# Intended for intimacy: The promise of a vulnerable God in a time of climate change

David R. Weiss at Buffalo United Methodist Church, June 12, 2016

Lessons:

Genesis 1:26-28 – Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Matthew 5:48 – [Jesus said,] "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

My sermon this morning has five parts.

## Part 1: Apocalypse

A short story about parents, children, and grandchildren.

It's not my parents' world anymore. They're still alive. Dad turns 80 this fall; Mom is two years ahead of him. But this is no longer the world they grew up in. It's barely my world anymore for that matter.

People my age and older, we live on a different planet today than the one we were born on. And the future generations—our children and grandchildren and beyond—are counting on us to make new choices for this new planet.

My daughter, Susanna, meanwhile, was born into a world altogether different than the one my parents knew. Let this sink in: within Susanna's lifetime—in fact just since she was a toddler in 1998, she has lived through ALL SIXTEEN of the hottest years on this planet since 1880.

Why 1880? Because 1880 marks the year when we finally had accurate temperatures reports from a sufficiently wide range of global locations to be able to calculate an average surface temperature for the entire globe. Prior to 1880 there are a variety of ways to make rough estimates, but since then we've kept extremely precise records.

And according to those records, out of the past 136 years, *every one of the hottest sixteen years has happened during her lifetime*. Let me read them off for you, because you need to FEEL the weight of this heat. My daughter Susanna was born in 1996. The hottest 16 years since 1880 have been 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. By the end of this year, she will—no doubt—add 2016 to her collection.

If there's anyone here this morning who is 16 years old, you have this dubious distinction: over your lifetime alone you have lived on a fundamentally hotter Earth *than anyone older than you … living anywhere on the planet*. Congratulations.

Finally, I have eight grandchildren; the two youngest are Eli and John. They're both just over two years old. Last spring as they were still learning to talk—in May 2015—to be specific, they experienced the hottest May recorded on the planet since 1880. And then the hottest June and July, followed by the hottest August, September, October, November, December, January, February, March, and April. For twelve consecutive months—almost half of their young lives—they lived month to month through the hottest months experienced by anyone alive today. My grandchildren. And yours.

It is a *different planet* that we dwell on today. And the well-being of those who come after us hinges—perhaps more than at any point in this planet's four-billion years—on choices made by those of us alive today.

"Apocalypse" is a Greek word … and it's come to mean "the end of the world," but biblically it meant the ending of one world—and the beginning of another, usually connected to the fall of an empire. It meant, for better or for worse, "the end of the world AS WE KNOW IT."

Today we are living through an Apocalypse. The world that we will bequeath to our children is *not* the world we were born into. That world IS NO MORE.

What happened? That's a story for someone else to tell, someone with more science under their belt than I have. But I can give you three telling signposts. My dad was born in 1936. Just in his lifetime 98% of all the oil ever pumped and burned by humans was pumped and burned. 98% percent in the last 80 years. My son was born in 1987. In his lifetime, just the past 29 years, more than half of all the greenhouse gasses generated by human activity have sailed upward into the atmosphere. As for me, I was born in 1959. Over the course of my 56 years, of all the "stuff"—from stone implements to crops, from clothing to processed foods, from jewelry to high tech gadgets—of *all the stuff* that has been fashioned for and consumed by humans over the approximately 10,000

years of human civilization, HALF of that stuff, ONE-HALF of 10,000 years of stuff has been produced and consumed in my lifetime. If Earth were a candle, it would be only too accurate to say that lately we've been burning the wick at both ends. Is it any wonder it's getting a whole lot hotter in between?

The evidence for climate change is overwhelming by now. And 97% of the climate scientists agree, not only that climate change is real, but that it is being driven, at least in part, by human activity. I'm not here to convince you of this. I'm here to help you ask one of the most pressing *theological* questions of our time in light of this, *"What now?"*

How do we think of God? How do we think of ourselves? How do we act—as individuals and as communities of faith—in a time of climate change … in a time of apocalypse?

**Part 2: Cosmology**

Some 2500 years ago an unnamed Hebrew writer wrote the creation tale we read from this morning. He did so while the Hebrew people were living in exile—as refugees in Babylon—and that context matters.

Creation stories are cosmologies. They are stories about our origins, always told against the backdrop of a specific context, and primarily focused on telling us *who we are*, *where we fit*, and *why we're here*.

This creation story, with its carefully ordered rhythm of days is crafted for a people whose lives have been swept over by chaos. This creation story, with its portrait of God who needs only speak and the entire universe comes into being, is offered to a people with no voice in their own future any longer: they have lost their Temple, their king, their land, likely even their hope. And this creation story, with its audacious suggestion that those who hear it bear the very image of God and are destined for dominion, was first told to a people brutalized by war, reduced to rags, and eking out an existence while haunted by anxiety.

In other words, *this creation story was woven for people who found themselves on the far side of a world-ending apocalypse*. And it speaks it hope into that nothingness.

