

## **“Hear the Earth’s Cry”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

I have shared with you this photo before. It is the inside of the Unitarian Church of Okland in Transylvania. The church was founded during the Protestant Reformation around the time in 1568 when the first and only Unitarian king, John Sigismund, issued the first edict declaring religious toleration as the rule of the land.

This was a time when the Catholic church was cracking down on heretics of all kinds including scientists who were developing theories that challenged official church doctrine. Amidst this, the Unitarians of the region affirmed the role of reason and science in religion.

This church has a typical Transylvanian style with a wooden ceiling and beams criss-crossing the ceiling forming squares that are painted with folk-art depictions of things like flowers and plants. But, one of the squares is a little different.

It is labeled “Systema Copernicanum.” Of course, one of the official church teachings of the time was that the Earth was the center of everything and so the Sun revolved around the Earth. Using his own methods of observation and experimentation, Copernicus concluded that the Sun and not the Earth was the center of the solar system. This ceiling panel in the Unitarian Church of Okland shows the Sun, marked with an ‘S’, at the center surrounded by rings depicting the orbiting planets around the Sun.

I can only imagine what it would have been like to be sitting in the pews of that church in the 1500s and 1600s, staring up at that panel. Not just affirming the role of science, but also wondering at the great mystery of the cosmos and our place in it.

Yesterday, of course, was Earth Day. A day to celebrate the beautiful and wondrous gift of this planet and all its life forms and to recommit ourselves to its care.

It was also a day on which thousands of people gathered, in perhaps the first ever, collective political act of protest by scientists. Like the Women's March back in January, the "March for Science" happened in Washington, DC with solidarity marches happening around the country and around the world, including in Montpelier. I know that some of you participated in the march and rally.

I know, too, that many of us lament that in the year 2017 we are having to march to preserve the role of science in our public discourse and policies and for the truth and facts that science helps us to understand, but here we are.

Hundreds of years after that panel was painted on the ceiling of the church in Okland, science continues to be a source of inspiration and also challenge to us as human beings and to our life of faith as Unitarian Universalists.

It is through science, and processes of observation and experimentation, that we gain knowledge of the wondrous world around us.

In this season of spring emergence and growth, we can talk with children about how seedlings become plants, how caterpillars becomes butterflies, and tadpoles become frogs because of science.

And, it is also science that presents us with hard truths that challenge us to face up to our human role in harming our planet - endangering other life and the natural systems that sustain that life.

Perhaps the hardest truth before us is the climate crisis.

The scientific community, of course, has been telling us for decades that the levels of emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases is warming the earth's temperature at an alarming and unsustainable rate. The build up of greenhouse gases and the warming of the planet lead to a number of effects: changing precipitation patterns; increases in ocean temperatures, sea level, and acidity; the

melting of glaciers; changes in the frequency, intensity, and duration of extreme weather events; shifts in the characteristics of ecosystems, like the length of the growing season and the migration patterns of birds; and impacts on our human health and well-being.<sup>1</sup>

There is a lot of information out there that documents and describes these negative impacts and the causes. We know, because of science, for example, that there is a certain range of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that has sustained life on the earth since the beginning of human civilization. 350 parts per million has been deemed a “safe” level, and we are currently at 400 parts per million and we’re adding 2 parts per million of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere every year. Because of science, we also know that in the 136-year record of global temperature, the 10 warmest years have all occurred since the year 2000 with 2016 ranking as the warmest on record.

I have to admit that I don’t follow this news closely, but whenever I do hear the latest news story about the climate crisis, I am overcome with sadness.

Now, part of the reason this may be, is that truthfully, I don’t allow myself enough time and space to really acknowledge the hard facts about this issue and the depth of sadness and despair that truth brings forth. As I’ve talked about and named before, grief in the face of the seeming onslaught of tragic news is hard to face.

Yet, facing these feelings is our first step towards any kind of meaningful action.

An enlightening blog has been put together that compiles handwritten letters from scientists who study the impacts of climate change sharing their feelings about climate change.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Sarah Perkins, a climate scientist and extreme events specialist at the University of New South Wales: “For sometime now I’ve been terribly worried...”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/climate-change-science/overview-climate-change-science>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.isthishowyoufeel.com/> Full quotations not included because of copyright. You can go to the blog to find the full letters.

Dr. Corey Bradshaw, a global changes ecologist at Flinders University in Australia wrote: "My overwhelming emotion is anger..."

There are dozens of other scientists on this blog whose letters share their depth of frustration, anger, and sadness.

For me, it is thinking of the generations to come that most deeply connects me to the pain of this issue.

Yesterday, at the New England Regional Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we sang this song by Linda Hirschhorn, a Jewish feminist and activist:

*Circle round for freedom, circle round for peace, for all of us imprisoned, circle for release.*

*Circle for the planet, circle for each soul, for the children of our children, keep the circle whole.*

We sang this song, and my eyes were instantly filled with tears.

