



The Earth Is the Lord's (A Word About Climate Change)

TEXT
Romans 8:18–25
Luke 9:57–62

February 10, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

When my kids turned 13, I took them on a trip — just the two of us. Sarah and I went to Branson, saw some shows, played the worst game of putt-putt golf in the history of the game, and had dinner on the lake. Nathan and I went to St. Louis, saw two baseball games, played golf — where he made his first par, and we had the best hamburger he can remember. The point of the trip was to talk. They were growing up, and there were four things I needed them to know. I told them:

(1) You are responsible for yourself. You'll need to take responsibility even when it is hard.

(2) I love you. If you ever have a child of your own, you will understand that in a way you can't fully understand it now.

(3) Remember you are baptized. You are a child of God and nothing will ever change that. Don't have to earn it, but you should live like a child of God.

(4) You are making more and more decisions, and you need to know every decision has consequences. Some are good, some not so good. Some you can anticipate; but many will catch you by surprise.

But know that the choices you make affect your life, those you love, and sometimes even total strangers.

Many of you asked that we revisit the issue of climate change or environmental stewardship, which is also just quite simply love of neighbor — including neighbors yet to be born. You can think of it as love of grandchildren, if you like. So, like before, I can't give you the answer to fix this circumstance in our world and in our nation. I'll tell you what I think; I'll tell you how I see it. I can't guarantee I'll be right, but I will endeavor to be honest. That's what you have called me to do. If you disagree, don't panic, there's always next week, and I might get better. If you agree with everything I say, don't get too excited, there's always next week, and the wheels might fall off.

Paul speaks of the whole creation groaning under sin. The biblical writers were convinced that human beings and all other creatures are united in a network of shared life. The ultimate redemption of creation does not end with human beings, but includes everything from the aardvark to the zymosan. We are all tied together as creatures

beloved by the creator. What affects some affects all.

Choices have consequences. Sometimes the human choices are destructive for the rest of creation. Of course, when the rest of creation is under duress, it can be very bad for humans. We are connected.

Because this is true, matters of the earth are not just a scientific conversation; it is a faith conversation. But because we are thoughtful in our faith, our faith does not ignore science.

Fifteen years ago, I listened to Dr. Gogineni, a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at KU. He is part of a team that developed a radar to measure the thickness of the ice at the polar caps. In 2004, he shared that the glaciers that rim the Amundsen Sea in Antarctica — a sea approximately the size of Texas — are discharging 60 percent more ice than they accumulate from snowfall. The pace and volume are greater than had previously been understood. This results in the raising of sea levels. He told our lunch group dining on soup and salad, "The ice caps are melting."

The nexus of the problem is CO₂ or carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The CO₂ is essential because it allows

the sunlight to stream through the atmosphere. But the CO₂ keeps some of the heat from reflecting back out. They say when there were 180 parts per million (ppm) in the atmosphere, the earth experienced an Ice Age. The CO₂ in the atmosphere climbed to approximately 280 ppm to end the glacial period. NASA scientists report that in 2013, for the first time in recorded history, the CO₂ exceeded 400 ppm and climbing. Increased CO₂ means heat cannot escape as easily, hence the warming of the planet. NASA says, “Today, we stand on the threshold of a new geologic era, which some term the “Anthropocene,” one where the climate is very different to the one our ancestors knew.”¹

Just over a year ago, we had Dr. John Smol speak here at Village. He is a paleolimnologist. He studies lake bottoms. You know how archeologists dig to uncover how life was in the past. He studies the layers of mud in lake bottoms to learn about the climate through the decades. Evidently the bottom of a lake is like a library of history regarding life through the years. His study confirms increased carbon in the environment. The science is overwhelming. The earth is running a fever and is getting sicker. It doesn't warm in a straight line, so we also hear reports of improved conditions here and there. But the trend is concerning.

You might say, “Wait a minute, Tom, not all scientists agree with that.” That's true. If

you are looking for universal agreement, we won't find it. Of course, we can find scientists who argue against evolution. Some scientists argue that the earth is flat; some argue that we faked the moon landing; that vaccines cause autism ... on and on. We can find scientists who question this, but there is no field of science that questions it. There is a consensus: The planet is warming.

Almost every day now, there is another report, another study, another example to lift up what science has been telling us for years.

Just this year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and NASA released studies to show 2018 is the fourth hottest year on record since scientists began collecting this data in 1880. The only three years hotter than last year, were 2015, 2016 and 2017.