That context is the first clue that what the declaration of "dominion" meant, it was not addressed to multinational corporations, to the billionaire class, not even to the average First World American. Any of whom might mistakenly hear in that word a blank check to do whatever their own power allows them to.

NO. Dominion was a promise made to refugees who had nothing, least of all the military-industrial-economic-technological power to damage the planet. Remember that. Until you have nothing, you may not be in a place to understand what the biblical promise of dominion is even talking about.

But first, this notion of *imago Dei*—Latin for being "in the image of God." It's a pretty lofty claim. But, again, I want you to remember the context, because these are NOT cheap words. They are unimaginably priceless. I'm going to give you a searing mental image to put them in context.

Do you recall from last summer the tragic image of that 3-year-old Syrian boy drowned on the beach? His brother and mother also drowned. They were in a fifteen-foot boat trying to cross a section of the Aegean Seas in choppy water. Like the first audience of this creation tale, they were *refugees*. Now imagine yourself a refugee, huddled in that boat, and then you hear someone huddled alongside you says:

*Remember, dear ones, "God said, 'Let us make* adam *– earth creatures – in our image, according to our likeness …' So God created them – human beings – in God's image, in the image of God, the Holy One created them; male and female God created them." AND THAT, DEAR ONES, IS WHO YOU ARE.*

If you're a refugee in that boat hearing those words, they might offer you a bit of precious dignity, maybe a dose of much needed hope or faith, but they're not likely to go to your head with full-blown case of arrogance or ego.

In a moment I'll say more about what it means—*in practice*—to be *imago Dei*. For now it's enough to realize that it has nothing to do with patting ourselves on the back for having produced, purchased, and piled up so much stuff. Nothing to do with having built an empire, conquered other peoples, or clear-cut forests … just because we could. It is, rather, the quiet reminder that when we have and *are* nothing, even then we are *imago Dei*.

About "dominion"— Then God said, "Let the *adam* – the human beings – have dominion over the fish, the birds, the cattle, all the wild animals, every creeping thing and every living thing that moves upon the earth."

We hear "dominate." So most of the time we presume that we exercise our God-given "dominion" when we dominate the earth and its creatures. But nothing could be further from the truth. "Dominion" appears elsewhere in the Bible, and its use in other settings can guide us in what it means here.

Dominion is what kings model. *But only at their best*. No bad king in the Bible is ever described as exercising dominion. They exercise tyranny. That's

when you dominate others for your own benefit. When you press the land beyond its capacity. When your greed is boundless. That's tyranny.

Dominion is used *only* to describe kings who use their power appropriately. So that widows and orphans are cared for, so that the needy find relief from their oppressors, so that both fields and livestock receive their due rest. When the web of life reflected in the rhythm of Sabbath, and the ideals of justice embedded in the Ten Commandments and echoed endlessly by the prophets, when these things are modeled, THEN there is dominion.

Part Two is "Cosmology."

Who are we? Images of God, reflections of the Holy One. We could not wish to be more than this—and we are not less than this, even when we are nothing.

Where do we fit? *Within*. Not on top. *Adam* from *adamah*. Earth creatures. Human beings. Words … made flesh. The iron in our blood was born in the stars. So we are stardust *incarnate*. Not on top. *Within*.

Why are we here? To exercise dominion. And while history remembers best the kings that model dominion, it doesn't require a crown to exercise it. Micah 6:8 captures dominion perfectly: to do justice, to pursue mercy, to walk humbly with God. That's why we're here. *Every one of us*: to do justice, to pursue mercy, to walk humbly with God.

## Part 3: Perfection

Then, as though justice, mercy, and humility weren't a high enough bar, Jesus comes along and says, "Be *perfect*, therefore, as God in heaven is perfect."

Of course, as with any time when there's multiple languages involved, it's more complicated than that. The Greek word lurking behind "perfect" is τελεω, and while one of its meaning *is* "perfect," other shades of meaning might be more helpful. We get our word teleology from τελεω, the study of the ends or goals of actions. τελεω also can refer to a quality of wholeness or healthiness. And τελεω can mean finished or completed. All of these fill out the notion of perfection.

As though Jesus hopes that we'll hear him exhorting us, "Strive to be perfect, pursue wholeness and completeness, be focused steadfastly on your goals of justice, mercy, and humility, for when you do these ways you are acting in the image of God."

In fact, when Luke records his version of these remarks, he has Jesus say it a little differently: "Be *compassionate*—as God in heaven is compassionate."

We don't know which version is closer to Jesus' actual words. It's likely that Jesus used different expressions on different occasions. In any case, when Luke arranges his story of Jesus, he offers up compassion *as* the perfection of God.

## Part 4: A Vulnerable God

The heart of compassion is the capacity (and the willingness) to be impacted by the joys—and, more importantly, by the sorrows—of others.

Both biblical testaments, the one written by our Jewish cousins and the one written in witness to Jesus, portray a vulnerable God. And this vulnerability is perhaps both the most overlooked—and today the most needed—aspect of God.

