

Earth Day Preachin'

By Ken Ward Grist

Tuesday 29 April 2008

By caring for God's creatures, we avert a second flood.

This is a speech I delivered on Earth Day, April 20, 2008, at the Unitarian-Universalist First Church in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. A software glitch prevented its publication on that day, but I believe it's still worth sharing.

As Kurt Vonnegut once said, "I wish I could bring light ... but there is no light. Everything is going to become unimaginably worse. If I lied to you about that, you would sense that I'd lied to you, and that would be another cause for gloom, and we have enough causes already."

It is true that there are fewer bald-faced lies being told about the state of the earth - even our president now admits that climate change is, well, shucks, kind of a problem - but fewer lies does not mean that there is more truth.

Jim Hansen, the world's foremost climate scientist, is circulating a draft paper arguing that the climate "tipping point" must be reset at 350 ppm of atmospheric carbon, a point we passed two years ago.

If we do not immediately return below that level, Greenland and Antarctic ice shelves will collapse, with a catastrophic rise in sea levels. From the study of ancient ice cores and sea sediment, we now know that sea level change is episodic and quick ... measured in feet per decade, rather than inches per century.

Neither civilization nor global ecosystems can adapt to change this rapid.

Hansen sketches a solution of appropriate scale: immediate halt to burning coal; crash Marshall program to replace it with renewables; limit oil and gas use to known, economically viable reserves; full-scale reforestation and adoption of carbon-storing agricultural practices.

Nothing that we are doing, nor even seriously contemplating, comes anywhere near such massive a transformation, yet every actor on the political stage - including major environmental organizations, "green" corporations, and presidential candidates of both major parties - downplay the terrible realities and trumpet small-scale solutions wrapped in upbeat rhetoric.

We are racing toward the end of the world and have no plan of escape, but it is considered impolite to acknowledge that fact in public.

In private, though, we are more and more terrified - especially those of us who are parents or grandparents.

I know from conversations with my own grandparents how heavily the burden of parenting during the Great Depression fell on their shoulders, but anxiety over earning a livelihood is dwarfed by feelings of parents today, who face the prospect of the very fabric of civilization fraying during the lifetime of our children.

To watch the evening news pass seamlessly from stories about an ice free arctic to nightly business reports enthusiastic about an upturn in oil sector stocks is to enter a rabbit hole where ordinary rules of logic, common sense, and cause and effect are overturned.

Though it pains me to say it, environmentalists bear a good deal of responsibility for the dreamy, Alice-in-Wonderland state we find ourselves in. Two decades ago, we adopted an approach to climate change that could be summed up with the slogan, "Stop global warming and have a nice day!" Even the most recent, most expensive, and most urgent climate education efforts -like Al Gore's "We" - warn that we have a problem, but are skittish when it comes to the bottom line.

We cannot count on environmentalists to come to terms with this terrible reality, nor are corporate leaders or politicians likely to step up to the plate, but there are good reasons why religious leaders and communities of faith can and must do so.

Three reasons are particularly important:

First, we can't leave apocalypse to those who find it seductive. As things begin to go haywire, the cockamamie "End of Days" eschatology will be buttressed and made more appealing. "End of Days" believers are the folks who are looking forward to global catastrophe, which they believe signals that the time is at hand when a handful of true believers will be whisked directly to heaven.

A 100-foot Jesus will then appear over the Temple Mount – presumably reaching down with one huge, sandaled foot to brush off any Muslims still hanging around - and all those "left behind" on earth will choose up sides for Armageddon.

Anyone sitting in Unitarian-Universalist pews can pretty much count on being "left behind," in the view of these folks, but I don't think this should be a great worry. The "End of Days" is so antithetical to Christian word and spirit that this splinter theology must be considered "blasphemous" in the old-fashioned meaning of the word. I think the Austin Lounge Lizards song "Jesus Loves Me, But He Doesn't Love You" sums it up best.

Apocalypse is not the last gift of a vengeful God, and we need to challenge the misguided and spiritually cramped who proclaim that it is.

Second, to avert cataclysm, we must give up dirty, expensive, and finite sources of energy for clean, free renewables and make that transition available to all peoples of the world, irrespective of their ability to pay for it. It is in our interest to do so.

Once this is accomplished, we may move on to solve other global problems waiting in the wings, like the shortage of potable water or impending collapse of ocean fisheries.