The place that this hits me hardest is imagining a future in which our children and our children's children aren't able to enjoy this same gift of the planet earth. Imagining that we might squander irrevocably the incredible gift of this delicately balanced planet.

But, if I allow myself to just sit with that sadness and that grief, if I recognize that something inside myself feels broken in recognizing the brokenness of the natural world, then I am able to also touch the love for the world that resides beneath this despair.

Joanna Macy writes, "If the world is to be healed through human efforts, I am convinced it will be by ordinary people, people whose love for this life is even greater than their fear, people who can open to the web of life that called us into being, and who can rest in the vitality of that larger body."

We are called in this moment to allow our love for this life to be greater than our fear and to respond to the web of life that calls us into being.

This is a time of action towards healing and wholeness for our planet.

On Saturday, April 29th, the 100th day of the current presidency, thousands will participate in the People's Climate Mobilization, a march for climate, jobs, and justice.

The mobilization has a number of goals, including:

- Advancing solutions to the climate crisis rooted in racial, social and economic justice, and committed to protecting front-line communities and workers,
- Protecting our right to clean air, water, land, healthy communities and a world at peace, and
- Funding investments in our communities, people and environment to transition to a new clean and renewable energy economy that works for all.<sup>3</sup>

As these goals suggest, serving human need and protecting the earth go hand in hand. And, these goals are certainly in line with our 7th principle in which we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence.

For any of you traveling to Washington, DC or participating right here in Montpelier next Saturday, I want to share my gratitude and extend a blessing to you on your journey. There will be many Unitarian Universalists across the country and the world participating, and I hope that we will be joining this broader movement and mobilization.

Throughout the past month, Unitarian Universalists around the country have been participating in a Climate Justice Month, from World Water Day to Earth Day. This year, they've added on an extra week to lead into the People's Climate March next Saturday. One action being promoted by Climate Justice Month is to write letters to Congress to urge them to fully fund the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Information on how to

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<sup>3</sup> <http://peoplesclimate.org/>

participate in this letter-writing campaign will be at the Social Responsibility Committee table after service.

And, there are, of course, a number of ways each of us can be involved locally. You can participate in next month's annual "Bike or Walk to Church" month and reduce your own carbon footprint in coming to church. You can participate in efforts to continue to make Montpelier a sustainable city.

If we start from that place of love, each of us can find those ways we move through our fear and embrace our place in the web of life and our role in healing the world.

In the spirit of opening to the web of life and the vitality of that larger body, I share this story of the gray wolves of Yellowstone National Park.

By the end of the 1930s, the gray wolf in Yellowstone National Park had been hunted to eradication. In the decades that followed, the elk population exploded, and with free reign they grazed away the landscape of young brush and trees. Scientists began to become alarmed at the degradation and worried about erosion and plants dying off.

They began to explore the idea of bringing Canadian wolves to the park and first did so in 1995. And, when wolves were re-introduced into Yellowstone, something remarkable happened.

First, the wolves began to prey on the elk, but the elk also started to move out of the valleys and so these areas began to regenerate. Bare valleys became forests of aspen, willow, and cottonwood. Birds started moving in. The numbers of beavers started to increase because they, of course, like to eat trees. And, the dams that the beavers built, created habits for otters, and muskrats, ducks, and fish, reptiles, and amphibians. The wolves also preyed on coyotes and in response the numbers of rabbits and mice started to rise which meant more hawks, weasels, and foxes. Ravens and bears started feeding on the elk carrion left behind by the wolves and so their populations grew.

The wolves even changed the behaviors of the rivers. There was less erosion and so they began to meander less and their channels narrowed. The regenerating forests stabilized the banks so that the rivers became more fixed in their course. There was also less soil erosion in the valleys as the wolves drove the deer out of those areas and the vegetation stabilized as well.

The wolves transformed an entire ecosystem and even its physical geography.<sup>4</sup>

This effect is called trophic cascade - the cascading effects that result from changes at the top of the food chain downwards.

When it comes to addressing the climate crisis, we must come to terms with the ways our human activities and fossil fuel consumption continue to set off cascading effects on our global ecosystem. We can instead choose to interact with the larger web of life as stewards in ways that allow for the earth to respond with the resiliency and beauty we witness and stand in awe of.

Our planet and the ecosystems within it operate in incredible and delicately balanced ways. While we can understand these processes through scientific research, that knowledge does not take away from its beauty or sacredness.

In fact, our ability to learn from science and to reflect on and change our human actions to respond with care is beautiful and sacred.

Let us embrace our role in the sacred web of life so that we might bring healing, wholeness, and balance to ourselves and this earth, our home.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.yellowstonepark.com/wolf-reintroduction-changes-ecosystem/>