"Choosing This Earth, Our Home"

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 24, 2021

Readings

Notes from a Climate Victory Garden by Louise Maher-Johnson[1]

…Remember: Everything is connected.
Everyone lives downstream and downwind.
Reimagine: Deep conservation, cooperation, and community.
Rebalance: Nature with nature. Mimic her. Sense her. Be her.

Selection from "Loving a Vanishing World" by Emily N. Johnston in All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis

"...we have also been granted an astonishingly beautiful gift that has never before been given to humans: the chance to shepherd human and animal life into the coming centuries and millenia, when we know that much of it would otherwise disappear. That's a power that should make us very humble and a privilege that can motivate us profoundly. In a way, our darkness--the knowledge that without our great effort, many or most of Earth's creatures will vanish--is what reveals the light within, the seed of life and possibility that we share with all of Earth's life, the one that we can carry forward. For better or for worse, we are the ones at the intersection of knowledge and agency."

Sermon

Two friends of mine were among the many couples over the past year and a half who had to delay their wedding due to the pandemic. Early in September, they were finally able to have their ceremony in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. My spouse and I were very excited to attend and to be present for this significant occasion for two dear friends. We also each had important roles - my spouse as a groomsman, and I as the wedding officiant.

[1] Full reading is not included due to copyright. Please click on the link to find the full poem.

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The night before our early morning flight was to leave Burlington I received a dreaded text message at nearly midnight. Our flight had been cancelled. I have done enough air travel to know that there could be any number of reasons for this cancelation, but bad weather was a likely one.

I quickly went online to try to figure out what might be going on here in Vermont or in New York City, where we were supposed to make a connection to a flight to Denver.

This was four days after Hurricane Ida had made landfall in Louisiana on the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane's powerful winds, heavy rainfall, and tornadoes caused catastrophic destruction. As the hurricane moved eastward, it was downgraded to a tropical depression but still poured down a stunning amount of rainfall.

It turned out that New York City was in a state of emergency due to the unexpected severity of the storm. Flooding was overtaking city streets. People were being stranded on public buses. Some people even lost their lives.

Given our important roles in this wedding, we were determined to make it to Colorado, and we booked another flight that avoided the storm's path.

Climate disruption is happening everywhere. The inconvenience that my spouse and I faced was minor in comparison to the ways so many people and so much of the natural world is experiencing the devastating impacts of climate change. These impacts are having an out-sized effect on people with fewer financial resources who are already living in environmentally compromised communities.

Just before Hurricane Ida made landfall, Vermonters commemorated the 10-year anniversary of Tropical Storm Irene which many of you lived through. Many of you and your neighbors, family, and friends, know first hand what it is like to live through an extreme weather event - how much can be lost and how our wherewithal to pull together can be put to the test.

From the multitude of disastrous weather events to the more subtle seasonal changes we are witnessing year after year, we know that climate change is not part of some distant future. It is here now.

We also know that, in the months and years to come, if we do not take bold action now, the natural balance of the Earth's systems will be pushed to further extremes. A recent study in Science magazine concludes that, if we simply maintain our current climate policy pledges, children being born now will experience extreme climate events at a rate that is two to seven

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times higher than people born in 1960.[2] The wildfires, droughts, flooding, and extreme heat will become far too common.

We cannot deny the role that we, humans, have played in dramatically altering the Earth's delicate balance. Over the last 30 years, human-caused emissions have increased by 60% even though we have known for decades that greenhouse gas emissions, largely caused by the burning of fossil fuels, has been unsettling the Earth's natural systems.

The Earth is a marvelous and somewhat mysterious planet. We don't yet know scientifically just how it is that the Earth has managed over billions of years to remain a place that can sustain life. We have pieces of the puzzle, but not the whole picture.

One theory that has been put forward is called the Gaia Hypothesis, which posits that the Earth is a single, self-regulating system in which living organisms as well as inorganic elements are connected and working together to maintain a habitable planet.

The Gaia Hypothesis as a scientific theory developed fairly recently in human history, but it has resonances with the mythological and spiritual views of peoples over millenia. Indigenous peoples have long understood the Earth as a spiritual being whose messages of balance and harmony people can listen to or ignore. And, Gaia, was among the primordial deities of ancient Greek mythology who personified the Earth.

Our relationship to the Earth is deeply rooted in human culture and spirituality. Our ecological relationship to the Earth is also made clear through our scientific understandings which point to our role in maintaining or disrupting those systems.
And this is where we have an incredible opportunity even in the face of so much we have not yet gotten right.

