

I am going to read to you all an imagined letter that a pastor wrote to her congregation on Ash Wednesday, 2070.

The church was located on the eastern seaboard of the United States since its founding in the 17th century.

The horrific global conditions have caused the world population to drop from its peak in 2040 of about 9 billion people to a huddle of survivors in 2070 nearing about 2 billion. So, here's the letter:

Ash Wednesday, February 12, 2070
Beloved in Christ,

Grace and peace to you. It was good to see so many of you at our final service.

Thanks for making the effort.

After all our tearful hugs, I realized that it was important for me to reach out and offer a final farewell to those of you who were unable to join us.

Since the Great Flood of 2037, our church and neighborhood have been under water six times.

At first, we did all we could for the neighborhood.

But the third flood, in 2051 was such a catastrophe- and our membership had dwindled to so few- that for the past twenty years, we've focused on keeping our once-beautiful building open in order to carry out funerals and other liturgical responsibilities.

Last year's category 6 hurricane made it clear to the dozen or so members who were still trying to live in the neighborhood that it was time to close the church.

My greatest regret is that over the past few decades- in our time of greatest need- faith in God has become as extinct as the elephant, tiger, panda, and the other thousands of species whose extinction we have mourned each St. Francis Day.

Many have suggested that humanity's abandonment of God is due to despair over the widespread increase in war, the persistent killing along the national border barriers, the unforgiving mosquito-borne viruses that have now invaded even Canada, and so on.

My own view is that, as God's creation came to be experienced as the destroyer- not the sustainer- of civilized life, people could no longer believe in a loving God.

Thanks be to God that our congregation has resisted this view!...

Not a day goes by that I don't cast my mind back to 2015- the year Pope Francis issued his Encyclical "On Care for Our Common Home" and when 193 nations signed the COP21 Paris Climate Agreement.

Although I was only 12 years old at the time, I'll never forget the hope I felt that the grownups were going to own up to having trashed God's creation and were not undertaking the necessary changes to make things right.

But at that young age, I didn't realize that the politicians would only make these changes if forced to do so.

Throughout history, one of the voices that compelled the end of slavery, the guarantee of civil rights and LGBTQ rights, and the end of apartheid, was the voice of the church.

But darker forces than I could imagine at the age of 12 had already made certain that the church would mostly stay silent on climate change because climate change was a "political issue."

[Thankfully, you all, in this church, knew better. Lead by your former pastor, Rev. Jill, you all responded to the needs of this world.]

Over the past 20 years, every one of you has shared with me your testimony-

the more you lives your lives for one another and in service to the dying world, the more satisfied you became with your own life.

But now all of that is past...

In the coming months, I expect most of you will join the others who have relocated to higher ground...

I hope that wherever each of you settle, you will continue to respond to God's call to be ambassadors of the beloved community.

I hope that each of you will make whatever community you join become more resilient..."

and may your faith in God fill you with hope that surpasses all understanding. In Christ's Love."

That excerpt came from the new book "Climate Church, Climate World," written by our own MA Conference Minister Rev. Jim Antal.

In his book, he says that neuroscientists have figured out that humans are not wired to respond to long-term threats such as climate change, which he calls a "long emergency" that is "overwhelming in scope." (Fate, Tim Montgomery. "Do you believe in God? Then you have a moral duty to fight climate change, writes Jim Antal." www.chicagotribune.com, April 18, 2018).

It's really hard to get people to adopt new habits, let alone drastically change their lives.

It's really hard to get people to invest time and energy into something, which isn't directly causing them to suffer.

If you have ever tried to compel someone to care about something that you were passionate about, then perhaps you know that it's like hitting your head up against a wall.

We know that most Americans aren't engaged with the topic of climate change, as Antal cites a study from Yale which found that while "*two in three Americans think global warming is happening, most Americans (65%) rarely or never discuss it.*" (Fate)

But the good news is that we aren't most Americans.

We are faithful Christians who should be compelled to protect the planet that we share because we know that it is not ours.

It is on loan to us from our Creator.

And we have a responsibility for God's beloved ones who will come after us, the plants, animals and people, to protect the planet for their sake.

That letter that I read to you was hypothetically written in the year 2070, that's 52 years from now.

I expect to be alive then, I will be 83 years old.

So it might feel like the effects are far off, but they aren't.

God's creation is suffering right now, in this moment, and I believe that responding to the degradation of the planet is the most important call for the church at this moment in time.

Everything else that we do is incredibly important, but none of it will matter if humans and make ourselves go extinct, or cut our global population down by 3/4 before we even realize what we've done.

As large, overwhelming and unwieldy as the problem of climate change might seem, we cannot turn a blind eye to this issue.

The biblical authors of the book of Genesis were connected to their land.

They were agrarian.

They knew when there was a drought not because everything looked brown and the grass wouldn't grow on their lawns, but because they couldn't grow food.

They could not eat.

They knew if there was a water shortage not because their municipality placed restrictions on their watering days but because they did not have enough to drink.

They literally felt the thirst in their throats.

I am afraid that we have become disconnected from our land, our food, our water.

We create trash and it disappears, we don't think about where it goes.

We use a straw at a restaurant or get a plastic bag from Market Basket, we don't think about how that will be added to the millions of other straws and bags which are floating in the great garbage patch in the Pacific Ocean that is larger than the state of Texas.

We buy a fruit or vegetable at the grocery store, we don't think about the pesticides that were sprayed on it and then drained off into the water table, contaminating the water that we drink.

We don't think about how far that fruit or vegetable had to travel, on ships and trucks powered by fossil fuels, to get to our grocery store, so that we can have a banana in the middle of winter.

We don't think about these things, and I confess I am guilty of this too.

But as people of faith, we need to wake up and be more vigilant.

We need to think about the decisions we make every day, and we need to work together to advocate for environmental legislation.

This is not a partisan issue.

In our community, we all drink the same water and breathe the same air.

We all have to live through the worsening storms and drastic temperature swings.

We are all suffering.

We need to work to protect the Earth for ourselves and for those who will come after us.

In fact, the young people are trying to make a difference, right now, and they need our support.

Once again, the young people are leading us.

In Burlington, a group of high school students presented a proposal to the Conservation Commission to ban the use of single-use plastic bags in our town.

They are now bringing it to the selectmen, who will decide whether to bring it to the town meeting.

Last month, the town of Lexington did pass a ban on single-use plastic checkout bags at their annual meeting, and we want to make sure we keep up with our neighbors!

I don't want the letter that I read to become something I read from my pastor when I am retired 50 years from now.

I don't want our church to become waterfront property.

Friends, we can't wait until we feel like we've felt enough of the effects to be scared into action, because at that point, it will be too late and that letter that I read will be our reality.

Yes, we have our beautiful new solar panels.

They are keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and they're also communicating to our community that we are committed to being caretakers of God's beloved earth.

But just because we've taken that big step, we can't become complacent.

They were one thing, but there are thousands more things that we can do to protect the earth.

Let us, as Christians, continue to live into our call as caretakers of God's creation and set the pace for the rest of our community, that they might follow our lead.

Amen.