

Our Home is in Our Hands

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Reading:

Genesis 1:26.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

I am approximately the 100 billionth human being to live on this planet. A new child born today might be about the 108 billionth. Our species, homo sapiens, is thought to have begun over 200,000 years ago. How long we, the human race, will continue to live on this planet in the future is unknown and is largely up to us. We could be seriously challenged within in a few tens of thousands of years by naturally-occurring climate change such as an ice age. We could kill ourselves off in a nuclear holocaust. On the other hand, we may have the ability to populate this beautiful planet for up to millions of years, if we play our cards right. The upper limit is 5 billion years, the future life of our sun.

It has become clear that our species has begun making enormous and, in some cases, irreversible changes in our world. In my work assessing patients in a medical setting, I start by assessing a patient's vital signs. One of the earth's vital signs is changing, and that is its temperature. Our earth is developing a fever. The major cause is the burning of carbon-based fossil fuels, coal, petroleum, and natural gas, which generate carbon dioxide, CO₂. CO₂ is called a greenhouse gas because it traps heat, like the windows of a greenhouse. A second cause is the raising of livestock, especially cows, which due to their unique digestive system, belch large amounts of methane, the second most important greenhouse gas contributing to warming of our planet.

Since 1975, these changes have caused the average temperature on our planet to rise by 1.2 degrees F. That may seem small, but consider that it is enough to completely melt 3 / 4 of the glaciers in Glacier National Park. Scientists say that if the temperature increase reaches 3.6 degrees F, the changes will be extremely serious for our planet and its human inhabitants. We are already 1 / 3 of the way there. But there is increasing concern among climate scientists that, even if we take major action today, the earth's temperature rise will exceed 3.6 degrees. One reason is that the CO₂ we create today by burning

fossil fuels will stay in our atmosphere for approximately 100 years, during which time it will continue to warm the earth.

How is climate change affecting us now, and how will it affect us in the future?

- Climate change is causing our sea levels to rise due to melting of the ice sheets of Antarctica and Greenland. Sea levels are expected to rise by up to several feet in this century. Over several generations, large numbers of humans will be displaced by rising oceans. In this country, the areas most affected will include the island of Manhattan, New Orleans, Miami, and the coast of Florida. Florida – where state employees are prohibited from using the terms “climate change” and “global warming” in their reports. As if stopping talk about the problem will make it go away. New Orleans, where we know from the experience of hurricane Katrina, that low income populations will be hit hardest.
- Climate change causes more extreme weather events, especially hurricanes, but also more floods in some areas, prolonged droughts in others. This is already occurring.
- Climate change will cause our agriculture to decline, decreasing our food supply. Crops will no thrive in the regions where they are currently grown. Water shortages will contribute. Vulnerable populations, especially the poor, will be affected more than others.
- Climate change will cause many animal and plant species to become extinct. Some of our earth’s most amazing creatures, such as polar bears and orangutans, are presently threatened due in part to climate change, while countless other species have already been lost. Species are becoming extinct at 1,000 to 10,000 times the natural rate. Biologists say that we are now in the 6th great extinction. The 5 previous great extinctions were caused by natural events. The most recent great extinction was 65 million years ago, when a large asteroid or comet hit the earth, killing off the dinosaurs and most other living things. But the present ongoing extinction is our responsibility.

Rev. Gail has asked me to tell you how I became interested and concerned about climate change.

- One source is my interest in Earth’s magical places. In my case, the magical places have often been mountains, seas, and glaciers. Last summer I took a trip with my wife Robbi and my daughter Molly to Yosemite, King’s Canyon, and Sequoia National Parks, where we basked among the giant sequoia trees, then to coastal California, land of the coastal redwoods. It was a big trees vacation, and it

was awesome. But the magical places can be in our own communities and in our own backyards.