Emily Johnston writes, "we have…been granted an astonishingly beautiful gift…the chance to shepherd human and animal life into the coming centuries and millenia, when we know that much of it would otherwise disappear. That's a power that should make us very humble and a privilege that can motivate us profoundly."

How might we still respond to this astonishingly beautiful gift? This chance to support life now and into the future?
What is the relationship that we want and need to have with the Earth?

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[2] https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abi7339

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Can we, will we yet make the shifts necessary to shepherd life now and for future generations?

Rabbi Yonatan Neril, who directs the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development has said, "The ecological crisis is not a crisis of the birds and the bees or the trees and the toads. It's a crisis of how we live as spiritual beings in a physical reality."

Rabbi Neril points to the inner work that is necessary for us to address this moment of crisis. This inner work involves, in large part, re-examining our relationship to the Earth.

The environmentalist Jane Goodall writes: "If we respect nature, if we respect animals, if we respect one another, things would be very different. I want a future where we've learned to live in harmony with the natural world, where we develop new ways of living, ways of growing food, ways of making money…We need to realize that we're part of this natural world and our lives depend on it."[3]

This new way of living builds on ancient wisdom and a deep-seated awe for this planet we call home.
This new way of living builds on the kithship we each feel with the particular patch of earth you call home and all of the earthly inhabitants within that corner of the world.
This new way of living builds on an expansive kinship we have with one another across differences of age, race, gender, ability, and class.
This new way of living rejects and resists the extractive and exploitive status quo of our predominant economic system and instead embraces cooperation, equity, and ecological sustainability in which all life can thrive.
This new way of living rethinks, relocalizes, revives, reimagines, and rebalances.

The other aspect of inner work that is needed to face the climate crisis is sustaining our hope.

Jane Goodall has just published a new book about hope, and in speaking about the book, she says that hope grows with action.[4]

Action is happening on a global scale. Beginning on October 31st governmental and civic leaders, activists, journalists, and everyday people will converge in Glasgow, Scotland for the 26th gathering of the signatories of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change - a meeting referred to as COP26. At this gathering, the parties will make further

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[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2021/10/19/jane-goodall-book-climate-change/

[4] https://www.npr.org/2021/10/18/1046952409/jane-goodalls-the-book-of-hope-explains-how-hope-can-grow-with-action

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commitments to meeting the standards set in the Paris Climate Agreement to hopefully avert a global temperature rise over 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Closer to home in our nation's capitol just two weeks ago, hundreds of indigenous, frontline climate leaders and other climate activists gathered on Indigenous People's Day and engaged in civil disobedience in the week that followed to call on the Biden administration to put an end to fossil fuel projects. Consider this - If just 24 proposed oil and gas projects in the United States were canceled it would cut our nation's emissions by 1.6 billion metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions every year - that's one-fifth of our emissions in the year 2019.[5]

All of this action grows my hope. And, I believe we can build enduring hope within ourselves through the actions we take, especially at the local level with friends, neighbors, and as a church community.

The other thing Jane Goodall said about hope is that hope grows when we take action locally and then notice how others all around the world are doing the same. Taking action and making a different where they are.

Hope grows with local action because that is often where we can best see and feel the difference we are making. Local action takes many forms. You can take local action on your own in choosing more sustainable forms of transportation that don't rely on fossil fuels, or in growing gardens that support healthy soils and absorb rain water.

And, it is local, collective action that will continue to push the levers of social, political, and economic change that are so needed to address the climate crisis.

Here in Vermont, our state legislature passed the Global Warming Solutions Act in June of 2020. To meet our goal of cutting climate pollution in half by the year 2030, the state is now working towards creating a Vermont Climate Action Plan which will guide efforts to cut carbon pollution and prepare our communities for a changing climate.

This plan has the potential to open many doorways to that new way of living that averts the worst of the devastation we can foresee and embraces the still possible future of generations upon generations surrounded by the beauty of this Earth, our home.

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[5] https://grist.org/politics/report-biden-has-the-power-to-prevent-1-6-billion-metric-tons-of-emissions-annually/

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We can act together to draw upon clean and renewable sources of energy to get around and to heat our homes, churches, and schools.
We can act together to improve the health and resilience of our ecosystems and to localize our food systems.
We can act together to build racial justice and equity into land stewardship and the greening of our economy.

All of us are needed, all and every one, as the song says.

Any action, however small it may seem, can grow hope and move us toward a new way of being in relationship with the Earth, with each other, and with the whole of life.

May we choose to do our part.
May we find strength and hope in one another.
May we remember that we are the turning tide.
All and every one of us
All and every one.

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