

“Grant Us Wisdom, Grant Us Courage”  
Job 12:7-10  
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 20, 2023  
Margie Paynton, Seattle First Baptist Church

## SCRIPTURE

There are many familiar places in the Bible that talk about creation, both in the Old and New Testaments. This one may be less familiar; it comes from the book of Job, chapter 12, verses 7-10, and asks us to seek wisdom from creation itself.

***Turn to the animals and let them teach you; the birds of the air will tell you the truth. Listen to the plants of the earth, and learn from them; let the fish of the sea become your teachers. Who among all these does not know that the hand of Yhwh has done this? In God’s hand is the soul of every living thing; in God’s hand is the breath of all humankind.***

## GRANT US WISDOM, GRANT US COURAGE

Not that long ago, talk of climate change was relegated to the back pages of the newspaper or a filler story on a newscast. Similarly with stories about young people, individuals in particular, making headlines with their protests or programs combating climate change in their communities. But no more. The articles, photographs and commentaries about the environmental crises we face on a daily basis are front and center! They are powerful in scope and overwhelming in number. How do we respond without joining those who believe that we are already too late, and we might as well give up?

I came upon an interesting article written in late 2020 entitled *How Religion Influences Our Relationship With the Environment*. It begins by reiterating that previous research found that religion influences many aspects of lifestyle that affect the environment. Quoting, “These include childbearing decisions and the use of contraceptives (and resulting effects on population growth); risk behaviors and use of health services (which affect life expectancy); whether people see climatic change as human-caused, or related to forces beyond human control; consumption patterns, and thereby use of natural resources and emissions of greenhouse gases; and willingness to take actions to abate environmental degradation.” End quote. An added comment by a reader suggested that one’s beliefs and perceptions regarding an afterlife influence our behavior.

The conclusions of this more recent study found that nations whose inhabitants are less religious tend to use more resources and produce more emissions; ironically, they are also better prepared to deal with resulting environmental challenges, because they are wealthier. Inversely, nations whose populations are more religious tend to use fewer resources, but have less capacity to meet environmental challenges and are subject to more adverse outcomes, in part due to their high

levels of poverty and continuing population growth. In its conclusion, the article states that ‘identifying ways to communicate environmental issues and risks within faith traditions, and encouraging inter-faith and religious-nonreligious collaboration, will be important for addressing future global environmental challenges.’ In other words – shared WISDOM.

Perhaps like many of you, we have evangelical friends that keep reminding us that the earth has endured environmental catastrophes in the past, that these events are part of a cyclical pattern that is all ‘part of God’s plan.’ These same evangelicals believe that our earthly life is just a stepping stone to a magnificent afterlife if we have the right beliefs and say the right words. Our actions during this lifetime have little impact on our place in heaven.

Record precipitation, record draught, excessive heat, rain and smoke, all simultaneously, have accelerated this cycle that is certainly not part of God’s plan. A recent statistic I heard says that in 1980, a billion-dollar environmental event was happening every 82 days. Adjusting for inflation, today, a billion-dollar catastrophe is occurring every 18 days – 18 days. A call – a clarion call – to increase ‘climate literacy’ – climate WISDOM – is overdue.

Will our current efforts be enough to be under the two degree Celsius threshold for global warming? Some say ‘no.’ Does that mean that we should give up and not even try? Are any efforts worthwhile?

Keith Ervin shared with me a link to an interview with Barack Obama, in which he told of a conversation he had with his daughter Malia. She had come to him, telling him that her friends were saying, “What’s the point?” Is there any point in trying to address climate change if we can’t meet this target? She wanted to know what she should tell her friends. His answer included an acknowledgement that we might not meet the two degree Celsius target. If it ends up at 2.5 degrees, it could mean that fewer places are underwater than if we end up at 3 degrees; that fewer than 100 million people globally must seek higher ground or cooler climates. His point to Malia was that ‘incremental changes make a difference.’

Today, there is evidence of those incremental changes, and we are hearing about them in our mainstream media. The victory of young people in Montana regarding their right to a clean environment made headlines. Wind farms are being built in various places around the world to harness energy that already exists.

The church is recognizing that speaking of social justice must include teaching on the environment. Pope Francis made headlines with the publication in 2015 of his *Laudato Si* encyclical on the Care of our Common Home. If you have not read it, I encourage you to look it up see it’s message not just for the Catholic Church, but for all of us. Jesuit priest Fr. James Martin summarizes this document with the following:

- The language of faith now enters the dialogue previously framed using only political, scientific and economic language.
- Pope Francis highlights frequently the disproportionate effect of environmental change on the poor, and the worst impact felt by those in developing countries.

- The Pope takes aim at technology, seen as the key to human existence. He criticizes technological advancement being embraced before considering how it will affect our world. He advocates for moderation and the capacity to be happy with little.
- This encyclical is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching, ensuring that its message will be relevant to future generations.
- Pope Francis reminds readers that the call to care for creation extends back to the Book of Genesis. The lessons of the Bible remain for us to learn from.
- We are reminded that everything is connected – including the economy. A blind pursuit of money that sets aside the interests of the marginalized and the ruination of the planet are connected.
- Widespread indifference and selfishness worsen the environmental problems, leading to the evaporation of the notion of the common good.
- Global dialogue and solidarity are needed to address 'our common home.'
- Finally, the document is hopeful, reminding us that because God is with us, all of us can strive to change course. We can move towards an 'ecological conversion' in which we can listen to the 'cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.'

I consider myself a person of faith, and as such, a person of hope. Hebrews 11:1 sums up my belief that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I keep this sheet from last fall's church gathering to remind myself where I have made progress and where I have more work to do regarding the environment. We are each called to do our part, even if our steps are incremental, because incremental changes add up and make a difference. Continue to reduce our use of plastic and excess packaging and contribute regularly to food banks and agencies that address the needs of the homeless, the hungry and out of work. Make your voice heard, with your emails and letters, with your feet at demonstrations, with your buying habits and with your vote. Don't be afraid to engage in conversation with those of differing opinions; equip yourself with facts – with wisdom – and take courage to step out in faith. Taking these steps will lead to more steps and more wisdom and more courage. I hope to hear more from our Climate Action Group; they can bring us the wisdom and equip us with courage to face the challenges ahead.

To conclude, I invite you to join me in the prayer printed in your order of service, a prayer that Pope Francis wrote to conclude his encyclical. Let us pray in unison:

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe  
and in the smallest of your creatures.  
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.  
Pour out upon us the power of your love,  
that we may protect life and beauty.  
Fill us with peace, that we may live  
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor,  
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,  
so precious in your eyes.  
Bring healing to our lives,  
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,  
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.  
Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain  
at the expense of the poor and the earth.  
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,  
to be filled with awe and contemplation,  
to recognize that we are profoundly united  
with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.  
We thank you for being with us each day.  
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle  
for justice, love and peace. Amen.

### **BENEDICTION**

We conclude our service today in the same way that we began; by giving praise to God for the abundance of creation and our commitment to take care of it.

Hear these words of blessing from the prophet Isaiah, reminding us to keep singing!

*For you shall go out in joy, be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

*Pine trees shall shoot up in place of the camel-thorn, myrtles instead of briers. All this shall win the Lord a great name, a sign for all times. Go out with joy, and be led forth in peace.*

*May it be so.*