

We drink from our own wells

Introduction

I am writing this in the midst of one of the worst heat waves ever to hit the United States, where I live. The hottest spot in the country is over 54C. Temperatures over 40C are afflicting tens of millions of people. Vicious floods near New York – my home region – are destroying roads, railway track beds, and homes. At the same time, former President Trump is preparing to repeal every possible climate regulation if elected, while President Biden – light years superior to Trump on every imaginable issue – continues to approve new oil and gas projects for the sake of “energy security.” Faith communities and high-level faith leaders have, almost universally, not yet made climate change a top priority. I ask, “What do they not understand?”

The most important challenges facing the world today are the urgent need to end new fossil fuel exploration and development, to phase out existing coal, oil and gas production equitably, to ensure universal access to clean, affordable energy, and for wealthy countries and corporations to pay for the climate-induced loss and damage for which they bear responsibility.

These are matters of moral urgency. They will only come to pass if a massive social movement for climate justice relentlessly pressures the world’s powerful governments, finance institutions, and extractive industries. Each of these parties benefits or profits from the status quo. Religious communities must be part of the movement that forces them to change.

Too often, religious communities fear the tension and confrontation involved in social movements, including the climate movement. Too many congregations fear linking faith with current events or politics. They propose individual behavior change because pursuing systemic change simply feels too hard, frightening or dangerous. In some cases, security risks may indeed make it unsafe for clergy or individuals to speak out. But in many, many circumstances, principled opposition to the climate’s destruction is more possible, and more powerful, in the name of faith than in any other way. Becoming socially engaged in the name of our faith can be scary. But for the sake of life, we can and must draw from deep spiritual sources to overcome our hesitancy.

This week’s readings tell us that it is time to wake up, to draw strength from religious rituals that are matters of great significance and require our courage and integrity, and to engage together in behavior that is uncomfortable but morally required.

Many people wonder where to find God in the midst of the climate crisis. This week’s readings point us in the right direction. The traditions of our faith give us strength: the Eucharist, songs of praise and lament, the commandment to love our neighbor and the prophetic traditions all form part of the spiritual wells from which we must drink.

NOTES ON THE READINGS

Exodus 12: 1-14 The Eucharist

14 “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.

The Old Testament reading is God’s direction to Moses and Aaron about the institution of the Passover, the actions that preceded the Israelites escape from bondage into freedom. It also serves to remind future generations of Jews about the ritual they should perform to reconnect with God’s liberating power – as a people. It reminds us that the context of the eucharist, our central ritual which is modeled in part after the Exodus event, is a matter of life, death and rebirth. Just like the Passover unifies and energizes our Jewish sisters and brothers, the eucharist can summon forth our integrity and courage to face the climate crisis and to take action.

The late Bishop Ellinah Wamukoya taught of the importance of the Eucharist for our environmental ministry

- We come not as a group of individuals, but as a community with a common purpose and a common life, we are one body because we all partake of the one bread. “We are one body” – reminds us of our brothers and sisters affected by climate change
- This understanding of communion has however, been limited to humans only, when in actual fact in the Eucharist it is the communion of individuals, angels and archangels and the whole creation. This is the unity which is expressed in every Eucharist. And so we must also hear the cry of the Earth and all God’s creatures
- In the liturgy we are shown that the sacramental materials of bread and wine are products of the earth, and human beings who receive them must take good care of the earth by calling to a halt any form of cruelty against it and ensure its preservation.

Psalm 149 : Songs of lament and hope

For the Lord takes delight in his people; God crowns the humble with victory. V4

This Psalm also points to another source of strength for the journey – worship

The late President Mandela said ‘ “The curious beauty of African music is that it uplifts even as it tells a sad tale. You may be poor, you may only have a ramshackle house, you may have lost your job, but that song gives you hope.” ~ Nelson Mandela from Long Walk to Freedom,

Too often our music in church is individualistic – focusing on ‘me and Jesus’ but when worship reflects the pain of the community, the pain of those suffering most, then songs of lament can give strength for the journey, they bring hope that change is possible.

Romans 13:8-14 The Commandment to love

“Whatever other commands there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Rom 13:9

How can we say we love our neighbor while we ignore the catastrophe that is facing our neighbors, in particular our most vulnerable global neighbors? How can we ignore the cries of our neighbors being devastated by drought and flooding, hurricanes and wildfires?

11 “And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here”.

Eastern religions are best known for the theme of “waking up” as a defining element of spiritual growth. St. Paul here calls on Christians to wake up and “put on the armor of light” to face the challenges of the day. Waking up suggests that we can see things in a different way than has been customary for us, and to act newly as well. In our context, this new-seeing, new-acting life is a means of awakening at a deeper level to God’s love for people and the planet alike.

This passage also reminds us of the urgency – wildfires, heatwaves and flooding are not a future scenario, they are a present reality. And we are reaching tipping points, as temperatures increase we are seeing more wildfires releasing vast amounts of carbon emissions. As the frozen permafrost begins to thaw then methane begins to bubble up from melting organic waste below the ice.

We face leaving a bleak and barren future for our children and children’s children

Matthew 18:15-20 Prophecy

15 “If your brother or sister[a] sins,[b] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over

Confrontation is unpleasant and hard, even when our cause may be right and just. Yet today’s Gospel describes justified confrontation as a necessity. The climate crisis requires confrontation with the world’s powerful governments, finance institutions, and extractive industries. Each of these entities benefits, in various ways, from the status quo of the climate crisis. Finance institutions enjoy profits from oil and gas – which they have financed to the tune of trillions since the Paris Climate Agreement. Extractive industries profit from the continued growth of their businesses at the very time when they should be giving way to clean energy. Some governments benefit by playing to a nationalist, anti-climate, anti-immigrant, anti-women base of support.

Many faith communities, and their clergy, are uncomfortable about confronting these powerful forces. They fear that if they speak out, they will suffer criticism of mixing politics and religion or backlash from certain wealthy benefactors. These fears, while both predictable and

understandable, are hurdles which faith communities must overcome. If it is wrong to destroy God's creation, then it is certainly wrong to profit from such destruction. Religious communities have a responsibility to society, and a sacred duty, to speak out in the face of wrong. Confrontation of evil is part of the prophetic tradition of the church. Now is such a time to raise prophetic voices.

In the words of the late great prophet Archbishop Tutu

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

So as people of faith we are called to act – we draw strength from our traditions from our shared Eucharistic celebration, from songs of joy and lament. We draw on the love we have for neighbors and for our children, and we stand on the prophetic tradition of the saints who go before us.

Wake up! It is time!