

Which Wind Will It Be?

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Excerpts from Exodus 16
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Tonight we're participating in the National Preach-in on Global Warming, sponsored by Interfaith Power & Light. This weekend—and in the days surrounding it—temples, mosques, churches, and other places of worship are offering testimony from their traditions on the importance of addressing climate change, raising a united voice that we hope will be heard by our political leaders. Greg Yost's wonderful faith story that we just heard—and the commissioning that we'll do after communion, of our members who are heading to Washington next weekend to participate in the mass climate-change demonstration—are part of Circle of Mercy's small contribution to this powerful witness, involving hundreds of congregations all across the country.

The text that I settled on for tonight is the 16th chapter of Exodus. It's perhaps the most compelling example we have from our tradition of creation cooperating with human beings in the way of justice.

The early Israelites, our ancestors in the faith, had just fled from repressive enslavement in Egypt and found themselves in the Sinai wilderness. They were going to spend forty years in this barren place, so, not surprisingly, they grumbled and whined about it. Moses, who along with the prophet Miriam was their deliverer from captivity, and their brother Aaron, a priest, assured the people that God had heard their complaints.

Here's an excerpt from Exodus 16, beginning with verse 13:

In the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?"...Moses said to them, "It is the bread that God has given you to eat. This is what God has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'"

Now an omer, explains a footnote in my study Bible, was a measure equal to one-tenth of an ephah. Helpful, right? Further research uncovered that an ephah was equal to about 22 liters. So picture folks in the desert every day eating the equivalent of two one-liter soda bottles full of this strange white substance—described in verse 31 as "like coriander seed" with a taste "like wafers made with honey"—which they called manna, meaning literally "What is it?"

God's instructions were very clear. People were told to gather what they needed to take care of their families. Given the difference in numbers of people in particular families, some gathered more and some less. But, verse 18 tells us, "When they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed."

United Church of Christ theologian Walter Brueggemann calls this time in the life of the people of God—between enslavement in Egypt and freedom in that Promised Land—the "wilderness training school." He argues that it was necessary for people who had been repressed and deprived as slaves to spend time learning about the way of justice, so that they wouldn't begin immediately hoarding and accumulating when they finally made it to the Promised Land "flowing with milk and honey"—in other words, a place of great abundance.

At the end of the wilderness time, God commanded that the people put an omer of manna in a jar and carry it with them always, as a sign to future generations of God's provision and the way that they were to live. The lesson of the wilderness years was that God provides enough for all, as long as the abundance is shared justly. And the earth itself participated in that justice. Every morning the manna appeared, melting by midday in the heat of the sun, but back again the next day.

Predictably—human nature being what it is—some people went against the instructions. When they tried to hoard, the manna “bred worms and became foul,” according to verse 20. Nature and humanity cooperated as long as justice was observed. But when justice was violated, nature began to rebel.

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I would argue that we're living today in a time of nature's rebellion. It's not just our imagination that things are getting worse climate-wise. The data are easy to get, simply by Googling “climate change disasters.”

Even detractors and skeptics can't argue with the documented rise in heat waves, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, severe thunderstorms, and tropical cyclones. In the 1980s, insured losses from climate events in the U.S. averaged nine billion dollars annually. In the 2000s, that figure has quadrupled to thirty-six billion dollars per year.

Hurricane Katrina was the worst U.S. weather disaster in recorded history, killing 1,322 people. Last October's weather event was so massive it was labeled “Superstorm Sandy.” And, as we gather here tonight, five Northeastern states are under a state of emergency, trying to move snowfalls of up to three feet and restore power knocked out by unprecedented high winds to hundreds of thousands of households.

Increasing global temperatures are raising the moisture level in the atmosphere, which fuels big storms. Clear-cutting forests has removed natural wind buffers. Paving wild areas increases rain runoff and causes severe erosion. As one blogger put it, it's time for us to start calling these events “unnatural disasters.”

Out-of-control wildfires like last summer's Waldo Canyon fire in Colorado, which destroyed more than 18,000 acres, are the result of shorter winters, less snowpack, and extreme summer heat. Early spring is throwing off the migration patterns and food sources for birds. We've heard about endangered polar bears facing a retreating Arctic Sea ice cover. But we also know it right here, up close and personal. The frogs in the Swan Mountain Farm pond were already singing by mid-January this year, and the daffodils and Lenten roses popped up a month early as well.

And then there's the small Pacific island nation of Kiribati. Ask the 100,000 folks there how they feel about climate change. But you'd better ask quick, because they're on the verge of buying 9.6 square miles on a tall island almost 1,400 miles away in Fiji—the place where they will relocate when it becomes necessary.

You see, Kiribati is only six and a half feet above sea level. Rising high tides are already inundating the water table and tainting the soil with saltwater. If the people stay, the rising sea level that is a result of global climate change—a problem to which they have barely contributed—will eventually drown them. Kiribati will one day simply disappear beneath the waves.

There was a time not long ago when pointing out these disturbing trends was considered “crying wolf,” raising an alarm unnecessarily. But, thanks to the work of Al Gore and Bill McKibben and others who have persisted in telling the truth, we can now celebrate that tens of thousands of people—so we expect—will converge on Washington next week. And we can give thanks that public pressure pushed our president to mention a commitment regarding climate change in his recent second inaugural address. I'm grateful to Greg and others in our Circle who have persisted in acting and keeping this concern before us.

The biblical worldview included close interconnection between God, creation, and humanity. The world was set in motion by a brooding, mothering God who imagined and breathed into being beauty and mystery. Humanity's first home was a lush garden.

Moses was saved in the waters of a river, and God first appeared to the prophet in a burning bush that was not consumed. Our spiritual ancestors passed through a miraculously parted sea on dry land and were led to freedom by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. On the journey, God turned bitter water sweet and fed the wanderers with manna from heaven.

The psalmist compares faithful followers to trees planted by streams, and the one seeking God to a doe longing for water. The prophet Isaiah says that those who do justice are like watered gardens, and those who are afraid will be lifted up on eagle's wings.

The Holy Spirit appears in the New Testament as dove, rushing wind, and tongues of fire. And most of Jesus' parables are about land—filled with pastoral images of shepherds and vineyard laborers and farmers sowing seed; and lessons learned from fig trees and mustard seeds. Earth, fire, water, air—the basic elements of creation are everywhere in our holy scriptures.

In this worldview, punishment from God came in the form of raging flood waters and unyielding soil and time spent in the belly of a whale. When humanity rebelled, so did nature. Nature acted “unnaturally.”

This perspective may seem a little primitive to our industrialized, 21st-century selves. But I think there's a deep truth here. When we care for the earth; when we live justly and see to it that her abundance is shared with all—then the earth yields fruit and provides sustenance. But when we exploit her resources, and consume more than our share, and pollute her air with carbon and her soil with poisons—then the earth unleashes her fury.

We know that God will be with us, no matter what may come, standing by us in the storms. But we have the power to choose whether the wind that blows among us is the gentle, comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, binding us together in unity and harmony with the earth—or the lashing fury of the superstorms that are sure to increase in our future if we don't repent and change course. It's up to all of us to make a wise choice.

Amen.