

# PENTECOST SUNDAY: Are you also among the prophets?

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-4

May 24, 2015 at Christ Church United in Lowell

Patrick Cage

Thank you so much for having me here today at Christ Church United in Lowell. I feel blessed to be at a church that does so much for the homeless and is so open to the wider community. My gratitude to Peter for setting this up, to Bill and Sylvia and you for sharing this morning with me.

My name is Patrick Cage, and I am the Climate Justice Intern for the Massachusetts Conference of the UCC. And my passion is to share the link between faith and climate change. Not just how Jesus' teachings call us to climate action, but how a deeper sense of faithfulness is our single best source of hope in an era of climate crisis.

Over Holy Week and Easter, I helped organize and participated in the Pipeline Pilgrimage, a faith-based walk along the proposed Kinder Morgan pipeline route. We often walked in silence among hills and buckets of maple sap, and in the evenings had fellowship with affected landowners. We created space to encounter the Holy Spirit in a fuller way than I have felt before, and so I am thrilled and honored to speak with you on Pentecost.

Since today is Pentecost, I will begin by naming hard truths, for the first Christians received not tongues of water, nor feathers, but tongues of fire.

So let us be bold and face our changing climate. Let us look at the valley of dry bones we walk through **today**:

The coral reefs bleaching white and brittle en masse, to be acidified to memory by century's end.<sup>i</sup>

Since the year 2000, lodgepole pines across acreage equal the size of Colorado have fallen to plagues of heat-loving bark beetle.<sup>ii</sup>

This winter's blizzards and other heavy precipitation events have intensified by 70% in the Northeast since when my parents were born.<sup>iii</sup>

Storms and floods have tripled in frequency worldwide since 1980.<sup>iv</sup>

Warmer and wetter climates are spreading malaria,<sup>v</sup> Lyme disease,<sup>viii</sup> West Nile Virus within the United States.<sup>viii</sup> Outbreaks of Dengue are shooting upwards in Asia and Latin America.<sup>ix</sup>

The decade-long drought in the Western US is the most intense in a millennium.<sup>x</sup>

Meager snows in the Sierra Nevada Mountains imperil the water supply of California,<sup>xi</sup> which grows a third our country's vegetables and two-thirds of our fruits and nuts.<sup>xii</sup>

Drought fomented the civil war in Syria,<sup>xiii</sup> and encroaching desert ignited the conflict in Darfur.<sup>xiv</sup>

These effects are from about 0.8 C of warming so far.<sup>xv</sup> Because there's a lag between emissions and temperature increase,<sup>xvi</sup> the climate change today results from the emissions of the 1980s – and half of our emissions have been since then –<sup>xvii</sup> meaning if we stopped tomorrow... we'd still have another 0.6 C in the pipeline.<sup>xviii</sup>

As an informed citizen and a realist, I am all too familiar with the feelings of hopelessness these facts can bring.

But that is precisely where God steps in – to do what seems impossible, put life back on these bones – to do the unexpected, and give us what Jesus calls the “Spirit of truth” in tongues of prophetic fire –<sup>xix</sup> not fire that burns, but that gives warmth and light, that causes bread to rise and illuminates our way forward.

Because we CAN do this. WE can do this. We know we have the technological and social solutions to transition away from fossil fuels and towards 100% renewable energy.

A few examples:

Solar now employs more people than coal,<sup>xx</sup> & solar roads and windows are under development.<sup>xxi</sup>

Huge, more powerful wind turbines are soon to come online, making wind energy viable for even the least breezy states.<sup>xxii</sup>

Across the globe, millions of homes and houses of worship are reducing consumption and becoming energy-efficient.

There are now over 500 active fossil fuel divestment campaigns worldwide,<sup>xxiii</sup> and they are starting to win.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In the Massachusetts state legislature, we currently have three pieces of climate legislation.<sup>xxv</sup>

Farmers markets and community gardens are springing to life and moving us from fossil fuel-intensive agriculture towards community-intensive, organic agriculture.

And there these great things called trees that can actually suck carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere – and countries are planting them in droves. By 2020, eight Latin American countries will reforest 50 million acres – 20 times the size of Massachusetts!<sup>xxvi</sup>

**So we know we CAN avert disastrous climate change.**

**Deploying these solutions en masse will not be easy – there is much against us: social inertia, political impasse, the largest industry the world has ever seen.**

Protecting our children and grandchildren from the worst effects of climate change will be an **epic story**, on par with the mobilization of the country for World War Two, on par with the epic of Exodus out of Egypt, the formative story of Jesus' people. An Exodus led by Moses, who was not first a shepherd, or a sandal-maker, or a climate scientist, but was first and foremost a person of faith – Moses, who did not put blind optimism in the miracles themselves, but saw them as God's empowering gifts that stirred his people into living, electric hope.

Amidst climate change, this enlivening hope borne of the Spirit is our most important contribution as people of faith. Yes, we in the church are called to climate action. I believe God celebrates with us when we improve our church's insulation, landscape organically, divest from fossil fuels. But we are more than just bodies in the People's Climate March. We are **the BODY OF CHRIST** in the People's Climate March.

