

What Are We Waiting For?
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
December 6, 2009

Meditation

Let us...

Stop... stop the rushing mind... the rushing body... the rushing...
Stop... for a few moments anyway.

Stop... that we might notice a spirit other than rushing in our hearts...
In our lives... in this season.

Stop... who knows what might emerge, what might grow...
If we give it room... give time to grow... give it this time.

Stop... for peace to grow... for love to overflow...
As the quiet embraces us, holds us, heals us.

Sermon

I guess there are only a finite number of sermon titles out there. Because when I first went to save my initial notes for today's sermon, my computer informed me that it already had stored a document by this name – and did I want to replace it?

And here I thought I hadn't written the sermon yet!

Turns out I wrote it for Earth Day 2006.

That sermon? A call for action to confront the challenge of global warming and climate change. I outlined the effects we were already experiencing, the additional disastrous effects we were almost certain to experience before long if not enough was done... and what we *could* do with enough will and dedication.

Then I asked, what were we waiting for... to address what is not only an environmental and political challenge, but also a moral challenge, since climate change, as it brings rising sea levels, more powerful storms, more devastating droughts, species extinctions, spreading disease, is about human suffering – and first for the poorest and most vulnerable – as well as about the degradation of life on the planet. It is a moral challenge as well, because of our responsibility for and duty to our children and theirs, and theirs.

In short, I affirmed, whether we will face this challenge head-on, or turn our heads in denial and delay is indeed, a moral question.

Well, that was almost four years ago. The fierce urgency of now, to use Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase, has only grown more fierce. Ice caps are melting more quickly than anyone predicted, droughts are lasting for years longer than is usual; and all while the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has climbed above the 350 parts per million deemed by many climate scientists to be the upper limit of safety... and it is still climbing.

Meanwhile, the likelihood of reaching a new binding agreement at the international climate negotiations in Copenhagen, which begin tomorrow, has in recent weeks dimmed as each nation seeks its own self-interest, and as issues of war, terrorism, and the economy – not to mention the dalliances of celebrities – more easily grab our attention.

But still... what *are* we waiting for? How convincing need the evidence be... how disastrous need the effects be... before we act with the required urgency?

Perhaps you've heard the story about an old minister's marginal notes on his sermon. Partway down one page was this note: "Point here is weak – pound pulpit!"

Well, I don't think my points are weak... but I've been wondering recently whether I have consistently enough gone deeply enough when pondering this question of why we are not collectively acting with greater urgency when it comes to climate change.

So yes, I could easily metaphorically and maybe literally pound the pulpit when it comes to global warming and climate change. I've been preaching about this for close to twenty years, and I know that many, perhaps most or even all of you, share the same depth of feeling and concern, along with a fear that it might already be too late to head off many of the worst effects of a warming planet. I could pound the pulpit!

And it easy enough to get angry at dithering politicians and others who deny or ignore the ever more convincing evidence of the crisis we face – not a crisis looming in the distant future, someday years or decades from now, something for our grandchildren to deal with – but the crisis we are now in the midst of. I could pound the pulpit!

But would pounding the pulpit make much of a difference? Would reiterating all the bad things that are happening and will happen change any more minds and hearts?

I'm not so sure.

Recently I came across an article on climate change titled "The Urgency Trap." The writer chided those who were shouting the loudest about all the terrible things that they say will happen if a binding international agreement is not reached in Copenhagen. She wrote that these well-intentioned prophets of doom misunderstand how change happens. She noted that in fact change in the direction of meeting the climate challenge is already taking place, and that we need to work with it, encourage it, and stop shouting ever louder and louder.

Does she have a point?

After all, notice the changes which *have* taken place since that Earth Day sermon in 2006. I will not take all the credit... this was after all just a month before Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" was released, and there were other fresh stirrings as well. In any case, reflect for a moment. Prior to "An Inconvenient Truth," global warming and climate change might as well have been a non-issue for most Americans and most politicians. Think of the shift since then. If not the perennially urgent front page story that it ought to be, at least the challenge of global warming is more universally recognized as something to which we should be paying attention.

And changes are taking place, both technologically and politically, to help us meet the challenge.

Yes, we *have* begun moving in the right direction. Whether like the Titanic we are changing course too late and too slowly remains to be seen. But more and more of us are changing minds, changing light bulbs, changing course. And as Al Gore writes in his new book, *Our Choice*:

...despair serves no purpose when reality still offers hope. Despair is simply another form of denial, and it invites inaction. We don't have time for despair. The solutions are available to us! We need to make our choice to act now.

