet, that is the challenge we face today in this country and around the world. Can we harness the political and social and religious will to call our country to some accountability? Can we call the United States to conscience with respect to the urgent necessity of reducing our dependency on fossil fuels? Can we convince folks that it's in their best interest to come out of the amusement park for the sake of their future selves and their children and certainly their children’s children? It’s not just a political or social movement; it’s a religious one as well. For what we are talking about here is engaging the reality of our situation with a vision for what could be – what needs to be – not what is.

Unitarian Universalists have been at the forefront of every major social movement in the history of this country: the abolitionist movement, the suffrage movement, the labor movement, and the civil rights and women’s movements. And the next great movement is developing now in terms of calling our country and world to realize the moral urgency and biological necessity of living more lightly on this planet. Nothing short of the sort of world we wish to leave our children and future generations is at stake. And if you don’t believe me, read the reports...

We need to not only change our ways personally and individually but be at the forefront of the groups and communities offering a new vision for life here in the US. Imagine a country where the cost of carbon emissions was factored into the business plans and spreadsheets of every corporation, company, and municipality. One of the things we desperately need to do is put in place an economy-wide carbon tax and then pay the dividends out to every American taxpayer. Such a plan can be structured in such a way that it appeals to liberals and conservatives alike.

And such a plan was also in the news this week. The Nobel Prize for Economics was just awarded jointly to William Nordhaus, the Yale economist who first proposed a carbon tax as a way to internalize the cost of fossil fuels efficiently. He has argued for decades that by imposing a carbon fee, or tax, we can harness our market-based capitalist system to move our society and economy in the direction of sustainability.

For what it’s worth, I have followed Professor Nordhaus’s work for many years and even read some of his work while I studied energy policy at Tufts. Simply having fossil fuels reflect their true cost would open up many other possibilities for energy. Imagine a world very much like this one, but where almost everything is powered by electricity coming from the sun and winds and tides. And I say almost everything. As someone who is a realist, I think we need to acknowledge that there will be a role for fossil fuels in helping us transition to a low- or no- carbon future. At this point, for example, I would be hard- pressed to envision an electric snow blower, though I concede it certainly is possible! And I think an electric jet plane is not going to be manufactured anytime soon. However, the market for electric cars is at its beginning stages, and there is huge potential for electric vehicles and improved rail and train travel.

How do we as a society reduce our carbon emissions by almost 50% in 12 years and by 80-90% within a generation? That is a herculean task. It will require a historic mobilization effort and campaign on par with what happened at the beginning of World War II here in the US and the creation of the Marshall Plan after the war in Europe.

Just out of curiosity, is there anyone here who was born before 1936? I am looking for a group of spry folks in their 80's and 90's who can tell the rest of us what it was like when the United States entered WWII in 1941. For that may very well be the type and scale of response we need in the coming years. But make no mistake; we can do this if we really want to. All it takes is average Americans realizing what we are truly up against with respect to climate change. I believe that if enough of us come to terms with the science, if enough of us realize the urgency of our situation, if enough of us wake up and come out of the amusement park, then we can be at the forefront of the next chapter in American History.

Many of us have a vision for what a decarbonized United States looks like: a country with a large 21st-century network of transmission lines that allows us to move wind power from the Midwest, solar power from the Southwest, and wind power from off the coasts to areas where people can use it, and then augment the power they are generating nearby. For example, just off the coast here in Massachusetts, there is enormous potential for wind power in the ocean. There is so much potential that wind farms just off our coasts could provide enough electricity for the whole region for much of the year. But as we all know, wind farms have had a rough go of it here in New England. The truth of the matter is that we don't need just one Cape Wind (a proposed offshore wind farm); we need 15 to 20 of them if we want to have any chance of avoiding runaway climate change. Those of us who have supported Charlie Baker in the past need to call his office and tell him that.

I have spent many years as a student and activist studying climate change. I believe we all have a moral obligation not only to our current neighbors but our future ones as well. And there is an ethic wrapped up in the vision we have for our world. Are the hopes we cherish and plans we have taking into consideration the scientific reality of the world in which we find ourselves? Are we respecting the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part? Are the hopes and visions we espouse bringing us closer to being more compassionate and healthy people or leading us away from that potential?

There is a generational call to arms being sounded right now. It has to do with how we as Americans are going to respond to the largest challenge our nation has faced in several generations. The science is clear and getting even clearer. We have to change our ways as individuals, as communities, and as a country. We have to transcend our political differences and reignite good old-fashioned American resolve and know-how and then eliminate our dependence on gas and oil within a generation. We need to convince people like us – level-headed, practical, capable folks just like us – that this challenge is real and serious, and that the direction we need to go as a country is clear. We need to convince people like us to come out of the amusement park and not despair. There is hope.

I am reminded of the words of the novelist Barbara Kingsolver. She once wrote, “The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof.”

I hope and pray that many of us will find the courage of our convictions and acknowledge the real challenges our country and world face and, in response, embrace the vision and hope that lead to a more sustainable – and peaceful – future. Amen

A Vision, by Wendell Berry

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow-growing trees on a ruined place,
Renewing it, enriching it,
If we will make our seasons welcome here,
Asking not too much of earth or heaven.

Then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live here,
Their houses strongly placed upon the valley sides,
Fields and gardens rich in the windows.
The river will run clear,
as we will never know it,
And over it, birdsong like a canopy.

On the levels of the hills will be green meadows,
Stock bells in noon shade.
On the steps where greed and ignorance cut down the old forest,
An old forest will stand,
Its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.

Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music risen out of the ground.
They will take nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting.
Memory, native to this valley,
will spread over it like a grove,
and memory will grow into legend,
legend into song, song into sacrament.

The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling light.
This is no paradise or dream.
Its hardship is its possibility.