

“Climate Justice, Climate Hope” (18 Apr 2021)

Genesis 1:1-2, 20-31;

A sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

Prayer: Holy God, we come before you today in praise and thanksgiving for the wonders of Creation. All that you have made is holy. All that lives does so by your will. All that sustains life is blessed by your word. Help us today to appreciate the goodness, the holiness of what you have made. May we open our hearts and minds to hear what you would say to us today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The title of my message today is “Climate Justice, Climate Hope.” I’ve wanted to preach about this topic for some time for a couple of reasons:

- For one, the climate is in the news a lot these days. We can’t help but see and hear about it from stories we read in the newspaper or see on TV about damage being done to the environment around the nation and the world.
- Another reason to speak on this topic today is to think about a Christian response to what’s going on with the climate. I know there are a lot of opinions on what we should or should not be doing about it, but I believe the Bible guides us toward a particular role as caretakers of this world.
- Finally, I want this message to be a word of hope in a dark place. Most of the stories we hear about the environment are stories of disaster, doom, and gloom. I don’t think we need to be so negative. After all, we are a people who place their hope in the God who made us in God’s own image. We must never lose hope because, well, the Bible tells us so.

Beloved, we have navigated some serious challenges over the past few years. And we faced them. We draw our courage in this from God. We might remember the words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to his young protege, Timothy, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7). We can overcome many things together so long as we rely on God.

You all know some of the challenges we have met as a church:

- In 2015, we set out to refurbish our church buildings. We created Renovate 185, a fundraising campaign, and over a period of five years, we raised enough money to replace two large air conditioners, replace part of the church’s roof, and in the sanctuary we refurbished the wood floor, installed new carpeting, and painted the room.
- When a need arises, like collecting flood buckets for Mission Central or preparing boxes for Operation Christmas Child, we have come together and done some pretty amazing things in the name of Jesus Christ.

This morning, I’m inviting us to come together again to face another challenge that effects our community and our world.

I think everyone has heard the term “climate change” by now. It refers to the warming of earth’s atmosphere that has taken on an alarming pace over the last 50 to 60 years. For a lot of us, we think of this as something that’s going on across the country—wildfires in California—or in some other part of the world. But if you look around, you can see the damage that’s taking place to the climate and the effect it’s having on our lives, right here in Frederick County.

- One of the things you’ve probably noticed is that our summers are getting hotter and drier. This is creating drought conditions that hurt peoples’ health and livelihoods.
 - o Folks who have respiratory problems, like asthma, are having episodes earlier in the year and for longer periods of time. The people who suffer the most from this are our children and grandparents.
 - o On the farming side, hotter weather reduces pollination of crops, leading to lower yields.

- The warming climate raises the water temperature in the streams and lakes we have in the county, and that poses a threat to the population of gamefish, like trout.¹
- At the same time as the summers are getting hotter, other seasons are seeing more intense rain storms.
 - That means more flooding. According to the Frederick News Post, one storm in May 2018 dropped 6 to 8 inches on Frederick in a few hours causing \$24 million in damage.
 - Farmers feel the impact of flooding too—it delays planting and washes fertilizer into the streams and rivers.²

Clearly, the warming climate is already affecting the people we love, our families, friends, and neighbors, and it is threatening the way we live. I chose the scripture lessons for today because I believe they contain the starting point for us to ponder in our response to climate damage.

The lesson from Genesis is an account of the creation. It tells us God created all that there is—the stars, the moon, the earth and the seas—and every living thing under heaven. A couple of things to notice here:

- God created the birds of the air and the fish and everything that lives in the sea.
- Then God created the animals and everything that lives on the ground.
- Both times when God created, God stepped back, looked at what He had made: “And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:21, 25).

And then, God created us, human beings, in God’s own image, giving us a charge to take care of what God had made: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

That word “dominion” means to reign over, to rule, to exercise power over. For a long time, people interpreted that to mean we could do whatever we wanted with the planet. But God did not give us this “dominion” to exploit what God had made—remember, God pronounced the Creation “good.”

God gave this power to those God made in God’s image in order for us to exercise Godly care, a Godly type of reign over the earth.

The word normally used for this is “stewardship.” God gave humanity the task to be “good stewards” over the Creation. There are times and places where we’ve done this well; and times and places where we haven’t. We are in a time where we are not doing such a good job, and it is starting to show up in rising temperatures that are affecting people here and around the world.

Mostly, the impact of climate damage is hurting the poorest people around the world; the ones who are most vulnerable to its effects. This is showing up as rising sea levels, droughts, and the lack of clean drinking water that are prompting people to migrate into ever more crowded cities and towns. The poorer people and nations of the world, the ones who are least responsible for causing damage to the climate, are the first to pay the price.