In a world that seems to be heading for the tomb, in a secular era, we, as a resurrection people, are blessed to offer the ministry of the Spirit.

In our moment, the Pentecost story has vital lessons for us:

**(1) God is with us as a guide.** For the grace of God put life back upon those dried bones, after the Spirit prophesied through Ezekiel. The Spirit descended as tongues of fire to speak *through* the mouths of the apostles. **Just as we cannot do this without God, God will not do this without us.** God is here to guide us.

**And, (2) we each have a key role in this Great Story of our times.**

**Pentecost teaches us we each have a prophetic voice.**

And I hear we have at least one fiery-tongued minister here with us today, who stomped up to pipeline company executives and said, **"Y'all are a bunch of liars."** Bold words – like overhead florescent lighting, casting a business plan that operates in darkness into sharp relief. Prophetic words of the Jesus who stated "you hypocrites!" to those in positions of power.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In April, on the Pipeline Pilgrimage, the most arresting story I heard was Buddy's, when after dinner he broke down with grief as he talked about the pipeline slated to run a stone's throw away from where he rests his head at night. On the pilgrimage, we heard the stories of fruit farmers and dancers turned activists with the pipeline slated to cut through their land. We heard people speak of banding together in community to keep the unwanted pipeline out.

There are many voices I could lift up, and many stories I could tell. But this sermon is about **your** story.

Pentecost is a party for the most overlooked face of our triune God – **the Holy Spirit, who moves through all of US.** Because, in the **reverse-Tower-of-Babel moment that is Pentecost,** God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to **ALL** people.

This is **huge** – whether you are well-educated or not, whether you come from money or struggle to make ends meet, whether you are confident or cripplingly shy, wherever your hometown, whatever your sexual orientation or ethnicity or gender identity or immigration status, **your story can be God’s story.**

There’s a great scene in first Samuel about the roving bands of prophets,<sup>xxviii</sup> coming down off the mountain, dancing with tambourines.<sup>xxix</sup> Saul sees them, strips off his clothes, and joins their procession, causing baffled onlookers to ask:

“Is Saul also among the prophets?”<sup>xxx</sup>

So today, I ask:

Are you also among the prophets?

If we allow it, the Spirit can move all of us to speak the truth of the world – climate change – and the truth of heaven – active love. We don’t need to prattle off statistics – climate communicators learned years ago that doesn’t work. What we can share are our stories – each speaking in our own language about climate change, with our differing words and values, as concerned pastors or fruit farmers, professors or PTA members, investors or homeless shelter volunteers, churchgoers or jokers or both. We each have a creative contribution to make. All of us can be climate carpenters.

In John 16, Jesus tells his disciples that he must leave in order for the Spirit of Truth to come to us.<sup>xxxi</sup> That is, Jesus ascends into heaven precisely SO THAT God can give us the Holy Spirit.

**The Holy Spirit is a gift & WHAT A GIFT THE SPIRIT IS!**

**Whoever you are, God loves you enough to give you the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

**Look to the person beside you. Whoever they are, God loves them enough to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit. God loves us all enough to fill us with the breath so our tongues might speak praise and the way towards peace.**

**Can I get an amen to that?**

Come on folks, we’re talking about tongues of Pentecostal fire here, I said, **Can I get an amen to that?**

We can open ourselves to receive the gift of the Spirit. We can open the windows to allow the Spirit to whip in, sometimes as a roaring tempest, other times as a lazy breeze. We can do this! All of us! – Meaning: you, and me, and her.

We can have a practice of listening to invite the Holy Spirit. So – though it’s a bit unconventional for a sermon:

I invite you now to close your eyes and just breathe. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Focus on your breath. Focus on the movement of the “ruach” – Hebrew for breath, for wind, for the Spirit. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Know that every breath is a gift from God. This breathing is one way we can create space for the Holy Spirit, for that face of God that we so often forget amidst all our commitments. This is one way to make ourselves open to the ministry God sets before all of us, the ministry others will need.

**Because the coming years will be tough, and people will need our ministry.**

Earlier, I stated that the Pentecost story has two important lessons for a climate change world: that we all have our own role in this great story of our times, and that God is with us as a guide. Now I wish to add a third, from Ezekiel’s experience in the valley of dry bones: that, **with God, there is always cause for hope.**

As Ezekiel recounts, “God asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’”

I said, “I sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

God tells Ezekiel, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them... ‘I will make breath/Spirit enter you, and you will come to life.’”<sup>xxxii</sup>

And God makes it so.

Then later, God states, “You, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

**God promises us that, whatever might seem lost now, hope will win out in the end. Life will win out in the end.**

**With God, there is always cause for hope.**

**Let us never forget this**, because the inevitable truth, sisters and brothers in Christ, is that as climate change worsens, people in our society will become so very lost, mired between feelings of guilt and powerlessness and loss. They will need us to share wholeheartedly what we know – the liberating love of Jesus, whose very name means salvation. Because we best know how crucifixion can lead to resurrection, we best know how to find that supernova of hope even in the well of despair. We have the Spirit’s ministry to shepherd each other away from panic, and towards the ever-blossoming tenderness of a God who came to be among us because “God so loved the world.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

As human beings, living today, climate change is colossal. I believe that only God’s promise, Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of Heaven is bigger. (And, as Jesus reminds us, “the Kingdom of Heaven is among you,”<sup>xxxv</sup> or, in another translation, “the Kingdom of Heaven is within you.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>) And it is my experience that when we open ourselves to the Spirit, when we admit that we are

mere infants – the crawling, babbling children of God – then we will feel which Way to walk towards peace on climate change.

