

Prayers for Paris

together, we reflect, sing, act and pray for climate justice



This is our Time

A sermon by the Very Reverend Dr. Bill Phipps

Scriptures: Jeremiah 33:14 – 16, 1 Thessalonians 3:12 – 4:2, Luke 21: 25 – 28, 34 – 36

Climate change is *the* embracing reality of our time. Among all the bewildering and complex issues humankind faces, climate change is the most urgent reality embracing us and our earthly home. It demands the very best of the human spirit, intellect, imagination and hope. It demands a basic change in the way we understand life and view the world. It demands spiritual, political, economic and social passion, as well as co-operation and ingenuity on an unprecedented scale.

Climate change is not one issue among many. Among other things, it is the spiritual challenge of our time. It is not only connected to how we relate to and live in mother Earth, it is connected to obscene inequality, reckless and self-indulgent consumption and human entitlement. Climate change begs the questions: Who are we? Where do we fit in Creator's imagination? How are we to live in healthy relationship with our earthly home and all creatures?

Theologian and ethicist Daniel McGuire says, "If religion does not speak to [environmental decline], it is an obsolete distraction." Although most of us have paid little attention, the Bible is full of references to God's creation and human responsibility. The bookends of the Bible speak of the rivers of life. In one Genesis story they flow out of the Garden of Eden into all the world, bringing life and nourishment. Then in the last chapter of the book of Revelation, they flow into the city of God bringing healing and life.

Living in a tense and conflicting time, Jeremiah talks about God's covenant and raising up voices to "execute justice and righteousness in the land." (Jeremiah 33:15)



CITIZENS FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

Our passage from the Gospel of Luke talks about signs in the sun, moon, stars, and about distress among the nations confused by the sea. People will faint from fear and foreboding for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Therefore, “be alert.” (Luke 21:25-26, 36)

We have not been alert for too long. But now humankind can no longer plead ignorance of global warming and human agency that is causing unparalleled and rapid change in the Earth’s climate and related systems. We can no longer say to our grandchildren, “I didn’t know.” So when they look into our eyes and ask, “Why were you silent? Why did you not take actions which were clearly available?” what will we say?

The facts of climate change are legion, the implications overwhelming, the consensus among scientists close to unanimous. The global banking system, the International Monetary Fund, NASA, and the global environmental movement are finding common ground and raising alarms at the political obstinance and more general acquiescence that pervades the human community. Although a growing consensus, even among business leaders, recognizes that 75% of fossil fuels in the ground need to remain there, we still ramp up exploration and drilling even in the most sensitive places.

Extreme weather – floods, drought, hurricanes – is becoming normal. Oceans are becoming dangerously acidic. Species are dying out. Even the huge boreal forest stretching across the northern hemisphere is under threat.

In the western world we are fatally addicted to fossil fuels. We depend upon hyper consumption to fuel our economies and our egos.

Each and all of us are embedded in an economic system which can no longer be sustained by our earthly home. There is no convenient enemy. Western lifestyles have benefitted from a brief moment in human history where burning carbon produced uncharacteristic and enormous wealth, including tons of *stuff*. The party is over.

So we can no longer pretend. Our earthly home is sick, wounded, brokenhearted. The Earth is being pushed to its limits. No place is sacred anymore, whether in the midst of tropical rain forests or in the Arctic Ocean. Humankind as consumer and plunderer has replaced humankind as citizen and spiritual being. How do we change our ways?

First, listen!

Vietnamese Buddhist priest Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, “What we most need to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying... A spiritual revolution is needed if we are going to confront the environmental challenges that face us.”

So, listen. Where is Earth under stress or attack near you? What voices are being raised to protect those sacred places? Be alert. Open your eyes, ears, heart to the cries of the Earth.

Second, practice gratitude! Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote, “Our goal should be to live in radical amazement.” We live in a beautiful world. Our earthly home is amazingly fragile, complex, resilient, stunning.

So regardless of how anxious, bewildered, depressed or outraged we feel in the face of climate change and other realities wounding our home, we always begin with gratitude for beauty, water, food, trees, butterflies, cougars, art, music, humour, imagination, eco-justice, human justice, relationships with each other and with Earth.

Where is your sacred place, where your soul is welcomed and nurtured, where you feel intense gratitude for being alive within the embrace of mother Earth?

Third, pray. I encourage all of us to develop a simple, daily prayer life which expresses gratitude for mother Earth in all her splendour. Then pray for the places of wreckage and destruction – oceans, forests, the Antarctic, endangered species, Indigenous lands being mercilessly exploited, your neighbourhood stream. There are many resources available including books such as *Earth Prayers*, *Global Chorus* and *Living Ecological Justice*.

Lastly, act. There are people of all walks of life in all parts of the world who are hearing Earth’s cries and responding with faithful imagination. In the face of powerful forces, people are rising in prophetic voice to reverse the plundering and the consuming of mother Earth. Paul Hawken talks about the “blessed unrest” sweeping across the world creating the transition to a healthy and whole earthly home. In December, 2015, representatives of countries will gather in Paris, France for the most crucial international conference of our time. Will humankind be able to agree on serious and effective measures to slow, then halt, global warming?

Around the world, Indigenous land is being torn up and exploited with little regard for Indigenous culture, tradition and spirituality. In Canada we have recently received the 94 “Calls to Action” from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I can think of no better acts of reconciliation than working together to preserve the land and health of mother Earth. Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and reconciliation of humankind with Earth.

Government leaders need to hear, unequivocally, that their people demand effective action. Now is the time for co-operative and creative action. I believe this is our time, the moment when faith communities can shine the light of holy inspiration on the most challenging spiritual crisis humankind has faced.

Overwhelming? Yes. Bewildering? Definitely. Impossible? Maybe. A great time to be alive and be the church? Yes, without doubt. This is our time. This is a moment of grace and transformation. What kind of ancestors will we be for our grandchildren and great grandchildren? What legacy will we leave them?

These are spiritual questions going to the heart of honouring our sacred earthly home. And so, this is *our* time. Let us seize the moment.



The Very Reverend Dr. Bill Phipps served as Moderator of The United Church of Canada from 1997-2000. His main passion is working on climate change and living into right relations with First Nations. His ministry has been characterized by social justice and peace building work. Bill is the co-founder of Faith and the Common Good, a national interfaith network on climate change. He lives in Calgary with his wife, author Carolyn Pogue. They have 4 grandchildren, for whose future they worry. www.billhipps.ca