Earth Day Sermon

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My Finnish family experienced a silent spring around 1960.

I spent my childhood summers on a small farm in southern Finland, where we three children had a chance to keep house for ourselves, eat peas and carrots and new potatoes from the garden and berries from the woods, check the nets for fish and walk to a cow farm to buy milk. All spring we looked forward to the summer of freedom and closeness to nature.

Our favorite birds were the barn swallows that had made three sturdy clay nests under the eaves of the barn. Every spring the swallows came, darting around, briefly sprucing up their nests, and in a couple of weeks there was the chirping of the baby birds that the parents were busily feeding. They kept peeking out of the nest until it was time to test their wings.

Then one year around 1960, the swallows came as harbingers of summer as usual and settled in their nests. But, mysteriously, that year there was no chirping of the baby birds, no swallows darting about, only a perplexing silence. What had happened? Father took down one of the swallow nests and told us that the eggs inside were broken. Why? We couldn’t even really talk about it. I just remember the sadness of that silence. Several months later, Father came to us with the answer. “It’s the DDT that we have used in the garden. What happened is that the swallows ate the mosquitos that were carrying DDT, and it made the eggshells so thin that the eggs broke before hatching.

What a shock that was! Mother and Father had been so happy to sprinkle DDT in the garden because it kept the moles from eating the carrots and the beets.

What did we learn from our silent spring? We learned that DDT is bad for the birds, and we stopped using DDT. Only *much* later did we realize that we had received our first warning of the harm that we humans were causing. It took ten years for DDT to be banned.

Father gave me Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* for Christmas, but I didn’t read it until much, much later. We were slow and reluctant learners.

 On the first Earth Day in 1970, David and I were invited to talk to some high school classes. David played his guitar and sang, and I enthusiastically described the benefits of communal living, which was our life at the time. I remember it as a really fun event.

Our first child was born in our commune in 1971. My parents in Finland were very eager to see the grandchild, and my mother was happy to finance our flights to Finland at least every other year. Of course, it never occurred to us then that flying in an airplane would harm the environment.

In 1988, James Hansen, the head of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, gave a famous speech to a US Senate Committee, where he stated in no uncertain terms that it was vitally important to stop the rise of CO2 in the atmosphere because it was overheating the world. Much later, we found out that the Exxon company’s scientists had already in the *1970’s* made even *more accurate* predictions of the effect of fossil fuels on global temperature, but the company kept the facts under cover and was casting doubt about the link between human activities and the climate.

When James Hansen gave his speech, 79% of our energy came from fossil fuels. Today thirty-six years later, in spite of increased solar and wind efforts, that number is now 81%.

Al Gore’s gorgeous and informative book *An Inconvenient Truth* came out seventeen years after James Hansen’s talk, and it has a graph that shows the absolutely uninterrupted climb of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

CO2 Levels in atmospheresince 1958



Why does it zigzag like that? I found the answer interesting: There is an annual cycle of lower carbon dioxide in the summer when the northern hemisphere is green and higher in the winter when there is much less greenery in the southern hemisphere (which has much less land mass) to absorb it.

Until the fossil fuels came into the picture, people had been adapting to the fairly predictable world climate the best they could. What is new is that now*people* are actually *changing*the climate and making a mess of it.

Today in 2024, we are in a grave predicament. The blanket that consists of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that raise the temperature of the world to dangerous levels will stay in place from 20 to 200 years. So even if we stopped all carbon emissions today, the temperature would stay elevated for at least several decades.

 2023 was the hottest year on record. So far.

 The melting of the polar ice will cause devastating floods, and the desertification of many parts of the world will result in vast famines.

It’s disturbing to know that the information has been there, but our society has not been able to mitigate the damage. **Market forces have become our idol.**

So where is our hope?

For an answer, I am quoting Wen Stephenson who wrote the book *What We Are Fighting For Is Each Other* in 2015.

“What we are fighting for **now** is each other. We have to fight for the person sitting next to us and the person living next door to us, for the person across town and across the tracks from us, and for the person across the continent and across the ocean from us. Because we are fighting for our humanity.”

And if that sounds like a modern notion, here is Martin Luther King at Riverside Church in 1967, exactly one year before he was murdered.

Of course, MLK was not talking about the climate change. His issues were civil rights, poverty and peace in Vietnam, but what he says relates to the worldwide crisis that we are facing today:

“Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole ... This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation, is in reality a call for all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind. This oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed…as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man… I am speaking of that force which all great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is …the key that unlocks the door that leads to ultimate reality.”

So dream on. Where is all this love coming from?

**This** is where we come to the end of our resources and turn to God.

 God is love. We need a change of heart. We need a conversion.

Is it too late? Too late for what?

Yes, it’s too late to avoid a climate catastrophe.

But it’s not too late for building the bonds of love to defend ourselves and each other against the hardships ahead.

Look around! This is one of the communities you are part of. It is a source of strength for all of us. How can we further reinforce the bonds that we have already created? We don’t know yet what it will take, but God will be with us on that path.

Let us pray.

Mother Father God, we are in uncharted territory, and only you can show us the way. Lead us, guide us, use us, as we try find the way of love among all the unimaginable challenges ahead.

Amen