I cannot tell *you* particularly what you will do about climate change, as individuals or as a community. But I can tell you earnestly that when you open the windows to the Holy Spirit, an answer will blow through, and **it will make you fall in love with God more deeply than you have ever known.**

Sisters and brothers in Christ, fellow children of God, let us pour out ourselves today. Let there be no more walls around our hearts. Let our hands serve selflessly those that we love and that God loves, let our mouth speak caring and joyous words to our loved ones and rivals alike, to both the easy and difficult family members, to the neighbors that we find in everyone. **Friends, let us nourish back to life a breaking world! Let us share the Good News of God's promise and Christ's effusive love with those in despair!**

**And may God put fire upon our lips to do so!**

Can I get an amen?

So I ask again today:

Are you also among the prophets? Are WE also among the prophets?

I pray that we may let it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.geneseo.edu/~bosch/Hoegh-Guldberg.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.ucusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2014/09/Rocky-Mountain-Forests-at-Risk-Full-Report.pdf#page=19>.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/highlights/regions/northeast#statement-16958>.

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.emdat.be/disaster\\_trends/index.html](http://www.emdat.be/disaster_trends/index.html),

[http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMra1109877?query=featured\\_home](http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMra1109877?query=featured_home). Some portion of this is due to better reporting. This is particularly true in the earlier part of the time series (1950-1979), which is here excluded for that reason.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/tar/wg2/index.php?idp=570>.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/science/indicators/health-society/lyme.html>.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2582486/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://time.com/11683/west-nile-virus-climate-change/>

<sup>ix</sup> McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Times, 2010. 72-73.

<sup>x</sup> <http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/report/our-changing-climate/extreme-weather#narrative-page-16570> and <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/12/08/3600717/california-drought-climate-change-2>.

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- <sup>xi</sup> <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2015/05/05/3646965/california-drought-and-agriculture-explainer/>
- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/statistics/> 2013 report page 1
- <sup>xiii</sup> <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2015/03/03/3628899/warming-syrian-conflict-isis/> and <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2015/02/23/1421533112>.
- <sup>xiv</sup> [http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/a\\_hostile\\_climate/](http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/a_hostile_climate/) and <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1615171,00.html>.
- <sup>xv</sup> <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/WorldOfChange/decadaltemp.php>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.skepticalscience.com/Climate-Change-The-40-Year-Delay-Between-Cause-and-Effect.html>.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Calculated from the raw data here (compare sum of yearly emissions before 1980, to sum afterwards): [http://cdiac.ornl.gov/ftp/ndp030/global.1751\\_2010.ems](http://cdiac.ornl.gov/ftp/ndp030/global.1751_2010.ems).
- <sup>xviii</sup> <http://www.bio.utexas.edu/courses/THOC/Hansen-et-al-2005-Science.pdf>
- <sup>xix</sup> John 16:3.
- <sup>xx</sup> <http://www.greenbiz.com/blog/2014/01/31/us-solar-industry-employs-more-coal-gas-industries-combined>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/11/11/3591195/netherlands-solar-road/> and <http://www.techtimes.com/articles/13575/20140820/transparent-solar-panel-cell-michigan-state-university.htm>.
- <sup>xxii</sup> <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2015/05/20/3660677/bigger-taller-wind-turbines-will-unlock-wind-power-across-united-states/>.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> <http://gofossilfree.org/press-release/fossil-fuel-divestment-campaign-to-hold-global-day-of-action-on-february-13-14/>.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Syracuse University's full divestment, Stanford University divesting from coal, Oxford University divesting from coal and tar sands are a few major victories. In the week following this sermon, Norway committed its \$900 billion dollar sovereign wealth fund, the world's largest, to divest from fossil fuels.
- <sup>xxv</sup> One divestment bill (S. 1350) and two carbon pricing bills (S. 1717 and S. 1786): <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/189/Senate/S1350>, <http://climate-xchange.org/the-policy/>
- <sup>xxvi</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/dec/08/lima-climate-talks-pledge-to-plant-20m-hectares-of-trees>. Unit conversions mine. Other countries with exciting reforestation projects include Ethiopia, Haiti, China.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> e.g. Matthew 23: 13-14.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> 1 Samuel 19:20.
- <sup>xxix</sup> 1 Samuel 10:5.
- <sup>xxx</sup> 1 Samuel 19:24.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> John 16:7.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Ezekiel 37:3,4a,5b.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Ezekeil 37:13.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> John 3:16a.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Luke 17:21b, NRSV.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Luke 17:21b, King James Bible.