

God's Gift of Water as a Public Trust

SCRIPTURE:

Listen for the word of God, as it is found in Genesis 1:6-8:

^[6] And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."^[7] So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ^[8] God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

Jesus concludes his Sermon on the Mount with these words from the Gospel of Matthew 7:24-27:

^[24] "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ^[25] The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ^[26] And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ^[27] The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"

So what's "the winter equivalent" of Jesus' conclusion of the sermon on the mount? Perhaps something about the wise person who built her house with a steep, metal roof that she insulated to a value of R-60.... in contrast to the foolish person who built his roof like so many of us in New England!

Living as I do in a parsonage, I'm guessing I'm not the only one who has spent much of the last month with furniture rearranged to accommodate a dozen buckets catching drips from the sills and ceilings.

But Jesus' illustration about where we build our homes can also be taken literally here in Massachusetts – especially when I'm preaching out on Cape Cod! Of course the truth Jesus exhorts is not limited to literal interpretation. Jesus' words can illuminate the foundation of our lives, our society – even our civilization.

The things we care about – the things our lives depend on – are changing. It's as if we are learning that the basis—the foundation—upon which we have built our society is vulnerable in ways humans have never imagined. Over the past 6 weeks, you and I have been learning first hand what scientists have said for years:

- that climate change has melted 40% of the polar ice cap;
- it's increased the ocean temperature off the New England coast;
- and it's made the atmosphere over 5% wetter.

As it turns out, the greatest impact of these three changes is being experienced in the northeast – where, since 1958, we have been suffering through a 70% increase in extreme precipitation events.¹ (At the moment in the form of tons of snow!) But we're not alone. People in West Texas, Arizona and California are in the midst of what scientists are now calling a 1,000 year drought². And they certainly aren't surprised to learn that each passing year is likely to be the hottest year ever recorded.³

Climate change is already testing our coastal cities, our farms, our national parks, our rivers. It's also already testing the poor, the marginalized, the elderly, the hungry and homeless. Under

these circumstances, our usual understanding of hope is insufficient.

A Story of Courage and Hope – Our Children’s Trust

So let me now share with you what for me is one of the most hopeful stories of our time. In a place not far, and a time quite near, there were some teenagers⁴ who were distinguished most of all by their fearless courage and uncompromising hope. You knew they were fearlessly courageous because, even though they were only teenagers, they had devoted years of their lives to facing up to the thing that stopped most grownups in their tracks. And of their hope...?

- Well, their hope was like that of the young shepherd David as he quieted his trembling hands so he could gather up a few smooth stones.
- Their hope was like that of the Indian champion of non-violence who once said, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”
- Their hope was like that of the carpenter’s son who assured those around him that they could move mountains and that the truth would set them free.

A few years earlier, these children learned much of what we all now know:

- In only 7 generations, humans have burned about half of all the known carbon reserves that nature took 150 million years to create. As a result,
- We’ve made the ocean 30% more acidic;
- We’ve set the stage for most of Miami and much of Boston to be under water before our grandchildren die;⁵
- We’ve made 2014 the warmest year on record.⁶
- We’ve assured that the pace of global warming is 10 times faster than any time over the last 65 million years.⁷
- And we’ve increased the rate of species extinction by a thousand fold.⁸

No child should have to hear this. But unlike many of us, upon hearing it, these children fearlessly persisted in their questioning. How could this happen? Why isn’t the whole world focused on this? How can people keep doing the same things they’ve always done—as if everything will continue as it always has? Isn’t anyone in charge...?

These questions were prompted by what they had learned in elementary and middle-school: that the world was organized into countries and our country was organized into 50 states, and that our leaders were responsible to assure that we live in safety, and that the world into which we were born would continue in a way that would give us opportunities not unlike those afforded to our parents and grandparents.

Their fearless courage allowed them not to avert their attention. It allowed them to see that the assurance of continuity was in jeopardy, and that most of the leaders were unwilling to take any action, and that many of those leaders denied that there was even a problem.

In addition to fearless courage, these teenagers were marked by uncompromising hope. And they expressed their hope by taking action. They teamed up with some attorneys and film makers

and then together, they made a case to protect the climate based on the Public Trust Doctrine. The Public Trust Doctrine, which stretches all the way back to Roman times, is well-established in American law and in many other legal traditions throughout the world. It states that it is the duty of the government to protect the natural resources that are essential for our collective survival and prosperity. Rivers, groundwater, the seashore - and in this case, the atmosphere - cannot be privatized or substantially impaired because these natural resources belong to everyone equally—including those not yet born.

I said “they made a case.” In fact, they have taken legal action in almost all 50 states, and currently have pending cases in 5 states including Massachusetts⁹. The best way to learn more about their prophetic and hopeful action is to watch Bill Moyers’ final show from January 1, 2015 when he interviewed the legal mind behind the organization I’ve been talking about: Our Children’s Trust.¹⁰

Not only is the work of Our Children’s Trust built upon legal principles that are thousands of years old, these young people are calling us to embrace moral principles that are as solid as the rock upon which Jesus would have us build the foundation of our lives.

Now, imagine if humanity were to regard the precious gift of water as a public trust? After all – we each begin life in water, even as evolution tells us that all of life began in water. In addition to being the most common life-giving expression of God’s creative power – soon, in places ranging from Sao Paulo¹¹ to Pakistan¹² to Phoenix, people will recognize what the ancients knew: that water is an essential and precious gift from God. It is not to be economically disregarded, wasted or polluted. God created water – the basis of life. Water IS a public trust—not a commodity. By getting in right relationship to water, humanity just may be able to get in right relationship to earth and all of God’s gifts.