Thus, by avoiding cataclysm, we will set out on a new road that holds out promise of a happy, productive, and secure life for all people, while averting destruction of the few remaining wild things and places.

Seems like a easy call, so what stands in the way?

Greed, for one. Foolish consistency, selfishness, murderous anger, folly, and the lust for power as well.

We are not engaged here in a public policy debate. This is the old, familiar, fundamental struggle between good and evil, between things of the world and things of the spirit, between the principalities of war and peace, between that which is godly and that which is satanic.

It is a clash between the best and worst in our natures, a reality that has been obscured in the measured, moderate, negotiated outcomes of our representative democracy. To save our world and our skins, we must cut through the gray fog of collective irresponsibility, planned obfuscation, and policy relativity and cast things in black and white.

Third, as a practical matter, no global solution is possible without the leadership of the U.S., the world's sole superpower. The current U.S. climate agenda of advocates and activists is entirely focused on reducing U.S. carbon emissions, but that objective is too small. Our goal must be to bring the full weight of American power, capital, ingenuity, technical acumen and, yes, military might, to bear in a desperate, last-minute drive to avert cataclysm.

In a civic landscape of bloated SUVs and war for oil, this may seem impossible, but it is the genius of America that in times of great need we are able to shrug off the shackles of indolence, introspection, and greed and act quickly, with purpose and great self sacrifice.

Every great surge of democracy and expansion of human rights in our history has been achieved by political and sometimes military means, but a moral groundwork was first laid by communities of faith. It required a civil war to end slavery, but that war could not have been fought until slavery was first understood as immoral.

And in each evolution, the Bible has been reinterpreted.

I suggest that in the story of Noah, the flood, and God's covenant of the rainbow, we find the keys to a theology of hope with a very practical application.

After the flood waters recede and Noah offers thanks, God grants dominion over all living things to Noah and his generations and promises never again to wantonly flood the earth. As a token of this covenant, God sets a rainbow in the clouds.

The deal is not between God and Noah alone. This is three-party contract, which includes "every living thing upon the earth." The tripartite nature of the covenant is reiterated no fewer than six times in 19 consecutive verses of Genesis (8:21, 9:9-10, 9:12, 9:13, 9:15, 9:16, 9:17).

"And the bow shall be in the cloud," says God, "and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth." (Genesis 9:16)

Why is this meaningful? It emphasizes that God's promise to refrain from destruction covers humankind and all living things. Though not explicit, that promise is binding on Noah and transfers with the power of dominion.

Small echoes of that covenant resound through both books of the Bible. When Jesus is baptized, the spirit of the Lord descends in the form of a dove (as it did for Noah), and Satan appears to drive Jesus into the wilderness for the first temptation - but he is not alone. According to Mark, Jesus "was with the wild beasts."

We, Noah's descendants, have broken the covenant because we have not, as God promised, refrained from destroying other living things. Extinction rates continue to climb from over hunting and fishing, habitat destruction, and climate change. If God's attorney brings this to his client's attention, then God may decide that he is no longer bound by the covenant - in other words, he's free to flood again.

If, however, we accept our responsibility for all living things – just as we came to accept that no human being should be owned by another – than we will be moved to precautionary action, not on our own behalf, but because extinction of God's creations is unthinkable. We must take immediate action to halt the certain death of all coral reefs within a couple decades, for example.

By caring for God's creatures, we fulfill the terms of the covenant and avert a second flood.

We live now in twilight years before the storm, like the peoples of Europe in the years before World War II. Our leaders are desperate to avoid direct confrontation, just as the democracies sought to avoid confronting Hitler.

But there is no escape now, as there was none then.

We do not know what event, the equivalent to Pearl Harbor, will blow America out of our complacency - two Katrina-level hurricanes crossing Florida in one year would probably do it. But that moment will be our greatest opportunity to turn America - and through America, the world – onto a livable path in keeping with the rainbow covenant.

It will also be a moment of chaos and fear, and there will be great pressure to turn to crackpot, quick-fix technical schemes, like lofting billions of small Mylar balloons into orbit between the earth and the sun.

To survive, to choose civilization over barbarism, requires people of compassion, courage, and righteousness, who have the strength to stand unbowed and unafraid against powerful forces. We are those people.

So ... we have a lot of work to do. Let's get cracking.

Oh, one last thing. I don't know about you, but I'm keeping a sharp eye on the sky on rainy days!