In the reading from Romans, we heard about how “the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains,” as it waits for the children of God to step up and fulfill their role as the adopted, redeemed people of God. On one level, this is a picture of cosmic redemption, of how God wills to save humankind through Jesus Christ, and the whole Creation along with humanity. When we hear these words in the context of our role as stewards over the earth, they reinforce the idea that we are the ones to care for God’s good creation. This is what God intended from the start.

The damage we are witnessing from the warming climate is daunting, but there is an image here that gives us hope—it is the image of birth—the creation groaning as in labor pains—the picture of new life, of joy, and of love and care. There is good news about the climate challenges we face: We can do something about climate damage if we work together, as a church, as a community, as good stewards of what God has gifted to us.

¹ Kevin Sellner and Barb Trader, “Droughts become an increasing local concern,” Frederick News Post, Mar 26, 2021, article on internet, https://www.fredericknewspost.com/news/environment/droughts-become-an-increasing-local-concern/article_529f5374-fe3f-5773-b79b-b36eda2845f0.html, accessed 15 Apr 2021.

² Kevin Sellner and Barb Trader, “The new climate’s effect on precipitation and flooding,” Frederick News Post, Feb 25, 2021, article on internet, https://www.fredericknewspost.com/news/environment/the-new-climates-effect-on-precipitation-and-flooding/article_5c3487d2-923a-5b7d-b796-7ac10dd0eb1e.html, accessed 15 Apr 2021.

Our environmental challenges are global, but they are also local, and I want to focus on the local. Together, we can reduce the effects of pollution and create a cleaner, healthier Thurmont and Frederick County. It's time for us to rise above the arguments and work together to fulfill God's vision for a beautiful and healthy world.

So, what can we do that will make a difference? I did a search for some practical steps we can take to help reduce our reliance on the fossil-fuels that are causing climate damage. Some of these things are simple, some are not so simple. All of them can contribute to reducing our reliance on the fossil fuels that are causing the climate damage that is hurting people and affecting our way of life.

The simple things:

- Change lightbulbs to LEDs; they use less energy and last longer.
- Turn down the thermostat in winter, turn it up in summer, this saves power and money.
- Take a day or two off from eating meat each week. (I did not say stop eating meat, just don't eat so much). Livestock produce a lot of methane, which contributes to air pollution.
- Drive less, walk more. It saves on gas and is healthy for you too.
- Recycle.
- Use a carbon footprint calculator to find out where you are using a lot of carbon-based energy and how to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

The less simple things: (These are more costly in the short run but they pay more in the long run). If you can:

- Switch to renewable energy sources like solar or wind.
- Buy a hybrid or electric car.
- Divest from investments in fossil fuels/invest in renewable energy.

The last step we can take is the simplest and the most important: talk about it. Take the time to learn about the changing climate: the causes, the impacts, and the things we can do to make it better. Talk about it with family and friends. Join a local group that cares for the environment like the Thurmont Green Team.

Below are some links to websites that help start you on your journey to learning more about climate damage; I hope you'll take the opportunity to check them out.

I want to end my message today where I began, in praise and thanksgiving to God. Some of you know I've taken to walking a lot more. I go to the Catoctin Mountain Park or to Gettysburg National Park and walk a few miles about once a week. This give me time to think, to pray, to reflect on life, and to enjoy the wonders of God's creation.

Sometimes when I walk, I fear for the future of the natural world I see around me. Will it still be this wondrous when our grandchildren and their children walk the earth? Maybe some of you have had these thoughts as well.

But mostly, my heart is filled with hope because God in Jesus Christ has given me hope that when we work together, we can make a positive difference in the fight to end climate damage. That is our call as stewards and caretakers of God's world, and I pray it will be so.

As I walk the green park trails, breathing in the fresh air, and listening to the birds sing their songs, I sometimes sing to myself a hymn of praise to God, giving thanks for all that I am in the midst of in the natural world.

For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies;
Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.³

May it ever be so.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

³ "For the Beauty of the Earth," *United Methodist Hymnal*, 92.

Resources:

Multi-faith Alliance of Climate Stewards (MACS) of Frederick County, <https://www.macsfrederick.org>.

Frederick County Climate Emergency Mobilization Workgroup (CEMWG), <https://www.mobilizefrederick.org>.

Carbon Footprint Calculator, Environmental Protection Agency, <https://www3.epa.gov/carbon-footprint-calculator/>.

Katherine Hayhoe, TED Talk, “The most important thing you can do to fight climate change: talk about it,” https://www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it?language=en.



View of Thurmont from the Overlook in Catoctin Mountain Park. The middle school is the large building in the center right portion of the picture. Weller’s steeple is visible in the lower right.