

# Climate Change & the Church

Joel 1:1-2:1

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

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The Day of the Lord is coming, the prophet Joel warns us. And it sounds pretty bad.

This doom and gloom is one reason we don't preach a lot of sermons from the Minor Prophets. They are called the "minor prophets" because their books are short, but the name could just as easily refer to the "minor key" in which they write. These guys talk a lot about God smiting people because of sin.

But these prophets are also powerful social justice advocates. Remember the great passage from Amos "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

These cantankerous prophets are concerned about the big issues of their day, particularly social inequality, the mistreatment of the poor, and irresponsible exploitation and damage to the land. Therefore, they are the perfect ancient voices to couple with the recent encyclical letter of Pope Francis.

This summer Francis issued the letter "Laudato Si," which translates into English as "Praise Be," inviting the entire world into dialogue about the major issues that face us—climate change, income inequality, refugees, technology, etc. He thinks the major issues facing humanity are interconnected and the result of our current way of living, what he calls a "throwaway lifestyle" that has damaged our common home, the Earth.

At the beginning of this letter, Francis wrote, "I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home." According to John O'Keefe, a theologian from Creighton University who spoke to our First Forum a few weeks ago, this papal encyclical is the very first one to be written to the entire world and not just the church.

So I want to accept the Pope's invitation and dialogue about these issues. As Stephen Bouma, our music director, preached last week in a sermon about the things he appreciates here at First Central, this congregation values inquiry—open and honest discussion and disagreement about significant topics. In that spirit, then, we accept the Pope's invitation to conversation.

Now, the Pope sounds like the prophet Joel when he describes the effects of pollution. He wrote, "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth." This ugliness is a concern because the Earth is part of the revelation of God. Nature should be a source of beauty and joy, "contemplated with gladness and praise."

Yet, in much contemporary culture, nature has become an object to be used and controlled not a mystery to be enjoyed. Viewing nature as something to be used has led to its

abuse. We live in a throwaway culture that consumes at an unsustainable level and does not reuse and recycle what we do use. The Earth has been exploited and she is crying out for deliverance.

Things should not be like this. For the Earth is our common home and the Earth's climate is part of the common good meant for all of us.

We come to this topic on the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, the namesake of the current pope. St. Francis was known for his relationship to nature and his love and concern for animals. Every year we bless pets and animals on the weekend closest to St. Francis' feast day. Blessing the animals reminds us of the important and holy connection between animals and ourselves.

We also come to this topic on World Communion Sunday. A day in which we are reminded of interconnections. Not just with all Christians around the globe. Or even with all humans and all cultures. We are also reminded that our communion is with all creatures of the Earth and the environments in which we live.

Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, wisely reminds us that we Christians are called "to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and with our neighbors on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust on our planet."

And so climate change is not just a scientific and political issue, the issue is moral, theological, spiritual. The damage being done to the Earth is damage being done to the work of God. The lifestyles that damage the Earth are lifestyles lived in contradiction to the communion that is God's will and intention.

But can we do anything about it?

The prophet Joel has a pretty negative view of the ecological devastation he lived through and foresaw getting worse if people did not repent. But he did believe repentance was possible, that's why he sounded the alarm.

Pope Francis is more hopeful than the ancient prophet. He believes that humanity is capable of changing our ways and living in greater solidarity with one another and with the Earth. This renewal calls for a change of heart based upon a better understanding of the Earth as our common home. We can and must work together, Francis proclaims. "All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements, and talents."

Last Sunday morning Michael, Sebastian, and I were driving through the hills of northwestern Connecticut. We were on our way back to Hartford to catch a flight home to Omaha after having participated in the wedding of Desi Fortina the night before in the town of Hudson, New York. Our drive was quiet on a crisp, cool, sunny day. Occasionally a leaf flamed into view, as the foliage was just beginning to turn autumnal colors.

We passed, unexpectedly, through the town of Norfolk (not Norfork), which was the hometown of this congregation's founding pastor, the Rev. Reuben Gaylord. We stopped to look the place over, see the church, and explore the cemetery. In the graveyard we encountered a historical marker at the tombstone of James Mars, the last slave who lived in

Norfolk. Mars gained his own freedom, became a prominent member of the community, and wrote a book about his experiences. He was also a member of the Congregational Church, meaning that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the home congregation of our founding pastor was integrated. Gaylord himself was a strong proponent of abolition.

To our predecessors, slavery could have been perceived as an insurmountable problem. But they had hope and conviction and used their moral and theological understanding to abolish it.

Our Sunday morning visit to Norfolk, during which I recalled the great heritage we have as the people of God, renewed my hope that we can heed the message of the prophets and heal the world.

This morning I haven't recited the troubling scientific data; there are folk, even some in our congregation, who are better skilled at that. Nor have I waded into the murk of public policy. My point has been simpler than all of that.

Climate change is a moral, theological, and spiritual concern calling upon the commitment of people of faith. For we are people of hope and conviction who have changed the world before and can do so again. On this World Communion Sunday, this Feast Day of St. Francis, let us recommit ourselves to live in solidarity and communion with all of creation, repenting of our sins, and working to heal and renew our common home, the Earth.