

Where Are We From?

A Sermon for Earth Sunday by John Pitney and Friends

Graphics by Lisa Young

May 3, 2009

This is our 10th Earth Sunday. By the song of the flute, we have been called here. And all we have to do today is answer one question:

Where are we from?

I'm from here. And I'm not just talking about my ancestors coming on the Oregon Trail in 1853. We're all *from* here. In our history and our memory, in the tissues of our bodies we can trace our ancestry to the same mud that greeted Eugene Skinner (founder of Eugene) and his clan, to the same flood plain where the Kalapuyans harvested salmon and camas for a hundred generations and burned the prairies to coax the elk down from the foothills long before our children breathed the smoke of wetland fires. We are from here. We are made of this place and everything we can smell and touch, hear, taste, see, feel and think. This, here, is "flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones." (Genesis 2:23)

And this is the story of our faith. We're formed of the same bedrock as the river, watered by the same snows, sheltered by the same forest, our lungs breathing ancient air. All of us, even those who've been here 6 generations are latecomers. We're all late-comers. And whether we've been right here for an hour or 100 generations, we're formed of this swamp and this watershed, her sacred gifts provide both life and death, trust and toxicity. For people of the Jesus-story, this locality is the material Body of Christ, the cosmic Body of Christ. The sacrifices of this place honor us with warmth and light, transport and privilege. This locality is "bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh."

And it is no different for us as a church community. As Glenn Biehl (our lay leader) and our church leaders helped us celebrate our 40 years in this building last Sunday, wasn't it striking to hear the story of how much we, as a congregation have invested in this place. We were formed before cityhood; our forebears, when it was time to move from the old building on Willamette Street made an intentional decision to remain in the heart of the city and not to go build on the hill. So we're still here in the swamp. It's part of our sacred memory. We have made a heavy investment in staying put here, to be in this very spot and to become a well-known membership where the community gathers. But today we come to acknowledge that this isn't, first, about what we've invested in this place in Creation. It's about what this locality has invested in us.



It's about our place in God's dream for the family of kinships in the whole Creation. Let's think of that. If you're sitting where you can (some of you), get close to one of the immense concrete beams that shape our cathedral. Stand and put your hand on the cool surface for us. Ever stop to think how the mighty Willamette has shaped us? Bedrock carved and rounded by falls and floods has become the rock and sand that, combined with the ingenuity of our human community birthed these pre-

stressed beams that shelter us in this temple. Our sacred building is a child of the River.

And of course the river keeps on sacrificing to generate the electricity, without which we couldn't see each other so well or hear the message of the Very Goodness (Genesis 1:31) of all life. Since 40% of the electricity we consume in the Pacific Northwest is generated by burning coal, we are also indebted to seams of life laid down for us by this spinning rock millennia ago, extracted at great price to light our little moment.

But the biggest way we participate in the sacred web is in the heating of this building. How many of you know that our building is heated with steam generated at the plant over on the river and piped under the street to us? In 1932 Eugene built the steam plant to generate electricity by burning wood to fire boilers to make steam to run generators. In 1940 the steam distribution system was built and as it developed, steam from the plant was piped to as many as 300 downtown buildings. About the time this building was built in the 60's, the steam was generated exclusively from lumber mill wood waste that, until that time was being just being burned up in those big wigwam burners. When you think about that system, it was a pretty good way to honor our place by working within God's living systems to make the best use of the sacrifice of the forest, especially when before it was all being thrown away. For 20 years in this building we did a pretty good job of honoring our ancestry in the ground in the way we did our heating. In the 1980's EWEB replaced the wood-fired boilers with ones fired by Natural Gas, cleaner burning but dependent again on the fossil sacrifice of the world. How do we know all this? Because we've been paying attention. And today it's becoming more and more important for us to know all we can about our membership in

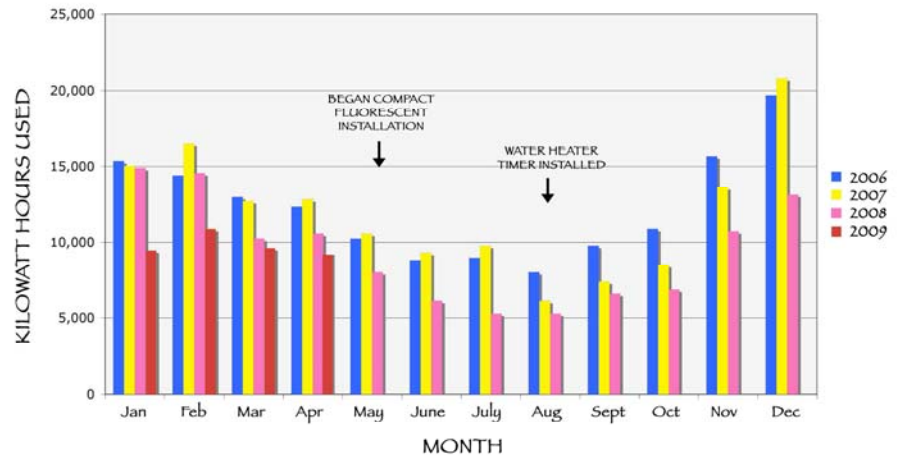
this Body and what ordinary everyday activities like lighting and heating endear us to the place to which we belong.

