

Earth Day Sermon—April 22, 2007
“Penguins and Polar Bears – and People, Too”

What a glorious day the Lord has made this second Sunday after Easter!! As a congregation, with *thousands* of other churches nationwide, we are celebrating Earth Day! After church, we will gather outdoors at our newly-planted tree in memory of Ken Lutterman, who loved nature *and* social justice. We'll share environmental resources, and have fun and fellowship amidst the beauty and the bounty of God's creation.

But the question before us Christians today is how can we *celebrate*, be joyful, or have any real hope for our planet and its people when we know, in a scientific age, that God's creation is increasingly at risk from human assaults on the environment -- especially from global warming? The facts are in; the science is straightforward. In January of this year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Global Climate Change, the IPCC, an authoritative group of over 2000 scientists from every nation, including the United States, issued its Fourth Assessment. As in 1990, 1995, 2001, and *again* in 2007, the IPCC concluded, only with greater certainty and with graver tones, that human activity, especially the burning of the fossil fuels -- oil, gas, and coal—is raising the concentration of carbon dioxide or CO₂ in the atmosphere. That causes global climate change. In the 1750s, before the Industrial Revolution, CO₂ made up 280 parts per million of our

atmosphere. Today that figure is up about 36% to 380 ppm and rising steadily, even accelerating. It is now at levels not seen on Earth for 650,000 years. CO₂ serves as a kind of blanket around the Earth, allowing solar radiation to pass through and then blocking reflected infrared radiation or heat from the surface. Until recent times, that allowed us to enjoy the very livable average global temperature of about 58-59 F. But we have already raised the average global temperature by over one degree in the past century, most of that in the past 50 years.

The IPCC reports that we are likely to see another degree of warming in this half of the century and, unless we stabilize or level off CO₂ concentrations at about 450 ppm by 2050, the world will enter a period of unprecedented and dangerous disruption of global climate systems. Unless we act, our children and grandchildren will see increasing sea-level rise, more glaciers melting around the world, and portions of the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets releasing huge amounts of fresh water into the sea. Hurricanes, droughts, floods, the spread of insect-borne diseases will all increase. Small island nations and low-lying ones like Bangladesh will be inundated, and food production will be seriously disrupted, especially in Africa and other parts of the developing world.

We are already witnessing, of course, the early effects of global climate disruption, but the worst is often far away -- droughts in China, floods in India, heat waves in Europe that killed about 50,000 people in the summer of 2003, or a storm like Hurricane Mitch, in 1998, that caused severe rains, flooding, 30,000 cases of cholera and 30,000 more of malaria in tiny Honduras. Ultimately, Mitch killed 11,000 people there. The WHO conservatively estimates that some 150,000 lives a year are lost to just the directly attributable, measurable effects of climate change. For we Americans, who, according to recent polling, still register the least knowledge and least concern about global warming of any nation on Earth, it has taken the devastation of Hurricane Katrina with some 2,000 dead Americans, one million driven from their homes, and hundreds of thousands of our citizens still internally displaced, to pierce the headlines and our hearts.

The *New York Times* called all this “grim.” Some environmentalists speak of crisis and catastrophe. A few have complained, in the style of Old Testament prophets, that the warnings are not grim enough. As Christians, how can we have faith, find Easter resurrection, joy, *hope* in the face of such looming dangers of truly Biblical proportions?

I want to offer hope, not false or cheap hope, but realistic, scientifically-grounded, and Biblical hope.

First, let's recognize and be thankful that we have *indeed* been warned. The prophets of our time, mostly unrecognized and little heeded, have already spoken. And many, many people over several decades now – scientists, environmental organizations, enlightened policy makers, some perceptive journalists, clergy, and lots of local citizens and activists have helped to create those warnings. They began the process of treaties and laws and personal choices that can stave off the worst of global warming. But many, many more people still need to listen, to heed the many ways in which God speaks to us today and has throughout history -- through physical signs and through historic individuals who seem somehow specially chosen or perhaps just particularly attentive and attuned.

One of these is Noah. One of my favorite Bible stories since I was a child, and perhaps yours, is of Noah's ark. And since we are truly modern, we mustn't forget his able and obviously talented partner -- unfortunately only known to us now as Mrs. Noah. – and their three sons and their wives. Together they faced heavy rains, rising seas, endangered species, loss of biodiversity – now frighteningly familiar and grim stuff. Amidst the Flood, God says to Noah and his wife, "Build an ark and then herd every available

species on board!” God promises with signs like a rainbow and a dove that these first environmentalists, our early stewards, will see dry land and that the world will never again be destroyed. But notice that God does not simply reach down and rescue our survivors. He asks them to have faith and to get to work. To build an ark – planks, sails, rigging, holds, steering, the works – and to gather and save the other creatures. It is *human* action that carries out God’s will -- that and a lot of faith, tough choices, and immense talent, skill, and hard work.