The carbon in the atmosphere matters. We have a telescope at our house, and I enjoy looking at the planets. They are all a bit different. Jupiter is the largest, and it's easy to see her moons in orbit. Saturn has her rings that are beautiful and amazing to me. Pluto was a planet when I was a kid, but several years ago The International Astronomical Union offered a formal definition of a planet, and poor old Pluto got excluded. She's been fired as a planet and is now officially a dwarf planet.²

Venus is unique as well. The atmosphere of Venus is almost all CO₂. On Venus, the temperature is a fairly constant 870 degrees.³ That's hot.

Now, what I have learned from you is that when I speak about this, some of you are disappointed because, in your mind, I don't speak strongly enough about this matter, or I don't speak about it often enough. Others of you are disappointed because you don't agree with the science as I do — or more frequently, you accept the science but recognize that there are no pure ways forward. You may be of the mind that the market needs fix this. Or maybe you worry that drastic efforts to attack this problem could adversely affect the economy. People might lose their jobs. Maybe you worry that real leadership in green efforts could diminish American status in the world.

All of those are important points. And there is nothing simple about this. But I begin with what I taught my children. Every decision has consequences, and when you know what they are, you need to be responsible.

And the truth is, this scientific information is demanding that we live in a way we never have, or we will end up with a world we have never known. And that is complicated, will no doubt result in unintended consequences and mostly, it will just be hard.

The question for us is this: What are our responsibilities when a hard thing needs to be done well?

As I understand it, the matter of the health of the earth is not something we can afford to be casual about. And there are too many, particularly in positions

of power, who are casual about this matter. I worry about this.

When I was in college, I visited my grandmother. She loved me in a way that only grandparents can. There at her kitchen table, we talked about the world. Matters of racism came up. She explained the world as she saw it. I was respectful. But I will never understand how a woman I knew holding so much capacity for love could withhold it from someone who was not like her. I could not understand how being different was equated with being deficient. And the hardest part is she knew better; she just couldn't find her way to live better.

I worry that our children's children will look at us with the same lack of comprehension about what we are doing to the only earth we have. They will say we knew better, we just couldn't find our way to live better.

Something needs to be done, and it is going to require sacrifice. I wonder if we have it in us to do a hard thing well.

Jesus was loved and he was worshipped. But he was also rejected because Jesus clearly wanted us to live differently than we do. He understood that is hard for us.

Some came to him and said, "I want to follow you." And rather than saying, "Welcome, love to have you. So glad you can join our team," Jesus said, "This is going to be harder than you imagine. 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'"

His face was set toward Jerusalem, where everything would be demanded of him. He sacrificed everything because it was his calling, his responsibility.

Faith gives us strength when we are weak. Faith gives us comfort when our hearts are broken. Faith gives us hope when times are hard. But faith also demands. We make choices, we make decisions, and every decision has consequences. Some we can anticipate ... some catch us by surprise, but when we learn what the consequences of our actions are, faith calls us to be responsible.

I was listening to Jon Meacham's biography of George H. W. Bush. In the early 1970s, Bush was ambassador to China, an important resume builder for a man who wanted to be President. But then President Ford asked him to do something: become Director of the CIA. Bush saw this as putting an end to his Presidential hopes. It was not a job Bush wanted, but Meacham records the decision was made with three words: "The President asked." Bush believed that his responsibility was more important than his desired future. He would sacrifice for the country.

We need a sense of responsibility these days — not for ourselves, but for others, for the world, for the earth. We need a sense of responsibility that calls us to sacrifice our desired future for the good of our children's children.

Yesterday Friendship Hall was filled with folks who were

learning, planning and committing to do what they can to make this situation better. They pledged large and small things. They refused to give up hope.

This is going to be hard. The question for us is this: What is our responsibility when a hard thing needs to be done well? Can this be the thing that our children's children will look to us not in dismayed disappointment, but with gratitude and inspiration? It matters because the whole creation is groaning, because every decision has a consequence. We have learned the consequences of our own decision; now is the time for us to find our way to live better.

¹https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/24/graphic-the-relentless-rise-of-carbon-dioxide/

²Univertoday.com "Why Pluto is no longer a planet." This is a fascinating discussion about Pluto and other objects in its orbit that are larger than Pluto.

³Univertoday.com and Space.com, "Planet Venus Facts"

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.