I am so proud of our congregation. 3 years ago, we really started paying attention to how we live in this sacred space. We paid energy engineers to show us how we use electricity and steam. First thing we discovered was that we were heating water 24 hours a day, 7 days a week even when we weren't using it. We took care of that with a \$50 dollar timer. What a concept.

WE TURNED OFF WATER HEATER DURING OFF HOURS

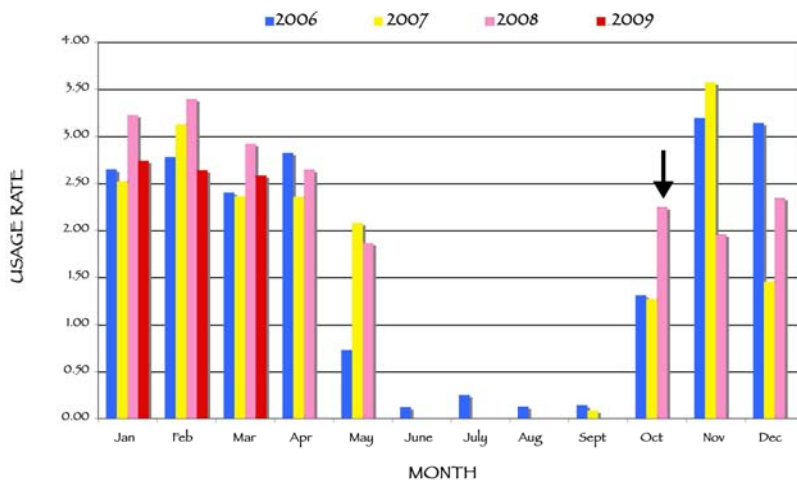
WE REPLACED BULBS WITH COMPACT FLUORESCENTS

ELECTRICAL USE CUT 20%!



WE TURNED SANCTUARY THERMOSTAT DOWN (10°F.)

STEAM USE CUT 20%!



Then we did what God's stewards do, we switched our lights to bulbs that consume less and I'm sure you can see from the graph that we reduced our electrical consumption by ~20%. And we graphed our steam use and we learned that we could turn the heat in this room down 10 degrees lower when we aren't in here and we saved 20%.

FROM THE REGISTER GUARD

Lighten up on your energy costs. If you want to save money or improve your lighting, be smart. Call EWEB Energy Management Services and ask us about *Energy Smart Improvements, cash rebates, incentive programs, tax credits and low-interest loans.*

These businesses recently installed energy efficient lighting and saved more than 20% on their electric bill.



- Galifco Oregon, Inc.
- Net Sales, Inc.
- Woodruff Nursery
- R & G Properties
- Graffiti Alley
- First United Methodist
- Overhead Door Company

WE HAVE BEEN
RECOGNIZED!!!!



We even got honored by EWEB with several others in Eugene for saving the most energy. And let's think for a second. Because the theology I'm talking about is the very materialistic piece of our faith story.

The Psalm says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain." I take that to mean even in the most ordinary task of constructing and maintaining a building, God's standards apply. The question isn't so much about the beauty of the architecture as it is about how our living here reminds us of where we're from. In the same way, energy saving for Christians isn't first about reducing our power bills, it's about honoring our kinship with the ground, loving our neighbors and living out our God-given stewardship.



In a time of catastrophic climate change when all our neighbors are at risk, it's about reducing the emissions of carbon we put into the atmosphere. And so I want to report to you, that our resident scientist, Lisa Young, has calculated that just the reduction in our use of electricity, has kept **15.3 Metric** tons of carbon from contributing to global warming which is the equivalent of taking **3 cars** off the road-- and that's just talking about electrical use, not our biggest use, which is the steam.

Applause!

But ultimately, this story is about Communion. In a book called “6 Stories of Membership” Wendell Berry says it’s always been about Communion. He says, “The way it is, everything is part of everything else, we’re all members of each other. The only difference is some folks know it and some don’t.” We have to be the ones who know.

Our family received this sourdough from a friend in Alaska and we’ve been keeping it alive for 28 years. 28 years of pancakes, cinnamon rolls and sourdough bread! In fact, in a few minutes we will share Communion bread made of this sourdough because it holds within it a shared memory in the story of a particular place in God’s Creation, in fact in the Broken Body of God’s Creation.