- A second factor has been my interest in science since childhood. I feel fortunate that my work has exposed me to real science – the science of facts about our universe, not the fake science presented by industries that make tons of money from burning carbon-based fuels. Among real scientists, those who publish in serious scientific journals, there is no doubt that our climate is changing, and that this change is largely or entirely caused by human activities. Among serious scientists, there is no doubt that climate change is already having substantial effects on our earth and its living things and that these effects will seriously threatening the desirability of our planet as a place for human life over just a few generations. Serious scientists are working on the details – like how climate change is changing ocean currents, and how those changing ocean currents will further affect climate. Serious scientists are investigating the possibility that certain effects will cause more sudden and dramatic changes rather than the slow and steady changes already underway.
- The third reason I became concerned about climate change is my interest in Big Questions. Churches are known for their focus on Big Questions – questions such as whether there is a divine being, how we came to be, what is our role on this planet. How many of you think of yourselves as persons interested in Big Questions? . . . (show of hands) . . . I submit to you that there are few questions bigger than whether we, the human race, will preserve our world as a good place for human beings to live for thousands or millions of years, or whether we will continue to seriously damage it over just a few generations, greatly affecting our children and our grandchildren in this century.

Why should we care about climate change?

- **We care, in some cases, because of our religious traditions.** Those of you who connected to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, either by upbringing or by present practice, can take to heart the message from God in Genesis, read by [Edie, Paul] a few minutes ago – that we have Dominion over our earth and its living things. While some religious practitioners take this passage to mean that God has given us the authority to damage our planet in any way we wish, I suspect that members of this congregation will take this passage to mean that we have a duty to be good caretakers, keeping our earth a beautiful place for humans and other living things.
- **As UUs, we care because it is in our 7th principle:** “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”
- **We care because we are humanists.** Humanism is a focus on the importance and the welfare of human beings. I submit to you that the question whether we

will leave future generations a world that is a desirable place for humans to live has a strong link to humanism.

- **We care about climate change because we care about the amazing animal and plant life of our world.**
- **Finally, and most important in my thinking, we care because this beautiful planet Earth is our home.** It is almost certainly the only home that we as a human race will ever have. But we are messing up our own home in a very serious way. It's even worse than that. If we mess up our residences, we know how to deal with that – we can clean up the mess, we can make repairs. We can even move to a new home or build a new home if necessary. But with the damage we are doing to our planet earth, we can do none of those things. This is especially true for the animal and plant species that are being lost at a rapid rate due to climate change – these lost species cannot be replaced. Even for those of you who are not seekers of earth's magical places, those who are just as happy pursuing indoor hobbies, attending or participating in sports, watching TV, or working on the computer, I think that you have as much reason as others to be concerned about climate change – because this earth is our home.

You might ask, but I am just one small person. How can I make a difference? The challenge is formidable, but there are answers.

- We start by educating ourselves how we can reduce our impact on climate. This is one of the missions of our Climate Action Group, which now has 120 members. Those of you who are not members, consider joining. A signup list will be in the Social Hall.
And, for those of you who are already members or may become members, keep your eyes open for ideas that you can bring to our group to fight against climate change.
- Changes that we as human beings could make include small changes, medium changes, and large changes. We need to do all of these.
- Small changes include those made by individual persons and families. We can look at our own burning of carbon. There are many actions we can all take to decrease our burning of fossil fuels. The Forum today at 1:00 is on important ways that families can affect their own carbon fuel usage – by installing home solar energy and home geothermal energy systems. These are fairly big undertakings for a household. When large numbers of households make such changes, they add up to medium-sized changes.
- The truly big changes are economic approaches that attach a price to the burning of carbon. The best approach, I think, is that advocated by Citizens Climate Lobby. This is an approach that protects our economy and our jobs, and it

protects ordinary families without disadvantaging those of low income or low political power. You can join a movement advocating such a system. More information is available in the Social Hall.

- But the most important thing you can do does not require you to lift a finger, but it requires you to do something more difficult – to move your lips. Let the others around you – your family, your friends and your co-workers -- know that you support action on climate change. Write to your congressperson. Visit your congressperson live.

Now is the time that we start demanding that our leaders work on Big Solutions. Now is the time for us to create the political will in those around us to join us in demanding these Big Solutions.