

Prepare the Soil

1.

A couple of years ago, I was lounging on my bed surfing the internet, intending to unwind but, foolishly, reading the news instead. Somehow, I ended up reading an article titled “The Uninhabitable Earth”, by David Wallace Wells in New York Magazine. The tagline of the article is: “Famine, economic collapse, a sun that cooks us: What climate change could wreak — sooner than you think”, and it goes on pretty much in that vein for a gut-wrenching 7000 words. Here’s a representative quote:

Most people talk as if Miami and Bangladesh still have a chance of surviving; most of the scientists I spoke with assume we’ll lose them within the century, even if we stop burning fossil fuel in the next decade. Two degrees of warming used to be considered the threshold of catastrophe[, when] tens of millions of climate refugees [would be] unleashed upon an unprepared world. Now two degrees is our goal, per the Paris climate accords, and experts give us only slim odds of hitting it.

2.

Since this article was written in 2017, America has rejected its commitments in the Paris Accord, and new developments have shown we have even less time to act. The way we power our way of life must be fundamentally changed not to rely on fossil fuels. How we grow our food, how we heat our homes, how we make things, and how we move around... To avoid a situation where climate change accelerates faster than we can adapt, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says we need to cut emissions in half by 2030, and reach carbon neutrality by 2050.

As I read the article, I had heard these facts before; I had noticed the headlines, the accelerating public discussion and concern, but I hadn’t internalized them. Now, it felt like a splash of cold water. My discomfort was amplified by a sense that I am unusually culpable. You see, in school I studied to be a climate scientist, but I gave it up in favor of an easier path. While I had been disengaged from the science for the last decade, the possible trajectory of climate change the article described rang true based on my training. Scientists are seeing the changes they predicted decades ago beginning to happen, and much sooner than expected. What seemed when I was a childless student like an important but abstract concern for future

generations has become a crisis that my daughter Livie and my son Henry will grapple with as young adults. Indeed, it has already started.

A sense of foreboding and dread took hold of me. I had trouble sleeping. I had trouble focusing on work. I felt the need to make a change, to do something big, but instead I just kept on mostly as I had before, wishing, on some level, that the unpleasant knowledge would just go away so I could feel good again.

I am hardly alone in having these feelings or reacting this way. Over 75% of American Adults now agree that climate change is either a crisis or a major problem, but it feels like our collective reaction is unfolding in slow motion. Day to day, even before the pandemic, we're hardly talking about it. Why? The explanation that seems to get the most airtime is that climate change deniers, entrenched in positions of power and supported by a distrustful public, are preventing change. Certainly, we desperately need consensus that action is necessary, but there are so many other obstacles to overcome: technological obstacles, systemic obstacles, and also obstacles of faith. Personally, I needed to confront obstacles of faith before I could even begin dealing with the others, and that's what I want to talk about today.

3.

What does faith have to do with this? It offers the possibility of transforming fear into hope, confusion into growth. It can bring us out of hiding into meaningful service. Faith is critical if we are to answer God's calling while an easier path is still open to us.

One of the bright spots of my pandemic lockdown is that I finally got around to planting my first garden. With time on my hands, and before I had any clear idea of what I wanted to grow, I spent a weekend preparing the soil. I ripped out sod and spread compost and mulch. Then I just stared at it for a few weeks, uncertain what to do next, afraid to do the wrong thing, and not really certain what my goal was. Then, one weekend, my brother in law came by with three heirloom tomato seedlings, and Emily Gorman offered me a half-dozen herb cuttings from her beautiful garden. These graceful gifts transformed my indecision and anxiety into peaceful activity. As soon as those plants were in the ground, God provided a series of to-dos — they mostly involved building defenses against the critters he ordained to eat my plants. But God cared for the land and watered it; and enriched it abundantly. A few of those seedlings withered, but the tomatoes, mint and rosemary took root and have been wildly successful. Every day, I feel drawn out to my little garden to feel the peace and quiet awe that comes over me when I look at those plants that God grew and guided me to tend. When I bite into a sweet, juicy garden-fresh tomato, I feel the same spirit that made the Psalmist shout for joy and sing.

Slowly, ever so slowly, God has worked on my climate fears in a similar way. God uses every type of emotion to guide our actions, but the most powerful of these are love and awe. Fear and rage can give a powerful push toward change, but sustaining change requires something else.

My fear drove me to prepare the soil — to read and re-educate myself and set an intention to take action. But as long as I stayed rooted in fear I could go no further. Fear that outlasts the initial rush of adrenaline dulls the mind and the heart, it makes you want to hide away. But bit by bit, graceful gifts began to show up to transform my indecision and anxiety into peaceful activity.

To notice those gifts, I had to give less attention to news and social media coverage. They offer a vision of how terrible the future could be, but precious little guidance on what to do about it. They do not offer hope or call the average person to any specific action except perhaps an extreme self-sacrifice. “To save the world, we all have to stop driving, stop flying, stop buying things, stop eating meat, and, oh yeah, don’t have children either.” Is it really surprising that few people would answer this call? It reminds me of the rich young man who asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus’s first response was simple, “Keep the commandments.” But the young man was so certain of his virtue and so eager to have God confirm it, that he pressed for more. “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” If you approach God asking for a finite and attainable list of things you can do to earn security and eternal reward, you will be disappointed.