Alaska



This sourdough comes from the kitchen of an Alaska Native family in a village called Shishmaref. The Inuit people there have lived in this place on the edge of the Bering Sea for thousands of years.

It can be a really cold place.





It is a tight-knit community where the cultural ways of hunting, fishing, whaling and skin-sewing intermingle with life on the internet, modern public schools and cable TV.

The sun has risen and set on times of feast and famine and through all of it, the people have held kinships together and learned how to survive on shifting tundra and ice flow.



Today, however, the future of Shishmaref and its people is in jeopardy from changing climate, and warming ocean waters. In a colder time, ice would begin to form in early fall creating a buffer between the village and the violent storms of the early season.

As ocean waters warm, the sea ice is forming 3-4 weeks later and now there is no



protection from the fall storms, so the fragile land under this ancient village on the edge of the Bering Sea is eroding ...

and their homeland is sliding into the ocean.



The people are making plans to relocate Shishmaref. The headquarters of the relocation project are in the basement of the village church. Soon they will have to move everything, even the bodies of their ancestors, who speak to them from the past and inform their every future choice.



Of course the story of Shishmaref is just the tip of the iceberg of the global Armageddon which keeps exposing the inconvenient truth that we humans can alter other parts of the Body of Creation without altering our own members.



You see, it *is* ultimately about Communion. The global crisis of climate gives us as humans an opportunity never before offered. Never before. To comprehend where we're from and finally get it, that we in God's green earth are truly members of each other.

It's hard to imagine any of us, in this time, having the audacity to deny that how we live in our locality in Eden has the ability to undermine life as God intended in all other places in the Garden.

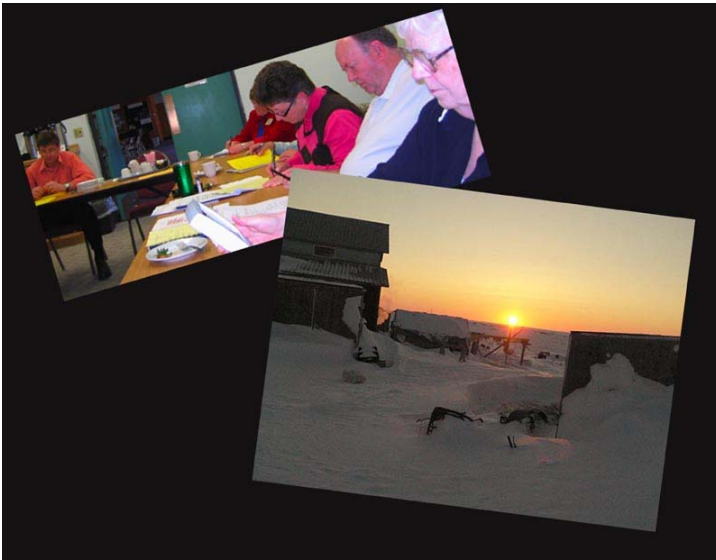


By now, most of you will know that the Eugene Water and Electric Board (E.W.E.B.), within a very few years will shut down the steam system that, as we sit here this morning, allows us to honor God's earth in comfort. We have decided that by this fall we must decide what kind of heating system to buy to replace the steam and we must decide what source of heat we will choose from the sacred earth to do that--and with that decision, we will decide our role in the future of our neighbors, creaturely and human. Since the construction of this building, this is the biggest opportunity we will ever have as a congregation to examine our relationship with the Creator.

One of our wise elders, Wendell Berry, has written:

“To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do it knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, destructively it is a desecration.” Wendell Berry

I would not suggest that given the state of our Body today, it is a simple or easy task to choose between sacrament or desecration in big decisions like these and neither would I say we don't understand the economic realities, especially now. But what we must do as church leaders is honor our deepest connections to our Source in our decision-making journey.



I do believe that what we decide around the Covenant Council table here helps determine in some measure, whether the sun is rising or setting on the vitality of life our Creator imagines for the Planet.