We tend to identify God most closely with power. We assume that what makes God "God" more than anything else is sheer power. And while I don't want to dismiss God's power as unimportant, I suspect it is *our own lust for power* that drives the assumption that—of course—God must be all-powerful. Because if *we* could choose, we'd choose power for ourselves.

But in the biblical story, while God certainly exercises power, God *chooses* vulnerability again and again. Look at the company God keeps: second-born sons, enslaved people, slow-tongued leaders, women, Gentiles, and awkwardly outcast prophets. These are not choices made by someone betting on the conventional wisdom for success. These are not the companions you choose if you want to make sure the odds are always on your side.

These choices leave God open to a depth of emotion that we rarely connect with divinity: in particular God feels anguish at the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt; God feels betrayal by their infidelity; God feels sorrow at their exile in Babylon; God even feels compassion for the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah. It would overstate it to call God an emotional wreck, but the God of the Hebrew Bible chooses to *be whole* not by avoiding vulnerability but by embracing it.

In the gospels Jesus continues that pattern. You might say, he *incarnates* it. Of course, it culminates on the cross, where the vulnerability of both Jesus and God reaches a crescendo, but it is at the very heart of his ministry. In daring to touch lepers and others whose illness has set them apart, Jesus' healings begin by stepping into the vulnerability of others. In choosing to eat with outcasts in a society where your table companions were carefully monitored and could cost you your reputation, Jesus' mealtimes are always choices to be vulnerable. In calling us to love our enemies, to meet them with creative nonviolence rather than outright force, Jesus' approach to social

change is to become vulnerable. And in using his parables about the "kingdom of God," to turn our notions of kingship inside out and upside down, Jesus' seeks to invite us to imagine a very different way of being *imago Dei*.

And then Jesus speaks directly to us: Therefore YOU are called to be perfectly focused on justice and mercy, to be compassionate, to be vulnerable. For this is how God has chosen to be. And you, my friends, *you are made in the image of that vulnerable God.*

**Part Five: Intended for Intimacy**

At last, we return to our initial question: *"What now?"*

As we face the prospects of life on this fundamentally different planet, as part of an ecosystem that we have heated in ways that will ripple—and rip—through creation's very fabric, how do we think of God? How do we think of ourselves? How do we act—as individuals and as communities of faith—in a time of climate change?

I believe we begin by remembering that we were created in the image of a vulnerable God. From Eden onward, although we have often forgotten it, we were *intended for intimacy*.

If there is a path forward for us, as people of faith, as inhabitants of a finite and fairly fragile planet, it is by way of intimacy: with each other, with our companion creatures, and with the earth. We are *humus* being, with stardust in our veins and the breath of God in our lungs.

We have a kinship with creation that we have not yet fully acknowledged, but it has been true for as long as long human beings have been. Science tells us that we live thanks to the countless creatures with whom we share an unimaginable intimacy. Well, not quite countless, but truly unimaginable. As I preach today, my relatively healthy human body is home to approximately 100 trillion microbes. These are tiny critters that are NOT ME. They live in and on me, assisting my digestion and immune system, but sometimes just making me their home and keeping me company without ever making me sick. *100 trillion of them.*

That's rather unimaginable. How many is 100 trillion? Well, if I were to thank each of them for keeping me healthy or just for keeping me company, and I were to thank one microbe per second—so sixty thank you's each minute, 3600 thank you's every hour. If I did this *nonstop* it would take me *three million years* to say thank you. An unimaginable number of microbes to whom I owe equally unimaginable gratitude.

While I'm obviously bigger than all of them put together, the total number of individual cells that these intimate neighbors of mine have outnumber my own human body cells ten to one. Right here, standing in front of you, there are ten times as many cells that are not David as cells that are David. If we could somehow separate them all out, these microbes would weigh somewhat more than a 5# bag of flour. That's a lot of "not me" that is interwoven with me. *I am my own ecosystem*. And so are you.

*Both theologically and scientifically we are intended for intimacy.*

**So, to conclude . . .**

This apocalypse is real—and it is upon us. Honestly, I fear that the planet *we* have fashioned for our children and grandchildren is already becoming far less hospitable than the one that we grew up on. As a result, there are some stark choices awaiting us, and we will need to listen carefully to the politically unpopular insights of the scientific community to learn what is required to live sustainably on a finite planet.

I'm as anxious for hope as the next person, but right now *I'm convinced that anguish is our most faithful response to climate change*. And I can't fast forward to hope just because I'd rather be there.

To be *imago Dei* in this moment of apocalypse is to embrace vulnerability. To truly feel the anguish of ecosystems irreparably damaged and of species lost to extinction because of human activity.

That anguish may be the only emotion deep enough to stir us, first to repentance—and *then* to hope. Besides reckoning the harm we have done to creation, that anguish may also be the only response authentic enough that it allows us to grieve for creation *as our own kin*. To grieve at a depth that begins to restore the intimacy for which we have always been intended.

There IS hope. Perhaps even in the midst of anguish. Surely in the renewal of intimacy. And always in the company of a vulnerable God.

May it be so. Amen.

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