It is the same with Moses who, leading the good life in Egypt, is called to lead his people, the Israelites out of slavery. Moses, like a Westmorelander asked to head a committee, says “Who me Lord?” No can do. Too busy, not enough time, talent -- whatever. Try somebody else. But again, the lesson is clear. Moses chooses to accept the call, to lead his people, and with them outwit and outrun a professional army with chariots, make it across the Red Sea at a perilous and miraculous low tide, and then head for the Promised Land. From the Garden of Eden to the Flood to the liberation of Jewish slaves, it is *our* faith in God and *our* choice to act, to work, to carry on, that leads to renewed life, to milk and honey, and to wholeness in life.

And so we come to Earth Day and our own Biblical and scientific crossroads. There are many beautiful passages in the Bible about nature and God's concern for it: from Creation onward we hear that God made the birds and the beasts, the sun and sky and stars—and *us*. Water in the desert, green pastures, lilies in the field, majestic mountains. And all of it, *all* of it, is good. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" says the Psalmist. An early E.O. Wilson, the ancient writer is simply singing, in more poetic language, the glories of biodiversity, of intricate ecosystems, the web of life, a planetary system upon which all things depend.

But I want to stress what both ancient Biblical texts and modern medicine and science reveal as *fundamental* truths. We know today with hard data that *we* are indeed all part of the same Creation. The environment is not just some thing *outside* of us, some Romantic set of lovely flora and fauna that we simply watch out for, and tend. The environment includes we humans as well. Paleogenetics shows that we are indeed all descended from a single ancient Eve (and Adam) and that the breath of God flows around us and through us, as it does all living things. From microbiology and our ability to measure minute trace chemicals in the body, as well as from environmental health studies by Philippe Grandjean and other scientists, we know that a single molecule of a toxin – of PCBs or mercury – can make its

way through evaporation, wind, and rain into the food chain and then into a body in the Arctic -- whether of a polar bear or an Inuit mother. The molecules then cross the placental blood barrier, and harm the development of her beloved baby. I have seen the labored and broken childhood drawings of affected Inuit children from as far away as the Faroe Islands off Greenland – the tragic result of industrial byproducts that keep us comfortable here thousands of miles away.

And so for me, Biblical texts about the environment include not just nature, but those about *people* -- Jesus' teaching to love thy neighbor as thyself, and, in as much as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me. It is this Biblical call to care for *all* Creation -- for the Earth and its creatures and for our fellow *humans*, especially the most vulnerable, that the United Church of Christ and the National Council of Churches call Eco-Justice.

Such Christian concerns caused the World Council of Churches to speak out about global warming in 1991, led to the formation of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment and a religious and scientific summit about climate in 1994, brought Jaydee Henderson of the United Methodists and other Christian social justice leaders to Kyoto in 1997, created a climate change program at the National Council of Churches, and

first brought together mainstream and evangelical Christians at a joint national conference and lobby day focused on global warming in March, 2002. Most recently, our own UCC's Mike Neuroth organized the National Council of Churches Ecumenical Advocacy Days. Some 1,000 Christians traveled to the Capitol to learn and lobby for peace, justice, and the prevention of climate change.

Surely, God is still speaking. My friend Carl Pope, the head of the Sierra Club, apologized some *ten* years ago, at a conference sponsored by Bartholomew I, patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, for the failure of environmentalists to appreciate the faithful environmental actions of many within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Today, the Sierra Club maintains a staff liaison to the faith community and special sections on its web site devoted to Sierra Club members who are church members. Last month, on March 24th, the Club and the Massachusetts Council of Churches organized the first statewide march of environmentalists and religious bodies from Western Massachusetts to the capitol in Boston. And just last Saturday, April 14th, over 1,200 local climate change events and a culminating human montage here in Washington called "Step It Up" were organized by noted nature writer Bill McKibben. Bill is one of today's prophets. His book warning of climate change came out nearly *twenty* years ago. Bill is still at it and still

hopeful despite the dangers we face. So let it be noted that Bill McKibben is also a lay leader in his church, writes passionate sermons, and can be found in the pages of *Christian Century*, as well as in the on-line environmental magazine *Grist!*

Also today, the secular Earth Day Network has provided Christian materials, web sites, organizing, and inspiration that has led to some 10-12,000 Earth Day sermons in churches all across America. That's as if we *doubled* the number of seemingly ubiquitous Starbucks in our land and held a Christian Earth Day service in every single one! And, of course, there are secular Earth Day events and rallies around the nation and another 1,000 lobbyists have descended upon Washington. But the question remains. Does all this preaching, praying, prancing about the streets, and politicking accomplish anything? Will it be enough to matter? I believe it will.