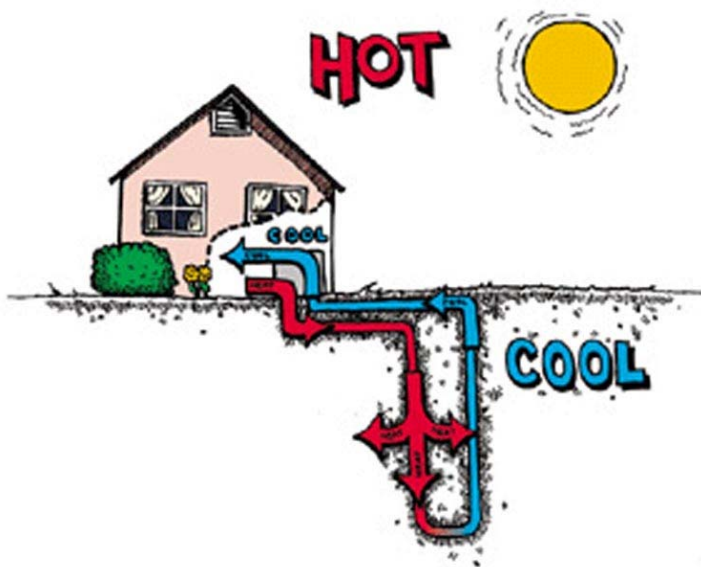
We are still right in the middle of the process of gathering all the information we need to make a careful and faithful decision about how to heat this place in the future. The work is not as glamorous as, say, restoring a wetland or even smelling fresh compost in the garden! It is grubbing around in the bowels of the boiler room with (our building manager) Greg, participating in endless meetings under the leadership of Patt Rollins, Lee Sutton and the Water and Energy Stewardship Team (W.E.S.T.). It is following people like Kurt Sundahl around to other places in the city where serious-minded people are looking for ways to honor the Earth while balancing budgets and economic survival. It isn't glamorous work but it could have glamorous outcomes for the Glory of God and the world God loves.

It's not my place as a preacher today, to tell us what heating system is right, and we don't have nearly enough information yet about what's even possible on our property. I can tell you what we know today about some options and their possible impact on the Body of Creation:

1. We know we can replace the steam system, powered over at the plant on the river by Natural Gas with gas-fired boilers we buy and install here. Replacing an inefficient natural gas system with a much more efficient natural gas system will save us money (though gas prices will continue to climb). This will also reduce our carbon emissions by a small but significant percentage.

2. One of our biggest discoveries is that it might be possible to replace the steam system with one called a **geothermal** (or ground source heat pump) system. This is actually a picture of Kurt and Greg as we looked at the insides of the geothermal system that heats and cools the Southtowne Shopping Center.





The geothermal system is a heat pump that draws the natural heat from the ground to heat and cool a building using a technology that is pictured here but I can only begin to describe today. Suffice it to say, in accordance with God's laws of thermodynamics, the ground holds heat, at a constant temperature of 52-55 degrees and our human geniuses figured out how to sink pipes into the earth and use that heat to heat and cool buildings.

Another option for us is to put solar panels on our roof to go with the other systems to supply part of our energy. What you see is a sketch that was drawn up in the process of working with other congregations last year, through the Solar Congregations project of Oregon Interfaith Power and Light and the Interfaith Network of Earth Concerns. This helps us visualize how a solar system would look on the flat part of our roof.



Of course the elegant thing about both the geothermal and the solar systems is that they cut our carbon emissions and so our impact on God's earth to nearly zero. The bottom line is that they work in harmony with the Creator and honor the ground from whence we all come. The reality is, of course, that we have other bottomlines to consider, ones that include the feeding and care of our families and meeting our church budget. The gas system would be much cheaper to install, but much more costly to our budget and to the fate of the earth in carbon emissions over the long run. The geothermal and solar systems would be much more costly to install, but infinitely cheaper to our budget and more faithful to the Ground of our Being over the long future.

We have much more work to do before we are ready to decide what we will do. But the decision is coming soon, so pray, discuss, learn and hope and, above all remember how much we need each other.

Before we close, I want to invite you to join together with other households of our church, so while we are considering this big decision as a congregation, we are supporting each other to do all we can and be faithful in how we live in our own households. Whether we live alone or with a family, in a house we own or rent or assisted living, there are changes we can choose that will make a huge difference. But

Low Carbon Diet
A 30 Day Program to Lose 5000 Pounds

...save money ...save energy ...save the planet
Be part of the global warming solution!

most of us need the support of community to keep the kind of persistence that will honor our place in the world. Please find your attendance card and turn to the back where there is a place for you to give us important information.

In the fall, our Sacred Earth Initiative Team will offer a the 30-Day Low Carbon Diet, guaranteed to help your household lose 5,000 pounds, that is, make changes in the way you live that will reduce your carbon footprint by 5,000 pounds of carbon a year. This plan works because it is well-designed and your household would join 4-5 other households (no matter if you are single or with a family or where you live). That way you have the support of others with the same commitment working on the same thing together. Our team stands ready

to provide a way this can happen for all of us this fall. All we need to know is if you will consider doing it so we can make real changes together for God. Please take a moment to indicate your interest, make sure your name is on the front and drop it in the offering plate (fyi: some 70-75 households responded).

Brother and sister stewards
of Earth. We know where we're
from. We know the future of our
own children is one with all the
children of earth.



Go with this prayer

Great Creator we are:

One Body of many members
Of one God with many names,
One people of many cultures,
One life with of many creatures,
One place and many localities,
We share many dreams and we belong to one great abundance.
Help us to live with gratitude. Amen