Why, then, *do* we hesitate? Why is it so exasperatingly hard to collectively make this choice? Well, as Gore points out in his book, neuroscientists point to at least part of the reason. We are basically programmed through millennia of evolution to respond quickly and decisively to challenges and threats which are immediate and close at hand. A saber tooth attacked our forebear or someone attacks us on the street and our fight/flight response kicks in without the need for reflection and consideration. Whereas threats that *don't* appear to be immediate don't easily generate a response.

This explains why Americans are willing to spend billions upon billions fighting the terrorist threat, even if it means fighting wars that have little to do with that threat. Whereas generating the support for spending even a fraction of the amount going toward the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan towards doing what is necessary to transform our energy grid and slow global warming feels like pushing a ten ton rock up a mountain with a spoon.

Is the terrorist threat real? Dangerous? Of course. But in the long run, the threat posed by climate change to civilization and to the well-being of human beings and much of life on earth is at least as dangerous, probably a whole lot more dangerous.

So... *do* I need to pound the pulpit with more vigor? *Do* we all need to shout louder? Do I need to read more books like these about climate change and the fate of the earth?

I'm not so sure.

And as I re-read that sermon from April 2006 I realize I did leave something out, something huge that should have been at the center of my message. Yes, I talked about the environmental challenge and the political and technological changes we need to make to meet that challenge. And I put it all in the context, as I said a moment ago, of a moral challenge for each of us and for humanity.

Good as far as I went.

But I neglected the deeper spiritual context for all of this.

For it seems to me that if we listen with *truly* open-minded and open-hearted attention, that question "what are we waiting for?" can take us to the very heart of what it means to be a human being; and from *that* heart, *that* center, perhaps more effective action is likely to grow – not to mention more joyful living right now.

Let me reflect for a moment on the season of Advent to get at my meaning.

Advent is meant to be a season of waiting – waiting for the holy birth of a child, waiting for the re-birth of love, joy, peace, and hope. Waiting. Contemplative waiting.

But it is also a season of preparation. We don't just wait passively. We prepare.

The initial level of preparation is straightforward enough. If we are among those who celebrate Christmas, our outward preparations include decorating our homes, singing carols, baking cookies, writing cards, buying gifts for those we love, worshipping, and listening once again to the ancient stories.

And though some of this can sometimes get *real* stressful... at their best, these outward preparations stimulate at least the beginnings of an inward shift into what we call the Christmas

spirit – that spirit we assert and wish we could live all the year long, that spirit of greater generosity and love.

Perhaps it is all about that line from “Joy to the World”: “Let every heart prepare Him room.”

Maybe that’s the key... if we could more fully understand what it means. For how *do* we prepare our hearts? And for *what* are we preparing them?

Put another way: What do we seek in our lives? What will really bring us happiness and well-being? What will give others happiness and well-being?

Surely *not* more stuff, which is part of what got us into this mess on the planet in the first place.

Just as surely... more love, more kindness, more generosity, more beauty, more resting in the present moment, all with a deeper awareness (as I preached last week) of our place in the Great Story of the cosmic unfolding of life.

With all this in mind... and heart... I invite us to pause right now, this moment, and reflect on these most fundamental questions of our lives and on our responses to these questions, all as a way of preparing our hearts, opening our hearts to what truly matters... all as a way to “Prepare Him room...” where “Him” means love, kindness, generosity, beauty... here and now...

What *are* we waiting for?

There is much to be done, that’s for sure – and not only in relation to climate change and the hopes we have for those negotiations in Copenhagen, but in regard to so many realities in our personal lives and on the planet today, whether close at hand or far away. There is always so much to be done.

Yet rather than pounding the pulpit with that list in hand, let me instead affirm this: That in the midst of our personal and planetary to-do lists, our fundamental task as human beings and a religious community is to nourish the deepest spiritual wellsprings of our lives so that we will – of course! – choose life as we make our daily choices that collectively can heal the planet and create a sustainable future.

For if we ask and answer the practical questions having to do with our own energy use, and with our own efforts to influence friends, family, and political leaders, and on and on... if we ask and answer such practical questions with spiritually prepared hearts, open to and centered in love and generosity – in traditional language, God – then our lives will be more fully turned *toward* those things that really matter and away from those things that after all don’t matter so much.

Not incidentally, this means we will have turned toward greater happiness and well-being for ourselves, for those we love, for all life on the planet.

To put it another way, we will have turned from despair to a renewed faith in the possibility that love will prevail.

So may it be.