

John Sampson
"What Time Is It?"
Text: Luke 12:49 – 56
Preached at All Souls
August 18, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

I want to begin my reflection this morning by thanking you, by thanking this congregation, for joining with St. Brendan's Catholic Church, and with Keene Valley Congregational Church in supporting a profound discussion about our collective spiritual response to the environmental crisis our world finds itself in. I believe this is the first time, since I have been pastor at KVCC that the three houses of

worship in our town have come together to cosponsor a series of events.

Your support of the panel discussion, entitled *Our Common Home in Crisis*, last Tuesday night, and the beginning of a shared four week reading of *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment and human ecology, shows how care of the Creation is of utmost value to this congregation. I am so thankful for the ways you already have, and will be, adding your voices to our discussion.

Now I confess that *Laudato Si* is the first papal document I've ever read. Being Protestant, statements by the popes usually only figure into my spiritual awareness at the margins, and come second, third, or even fourth hand to me. But Francis' document is something I kept hearing about, something that would pop-up in discussion in the most unexpected ways. And so I am glad that I am not only

getting a chance to read it, but that I am able to read it in community with other people of faith.

And so, this morning, I want to share with you how this document has been sitting with me throughout the week, since I first read the opening chapters in our book discussion group on Wednesday evening.

In the gospel reading we just heard, Jesus tells us that we are able to look at the clouds, and from their form, and color, and altitude we're able to understand something about them, and something about the future.

Take a mass of clouds coming nearer and nearer to where you stand. They're black and their tops tower above you. You can see from a distance the sun being blocked and the ground below dark. You look

at these clouds and know it is about to rain. And so you close the windows in your house, and you call your dog inside.

Looking at the ring of high altitude ice crystals that form a halo around the moon at night, we know that snow is on its way. And so we break out our snowshoes, and make sure there's extra wood by the fireplace.

Our teacher, our rabbi, affirms our ability to read the signs of the sky, and respond in kind. But, unfortunately, Jesus says, we're not always able to take this skill and apply it to ourselves. There are events and occurrences that happen within our lives that should tell us where we are, and what our future will bring, and yet we seem unable to recognize these signs and their meaning for us.

The opening of *Laudato Si* acts as an extension of this observation of Jesus. Here we have Pope Francis looking up at the sky, and telling

us what we see. He tells us that our climate is warming, that the patterns of rain and snow are changing, that storms are increasing in intensity.

And then he lowers his gaze and interprets for us the appearance of the earth: of its droughts, and its forests being cut down, and of the migrations of people, and the death of species.

Francis opens his encyclical with a sobering view of the current state of our environment, and it causes him to make a statement so similar to the one Jesus makes. We look at the signs of heaven and earth, and we understand them, but why are we, as a species, unable to interpret the meaning of the present time? Why are we able to see them as the signs of collapse they are, and yet not respond in the urgency they demand?

We look at the skies, and our science shows us how they are filled with more and more heat-trapping gasses that are warming our planet to levels that will catastrophically change our environment, and then we read in the New York Times about the development of new coal fields in Australia, to fuel plants in India that will spew more heat-trapping gasses into the atmosphere for decades.

Do we understand the meaning of our present time?

We look at our oceans and we see they are increasingly filled with human trash, and we hear a talk by Judith Enck sponsored by the Garden Club of Lake Placid and the Adirondack Garden Club that by 2025, for every three pounds of fish in the oceans, there will be one pound of plastic. If plastic packaging is not drastically reduced by 2050, Enck tells us, there will be more plastic in the oceans by weight than fish.

Do we understand the meaning of our present time?

In our wider society the discussion of the environmental crisis that surrounds us is often spoken about in political terms, or economic terms, in the language of science and of technology, but Jesus asks us to shift our perspective and look at our world with spiritual eyes.

Pope Francis asks us to look out at the destruction of our world with the eyes of faith. Our cosponsored panel discussion earlier this week, and the ongoing weekly readings of *Laudato Si*, ask us to look at all of the environmental challenges of our world from the perspective of the sacred and innate worth of our planet, and of all the life it supports.

To look at the environmental crisis we live in with spiritual eyes allows us a contagion between our stories of faith, and the meaning of the present time.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis is trying to share with all of his readers a sense of where we stand, right now, in the history of our planet, in this most important and unique moment. He shows us the wounds we are inflicting on our planet's atmosphere, and land, on God's other non-human children, on the water, and ultimately on each other.

And what we have revealed before us is nothing less than an image of the Passion of the Earth. We have sitting in the center of this icon the world, wounded and dying, the marks of violence and apathy and selfishness pulsing throughout its global body. Abandoned by the very people God created to care for it, our world cries out in pain, and for help.

In showing us this image of the state of our world Francis is echoing Pilate's words when presenting Jesus before the crowds: *ecce homo*,

behold the man. But Francis turns these words and states *ecce kosmos*, behold the world.

Can we look at the icon of the Earth standing before us, bloodied and humiliated, or do we feel we would like to avert our eyes?

But before we can shift our gaze Francis begins to widen the frame of his portrait, and as he does so he begins to reveal the actors that have led us to this present moment. This is why I have said the Pope gives us a picture not simply of a crucifixion, but of the drama of the Passion. Because in the Passion you come to see all of the actors, all of the dynamics of power, all of the decisions, that lead to our world dying around us.

There are many actors that Francis names: multinational corporations, national interests, unsustainable modes of living. But I think they all come back to here, to our hearts.

The environmental crisis, as Francis understands it, is not simply a political, or economic, or technological, or scientific problem. It is a manifestation of the sickness of our collective spirit, of humanity's heart. To see the earth wounded and yet increase the amount of garbage we, as a species, dump into the oceans reveals a sickness of heart. To see our climate warm to the point of threatening life as we know it on this planet, and to develop one of the biggest coal fields in the world, manifests a short-sightedness that denies the sacredness of the Creation, which God called "good," and "very good." To see our world as simply a resource to consume for our own need, instead of caring for it based on its innate value and worth, is to misunderstand the purpose of humanity itself.

We can't understand the meaning of this present moment as a species, because our spiritual hearts are sick. Jesus knew it. Francis sees it. And our cosponsored discussions on *Laudato Si* are meant to

open our eyes to it, if we find that they are in anyway closed to where we find ourselves here today.

Perhaps you've found this reflection a little heaving and depressing so far. And if I stopped here I would agree. And if our sacred story of the Passion stopped with the crucifixion, stopped at the moment of death, understood as a moment of finality, I would also agree.

But this is not where our story ends. It's not where Jesus ends. It's not where Francis ends. Because our shared tradition tells us that death is not the end; death is never the end.

And Jesus alludes to this possibility of a life not bounded by death by mentioning baptism. He mentions it before he even mentions looking at the sky and the earth, and it's as if he has given the answer before even posing the problem.

Jesus holds up to all of us, to all who try to follow his message of love and compassion, the ritual of new life, of a dying to an old self, and of an asking to join a new path in its stead. Baptism is a sacrament that seeks to wash away the sinful, the selfish, and replace it with admission into community, and a desire to enter the selfless.

Right now, standing before the pieta of the world held lifeless in the arms of a weeping God, can we, can our species, ask for baptism?

Can we ask for a new path of selflessness, and of community – community with all other aspects of Creation: the land, and the water, the air, and of God's other living children who share this planet with us?

Can we ask that an old way of life that is literally killing our planet be so completely reformed it is as if setting fire to what came before?

This is the meaning of the present time. This is the opportunity of this moment.

And I feel so blessed that God is allowing us to share it together.

Amen.