Scientists like Robert Socolow at Princeton tell us we need to cut 7 billion metric tons of carbon of annual emissions worldwide by 2050. That's the amount we are pumping into the atmosphere right now. If we don't change our ways, if we keep on with business as usual, CO2 emissions will reach about 14-15 billion tons, double the concentration of CO2 by mid-century, and bring on those Biblical horrors. Socolow has helpfully divided the task into seven wedges with fifteen different scenarios we could choose

to make those CO₂ reductions. The good news is that a number of recent studies including experts from the DOE Renewable Energy program at Los Alamos have indicated that the paths of energy efficiency, renewable energy, like wind and solar, and increased vegetation to absorb CO₂, could meet the needed cuts to stabilize human emissions and then reduce CO₂ levels to safer levels in the latter part of this century.

Let me repeat. A number of credible studies indicate that recent advances in wind, solar, biomass, biofuels, geothermal, and other renewable energy, along with greater efficiencies in our cars, homes, appliances, buildings, factories -- and, yes, churches -- plus reforestation and greener cities could meet the cuts in carbon that we need. We have detailed plans for *our* Ark -- drawings, hammers, nails, planks, adzes -- the works. All we need to do is have faith, care for creation, and get to work. It is up to *us*. God is still speaking. And, in my view, very, very audibly.

The task is awesome in the true sense of the word. It will require that each of us take personal and collective responsibility to get the job done. I will now publicly repent for my own penchant of resisting change in my personal consumer and carbon choices. I don't like guilt trips, nagging and all those other things that sometimes seem to come with environmentalism. And I also feared, perhaps legitimately, that after taking some simple steps,

like getting compact fluorescent light bulbs, or buying a Prius, Americans might come to believe that individual effort alone is enough, that changes in public policy might not be needed. I now sincerely believe we need *both*. Personal and public policy choices encourage and reinforce each other in a wonderful feedback loop.

It was environmentalists at a PSR conference jointly sponsored by the Pennsylvania Conference of Churches that first convinced *me* that changing a single light bulb can -- in one year -- prevent the burning of 500 pounds of coal in a dirty, coal-fired electric utility. Such old twentieth-century monsters give off huge amounts of CO₂ and toxins and cause asthma, respiratory disease, even heart attacks, leading to about 30,000 premature deaths per year. Or, if you're beyond light bulbs, if every American increased the gas mileage on their car by just 2-3 mpg, whether by personal choice or by improved federal CAFÉ standards, it would entirely eliminate our nation's need for oil from the Persian Gulf. And here in sunny and sometimes steamy metropolitan Washington, just seven well-placed shade trees can cut the need for air conditioning in your home by 20%.

And so I am in favor of even the simplest individual steps, as well as major policy changes, that will prevent global warming. Every pound, every ton of CO₂, however released, stays in the atmosphere for over a century.

The average American home, in fact, releases about 20 tons or *five* times the global average. And we Americans account for only 4-5% of world population, but nearly a *quarter* of all global CO2 emissions. And so here at Westmoreland, as individual Christians, as families, as a church, and as part of a broader environmental and justice movement, we can join with millions of other Americans and many hundreds of designated National Council of Churches eco-justice congregations that have heard and responded to God's call. We can make *choices* and take **action**. Our families can recycle, reuse, take public transportation, car pool, walk, run, jog, bicycle -- to work and as many of you have today --to church. Our church committees can develop plans to make our lovely New England-style building more energy efficient from lighting to appliances to AC. Already, Westmoreland has signed up for clean, green electricity and we are in the forefront of planning energy savings and a green roof for Lincoln-Westmoreland housing.

We can engage in advocacy right here in Montgomery County or DC, in Annapolis or Richmond, and in elections at every level of government. We can join with organizations that have alerted our nation and our world to the dangers of climate change from the Sierra Club to the Natural Resources Defense Council to the Union of Concerned Scientists, and many more. And, of course, we can support and work with the United Church of Christ

which on climate change and the environment, as in so many things, makes us all proud of our denomination's long heritage of justice and reform.

And so, when asked why do Christians care about creation, about the environment, about global climate change? When we are asked if there is any hope in the face of the gathering flood, it is my prayer that you can and will say *yes!!* There is hope if *we* choose to act. God created the heavens and the Earth and all living things and saw that they are *good*. Jesus teaches us that as we have done it unto the *least* of these, we have done it unto him. And we know from faith and modern science alike that we are all *one* people. God's people. We know that molecules from around the globe – for good or ill -- flow around us and through us. God's breath surrounds and supports us all. And throughout recorded history we know it has been up to us *humans* to help maintain the beautiful, bountiful world that God created and intends for us.

And so on this beautiful Earth Day, Earth Day Sunday, let us commit ourselves now to go forth from God's house into God's world with renewed faith, like the stewards of old. Let us joyfully set about building a new ark, a new, peaceful, and sustainable society, where we care for and love and do justice to one another, where we care for *all* creation -- for all creatures great and small, for pandas and penguins and polar bears, and for *people*, too. This

is, after all, the earthly home of *all* of us -- one we know from ancient Biblical truths and from modern science alike – is the *only* lovely, livable planet that -- by God's grace -- we have been given.

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