

## **“God of Grace, Mercy, Love...and Typhoons?”**

**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**

**November 17, 2013**

As some of you who were with us last Sunday afternoon for the Installation Service will remember, the preacher, Bill Cushwa, told a story about a sermon that I delivered one time. During the greeting line after church, as people came through, one woman came through the line, shook my hand and said “Pastor, if you had given an altar call after that sermon today, I would have been the first one up there.” Then, the next woman who came up said “I don’t come to church to hear that crap”. So, I want to begin with an apology for those who don’t come to church to hear that “crap”. Sorry about that. Second, I’d like to apologize for those of you who would like to come forward today for an altar call because there will not be one; nonetheless, this is the word of God with which we struggle.

On Sunday, July 28th, of this past summer, my brother-in-law and I took Daniel and Abigail over for a week’s stay at Johns River Valley Camp in western North Carolina. On our way up there, we began to notice how the streams and rivers that we crossed were very high and very muddy. Heavy rains had been in the area for the last few days and, stopping along the way to get some gas, I chatted with a local man while we each filled our gas tanks. I said to him, “I see you’ve had a lot of rain here recently:” He said to me “Yeah, you know, I’ve lived here for nearly 40 years and I’ve never seen anything like this.”

This past June 28th, a month earlier, while I was looking through my Facebook postings, I was surprised to see there an article about my hometown of Oneida, New York. It was an article and a video clip about massive rains and flooding that had hit Oneida County in a 36-hour period. Roads were washed out, electricity was down, and Oneida Creek, which runs right through the county, was at an all-time record level, cresting at 6.5 feet above flood stage—all of this in late June. News reporters interviewing local residents heard the familiar refrain “We’ve never seen anything like this before.”

In this day and time, people all over the world are “singing” the same refrain “We’ve never seen anything like this before”, whether it be the 70 wildfires that have scorched Australia in the month of October, just in the recent past, or Super Storm Sandy that hit New York and New Jersey a year ago, or the recent typhoon that cut a swath of destruction through the Philippines. We are now seeing storms and environmental catastrophes on a scale that has never been recorded. The cause of these storms is widely thought to be climate change—that is, the warming of the planet due to the burning of fossil fuels. As to this claim of climate change, I have always been a skeptic. After all, we’ve always had floods, fires and hurricanes, and they are a little more intense these days.

In my skepticism, I began reading the science and the environmental reporting in regards to climate change, and I learned a lot, but it was always from the usual suspects—the environmentalist, Bill McKibben, the climatologist, James Hansen, who has been testifying about the dangers of climate change since 1988, or from bureaucrats and scientists at the United Nations. As you read their reports, you almost know what they are going to say, and it is hard to listen to because, frankly, it is scary.

My skepticism about climate change has begun to change of late. It has begun to change, in part, due to the storms that we have been seeing over the last 5-10 years, but also due to the new voices who are saying yes, we have a problem. These new voices include Rex Tillerson, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Exxon Mobile Corporation, who admitted in June of 2012 that, yes, global warming is real, or John Brown, the Past Chief Executive of BP Oil, who has also publicly agreed, and Richard Muller, a prominent physicist and skeptic of global warming, who spent 2 years trying to find out if mainstream scientists were wrong about climate change, and whose funding for this research came, in part, from the Charles Cooke Foundation, a group dedicated to refuting the claims of climate change science.

Richard Muller came out in October of 2011 in the Wall Street Journal, of all places, and said that there is no reason to be a skeptic about global warming. The earth is, indeed, getting hot.

Finally, putting an end to my doubts about the reality of global warming was the May 10th report from this year from scientists at an observatory in Hawaii, scientists who have been measuring the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere since 1958. In 1958, there were 315 parts per million of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, and these scientists reported in May, that this year, for the first time since the Pliocene Era, that is, the time from 3-5 million years ago, we are now seeing levels of 400 parts per million of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. So, I have slowly, but surely, grown convinced, not only that the planet is getting hotter, but also that the clock is ticking as to what can be done about this.

As a person of faith, who believe that God, the creator of the earth, is somehow in the midst of this big mess, I believe that we need to bring our perspectives and passions into this global warming conversation. So, this morning, I want to struggle with what we have to offer as the faith community.