If care of creation is framed as a quest for purity in our relationship to the natural world, it sets us up for failure and accusations of hypocrisy. Today, electric cars are powered with electricity generated mostly from fossil fuels. The act of building sustainable infrastructure will itself produce significant greenhouse gas emissions. To bring green energy from where the sun is shining and the wind is blowing to where we use it could require ugly power lines to cross beautiful natural habitats. This is hard, and no one has all the answers. We have to be willing to take imperfect steps in the right direction, and that takes hope. Hope that, with each step, we will learn something, then take another. Finally we will end up, if not at our planned destination, at least somewhere better.

Humbly, I want to share a few seeds of hope that are taking root for me.

One seed was a study published by Rare.org, an organization that researches how realistic, attainable changes in our individual behavior can make an impact on climate change. Their analysis suggests that, even without making dramatic lifestyle changes and in the absence of sweeping new policies, reasonable, individual actions by a minority of Americans could deliver 80% of the emissions reductions called for by the Paris Agreement. They identified seven specific behavior changes: things like buying carbon offsets, eating more plant-based foods, and reducing food waste that we could all begin taking action on right now. And no, it’s not enough by itself, but it’s a start, and it can be fun.

Another seed has been connecting with groups that are already making the climate challenge part of their life’s work, and discovering how dynamic and diverse they are. Through a podcast called “My Climate Journey”, I listened to interviews with scientists and business owners,

engineers and financiers, power companies, actors, artists, and teachers. The giant, multi-faceted nature of the climate problem is daunting, but the upside is that there is a role for everyone. This challenge does not belong to a small group of individuals or a specific skill set, but to all of us. I'm starting to see that there are as many ways to rise to the challenge of climate change as there are individuals in our community. If we can embrace policies that allow all of us to make a living while helping to solve the problem, it will unlock enormous energy and creativity that is for now still dormant.

One more seed: people in power are starting to take notice. With certain high profile exceptions, political and business leaders have begun to see that climate change cannot be ignored, and are increasingly embracing policies that will put more and more people to work on it. The CEO of BlackRock, a powerful asset manager with enormous influence on Wall Street, declared last year that "Climate change has become a defining factor in companies' long-term prospects", and is changing its investment policies accordingly. Big companies can't ignore this, regardless of what our federal government is doing, and an increasing number are declaring their own roadmaps to carbon neutrality by 2050. In just the last few weeks, major legislation on climate change that attempts a coordinated response to COVID-19, racial justice, and our carbon roadmap has passed the Massachusetts house and senate and is on its way to conference committee. There is a lot going on right now and it's an incredibly important moment for voters to let leaders and candidates of both parties know that we expect to see bold, smart plans on climate.

As I struggle daily to put my faith in God, I keep returning to Proverbs 3. It says: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." This verse used to bother me. I took it to mean "use not your understanding", in the sense that you should hold fast to dogma and reject insights based on evidence. But the verse says "Lean Not", not "Use Not". "Leaning" conjures an image of a person leaning on a crutch, who will fall flat on their face if the crutch is kicked away. Someone who leans on their understanding this way will be afraid to step out into a situation they don't fully understand. They will hesitate to begin a journey whose end they cannot foresee.

4.

In COVID-19, God has given us a painful reminder of how exponential, systemic changes unfold. Slowly at first, barely a trickle... accelerating discussion and concern, controversy over whether anything is happening at all, then, suddenly change that can't be ignored overtakes you like a tsunami. With the pandemic, this all happened fast enough for us to see and understand it. Climate change is similar, but slower, and bigger. God whispers, and then God roars. God's climate roar will arrive in different places at different times, just like it did with COVID-19. It has arrived already for subsistence farmers migrating by thousands to escape droughts, for residents of low-lying communities that flood too often to be worth rebuilding, and for my

cousins in California who last week had their bags packed in case they needed to abandon their homes to yet another wildfire.

God doesn't demand our praise and service out of vanity, but because he loves us and knows that praising Him and serving Him is the best thing we can do for ourselves. God's nature is reflected in the world he created, in the way things actually work. Whether we like it or not, the world isn't safe. Providing us with comfort and convenience is not its main purpose. To praise God is to hold reality in awe, and realize the depth of our dependence on each other and on the natural world.

5.

Today, I am asking the Congregation to make caring for God's awesome creation a core part of our shared life in faith. I get it, there are so many other pressing demands, and the way forward isn't clear. That's why I'm only asking you to take the first step: prepare the soil, and plant a seed to see what God will grow there. If you don't know what step to take, let me suggest one. In March, a small group formed to discuss climate change and how we can take action as a congregation. We would love for you to join us. Soon, we will be reaching out to members of the congregation with requests for help and suggestions for activities. We'd be grateful for any ideas, and for loving feedback on our suggestions. I'd be happy to speak personally with anyone who wants to just talk about it.

Let's start that journey whose end we cannot see. It takes a strong faith to step up to serve God while he is still whispering, while it still feels possible to hide from him. But God commanded us to love our neighbors, and all our neighbors need clean water, clean air, and healthy food which can be assured only by bringing society into a sustainable balance with mother nature. God calls us to follow Him forward into struggle and trouble, but ultimately to share in his glory. To follow is no guarantee of safety or success as we define it, but if we follow in a spirit of wonder, gratitude, and praise, He will make our paths straight. Thank you, and may God bless all of us.