For many of you, what I’m saying may be quite familiar. Your awareness of water’s preciousness may already be part of your everyday consciousness. But because most of us have yet to take in this truth as a foundation of living, I want to take a moment to illustrate how we might move in that direction.

About 20 years ago—when my boys were 11 and 7—our family took a three week camping trip in the southwest at a time when a severe drought dominated the region. In Zion National Park—where visitors experience nature’s beauty from the floor of the great valley—the temperature was over 100 and water was almost unavailable. But after days in a car, we all needed to shower. So my wife and I used the opportunity to teach our sons about the preciousness of water. I tied a rope around the handle of a plastic gallon jug of water and threw the rope over a branch about 10’ off the ground and hoisted the jug up above our heads. Then I poked a small hole in the bottom of the jug so the water would flow with a steady drip, and with our bathing suits on, one by one the 4 of us took a shower. We each used less than one gallon of water. (In case you weren’t aware, a person taking an average shower uses over 17 gallons!)

My point here is not to illustrate virtue. What we did was in part a response to the

conditions we found ourselves in. We also did it to make a lasting impression on our sons of the preciousness of water. And our hope was to make them more innovative and resilient, knowing they were growing up in a world that would demand both.

By choosing to have a smaller “water footprint” or a smaller waste footprint or a smaller carbon footprint – even when there is no legal obligation or financial necessity to do so – by choosing to tread more lightly on the earth, we become more conscious of our personal impact along with becoming more aware of our collective impact. And when we talk with others about our choices, we become witnesses. And thus the seeds for activism are sewn.

Now let’s move from personal responsibility to community and institutional responsibility, and I’ll illustrate with another story. Not long ago I was preaching on climate change and as we will do following worship this morning, I had time to meet with several dozen members of the church to respond to questions. As we’ve learned from the past month of record-breaking snow, climate change can have a huge impact on a region, or even a particular building. This particular church has been paying a good bit of appropriate attention to major building projects, so I raised this question: Have you taken into consideration the fact that this particular part of your city will be underwater (at least several times a year) by the time our grandchildren have kids?¹³

This is very much related to the humongous challenges the MBTA has been facing. To keep repairing a mass transit system that is based on direct current in a climate where precipitation will continually increase for the next few centuries makes no sense. But what about doing substantial deferred maintenance (or more!) on a landmark, flagship church—a church that is flourishing by any measure – when the building’s location assures it will be underwater in 2 generations? My advice to them was to move ahead with their building plans... AND commit to becoming the national religious voice on addressing climate change.

What’s absolutely clear is that we need to come together by neighborhood and by region so that we can muster the resilience climate change demands.

And it turns out – as has been true throughout the almost 400 year history of Massachusetts – it turns out that there’s a UCC church in almost every town. God is calling upon the church, the synagogue and the mosque to rise to this challenge by leading their neighborhoods to develop appropriate, just, and life-renewing plans that fully account for the realities we have brought upon ourselves by needlessly burning too much fossil fuel, while being too slow to make the appropriate adjustments.

There was a time when the church served to rally the community to tackle whatever challenges the town was facing. The church functioned this way because it is built upon a rock. Now it’s time for the church to be re-awakened to this calling. Science makes clear that the need for anticipatory leadership is immediate. And history suggests that this can only happen if faith leaders like YOU are recognizing that our leadership is essential if we are to create a world worth saving. Amen.

1. <http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/report/our-changing-climate/heavy-downpours-increasing>. and from the Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/02/10/what-the-massive-snowfall-in-boston-tells-us-about-global-warming/>
2. There is an 80% chance that the Southwest and Great Plains will see a "megadrought" before the end of the 21ST century if climate change continues unabated, a new study finds. <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/1/1/e1400082> This megadrought (defined by severe drought conditions lasting for decades or longer) is expected to be worse than any drought seen in the past 1,000 years and can be attributed to human-caused global warming. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/272cc1e2c156462e9b0b055f96dc08d2/study-sees-even-bigger-longer-droughts-much-us-west>
3. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/10/13/3579242/nasa-hottest-september-on-record/>
4. <http://ourchildrenstrust.org/>
5. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/05/23/2967411/coastal-property-values-crash-climate-science-deniers/> Sea level will rise more than half-again as much as scientists predicted it would in 2007 From the IPCC September 2013 Report: <http://www.climatechange2013.org/>
6. <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/12/03/3598698/2014-hottest-year-on-record/>
7. From the IPCC September 2013 Report: <http://www.climatechange2013.org/>
8. The May 2014 issue of Science magazine <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/344/6187/1246752.abstract?sid=a4435a49-708d-44b5-9101-e5c5abf91eb0>
9. <http://ourchildrenstrust.org/state/Massachusetts>
10. Bill Moyers' final show on January 1, 2015 focused on the Children's Climate Crusade and featured the legal scholar behind Our Children's Trust, Mary Christina Wood, author of *Nature's Trust*. Watch the show here: <http://billmoyers.com/episode/full-show-climate-crusade/>
11. In Sao Paulo Brazil: <http://nyti.ms/1CBgLEo>
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/world/americas/brazil-drastic-water-rationing-may-be-put-in-place-in-sao-paulo.html>
12. Drought in Pakistan: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/world/asia/pakistan-braces-for-major-water-shortages.html>
13. http://ssrf.climatecentral.org.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/Buffer2/states/MA/downloads/pdf_reports/State/MA_State-report.pdf and http://www.bostonglobe.com/magazine/2014/04/04/how-boston-and-should-preparing-for-rising-seas/8mF4YVWgAMzDGQexMF35FK/story.html?s_campaign=8315