To do this, I want to go into our readings today—Psalm 29 and the Book of Job. These are wonderful examples of how ancient Israel's writers and theologians understood and imagined God's role in creation. In these writings, everything of an earthly and environmental nature was ascribed to the Lord, so we heard in that psalm this morning that the voice of the Lord is over the waters, the voice of the Lord thunders and flashes forth from fire, the Lord sits enthroned over the flood, and throughout the biblical narrative, there is all this poetry about God's creation and about how God is sort of in it and among it, and the author of it all.

Ancient people, of course, did not have climatologists to tell them how the earth works. They did not have weathermen to tell them how weather patterns form. They did not have Doppler radar in those days, so anything that happened—whether it be earthquakes, fires, floods or hurricanes—were all pointed to as the work of the Lord, or often pointed to as an expression of the anger of God—when God is “ticked off”, we hear thunder.

Not too long ago, Pat Robertson, the host of the 700 Club on T.V., suggested that the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010 was God's judgment on them for making a pact with the devil in order to throw off French colonial oppression that they threw off in 1804, so God's judgment apparently took awhile to get to Haiti.

I share that simple story so that we might want to pay attention and be careful when we enter into conversations about God and global warming. We want to be careful so that we don't look ridiculous.

In the most recent typhoon, in Super Storm Sandy, and in fires, droughts and floods that are happening all over the world, I think, in fact, what we are seeing is God's judgment. We are seeing God's judgment for having violated and abused the creation.

Now, what is important here, having made this statement, is to think about how that divine judgment comes to be because the idea of a judgmental God permeates our biblical narrative. In our popular culture, we have imagined that God from on high looks down on the earth and zaps wrongdoers with a lightning bolt of judgment when they do wrong, but over the eons, that conception of judgment just has not held water. The idea that we do something wrong or think about something wrong and then get zapped by God just has not rung true.

The fact is that too many good people suffer in our world, and too many bad people thrive for God's case by case judgment mode to be authentic, but what I think global warming and the environmental consequences of such are revealing is that God's judgment does not come down from on high on a case by case basis, but that God's judgment was written into the creation from the “get go”. Listen to that again. I believe that God's judgment was written into the creation from the beginning, and that is to say that, in the creation of all that

there is—in the creation of the earth, of the atmosphere, of our bodies, of our social orders, of our oceans, of our forests, of our communities, of our solar system—God’s healthy equilibrium was put into place from the beginning—that it is in part, from the chemistry of life, so when we begin to violate that chemistry, we begin to see God’s judgments in the consequences of our actions. So, storms, floods, droughts and fires, which theologians have historically put in the category of natural evil—that is, the result of natural processes—these storms, floods, droughts and fires, in their new levels of intensity and destruction, are now taking the form of a moral evil, so we’ve changed the order from natural evil—storms and so forth being the product of natural processes that are out of our control—and we have transformed them into an example of moral evil, which is to say they are, in their new intensities, results of a perpetrator, of course, that perpetrator being the human race.

I believe that, as part of the faithful community, as people of faith, as people who believe that God has created our creation, that God is the author of all that is, we have a moral responsibility, and we have power to speak out and defend God’s creation which is under attack by the way we live. Every time I get in my automobile and drive to church, I am very much aware that I am contributing to that problem. We are all caught up in this dilemma.

I have to admit that I am not sure what we can do about global warming, but I am sure that, to stick our heads in the sand is not a faithful response because, as far as I understand it, global warming and climate change are huge problems for the entire earth.

The representative of the Philippines, who was at the Global Climate Conference this week in Warsaw, Poland, spoke to the gathering there in tears, beginning them to do something about global warming, and he pledged there at the table that he would not eat. He would be on a hunger strike until something was done to stop and slow down global warming because he was seeing firsthand the pain and the destruction that are the consequences of what is happening.

John F. Kennedy, whose death we are remembering this week, said this in response to a previous crisis moment in our world: He said “Written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters. One character represents danger, and the other character represents opportunity. Crisis is the combination of real danger and real opportunity”.

The danger of global warming is being revealed to us as we speak. The opportunity of this crisis is waiting to be claimed, and perhaps God is looking down on us today and asking us: What are you going to do? We live in a time of crisis.

I am a skeptic who has been converted because I am watching what is happening, and I am a person of faith, who believes that we, together, need to enter into this discussion and enter into the solutions before it is too late. In this struggle, we can pray that God will be with us and know that, indeed, God is with us to defend God’s creation and to make it healthy once again. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor