

Appendix III Sample Sermon

*God said, This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”
(Genesis 9:12-13)*

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:2)

The images were apocalyptic. Australia burning; burning for months. In the state of New South Wales 72,000 volunteer firefighters – the largest volunteer firefighting force in the world – were under siege as they attempted to save people, animals and forests. In a January 7, 2020 CBC interview one “Firie,” as they are nicknamed, said, “Yeah mate, I’m an arborist... I’m usually up there climbing around in [trees] actually.”

This morning we read the story of God’s first covenant. It is often described as God’s covenant with Noah, but a careful reading reveals two things: it is a covenant made between God and ALL OF CREATION, of which humans are a part, and God repeats it SIX times just in case we missed it the first, second, third, fourth or fifth times. It’s important. It’s important to God. It’s important to Creation. It’s important to humankind as PART OF Creation.

Covenants – promises, commitments – are between two or more parties. And we humans in Creation have failed to live up to our part of God’s ancient covenant. We have failed to “keep covenant” with God and with ALL OF CREATION. Climate change is upon us. Forests are burning, seas are rising, weather patterns changing. Creation is groaning.

While politicians issue platitudes, and pundits prognosticate, those on the frontlines of climate change – volunteer firefighters in Australia, rural women in the Colombian highlands, farmers in Burundi and elsewhere in Africa, villagers in Bangladesh, and PWRDF’s partners throughout the world are getting on with the hard work of keeping covenant with God and with ALL OF CREATION.

Let me share with you a few examples:

In March 2019 Anglicans from throughout the Caribbean gathered in a “Pastors and Disasters” workshop in Grenada. The workshop was organized and hosted by the Church of the Province of the West Indies with the global Anglican Alliance, PWRDF and the US-based Episcopal Relief & Development. It was staged following a number of natural disasters and climate change-related events to hit the island nations.

As one of the organizers stated, “In all parts of the Anglican Communion...partners are shifting the focus to support building resilience at all levels – diocesan, parish and individual. In this way the churches, communities and individuals can look to decrease their vulnerabilities and increase their capacity using their assets.”

Since 1997, St. Jude Family Projects, led by Josephine Kizza, has trained, closely monitored and transformed the lives of 186,000 farmers from throughout Africa and other parts of the world as they learn about organic farming, food security, income generation, environmental management, tree planting, water harvesting and soil fertilization. In 2019 PWRDF supported 210 families to improve food security (three meals a day instead of one and a half), and increase income through farm entrepreneurship and through the teaching of agricultural conservation techniques to cope with climate change.

Bangladesh has become increasingly vulnerable because of climate change. PWRDF has worked with long-time partner, UBINIG, in climate vulnerable areas that have suffered the effects of natural disasters, targeting 22,000 Bangladeshi farmers in 10 villages threatened by drought, floods and cyclones. In 2018 two villages were prepared for mangrove regeneration in order to help protect their shorelines against erosion, flooding and high winds. The communities have been trained on how to protect these plants to ensure their survival and growth. In addition, UBINIG has set up farmers’ field schools in six villages in climate vulnerable areas. These schools are sharing knowledge about farming in drought and flood prone areas as well as discussing the challenges that climate change is presenting.

But those apocalyptic images of fires, floods, storms and devastating destruction, what are we to do with them? And after we turn off the news, what are we, as people of faith, TO DO? Where are we to find hope?

In the gospel that we heard this morning, Jesus uses agricultural imagery to remind us, once again, that we are part of God’s created order: God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. In order to keep covenant, in order to live faithfully, in order to “abide” in Jesus, we must do two things: bear fruit and be pruned.

At the time of baptism, we (or our parents on our behalf) promise to keep covenant with God. Among other questions of “covenant inquiry” we are asked, “Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?” To which we respond, “I will, with God’s help.” The five Marks of Mission of the worldwide Anglican Communion contain similar language.

You “bear fruit” and you “prune” through your prayers, your actions both personal and collective for climate justice in your homes, parishes and communities, and through your financial support of PWRDF and its partners around the world. In so doing you too are keeping covenant with God and ALL OF CREATION. You are keeping your baptismal covenant.

The bible begins and ends with stories that contain the beautiful image of the “tree of life.” It is found in the middle of the Garden of Eden in Genesis and it is there again in John’s powerful vision of Eden restored with a tree of life bearing twelve fruits and whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations.” In between the tree of Genesis and the tree of Revelation are the stories of God’s people keeping and then breaking, keeping and then breaking covenant, over and over again. And there is the story of Jesus who, in his life, death and resurrection keeps covenant with and for us and ALL OF CREATION.

So, we live in hope, or as the great Czech dissident, writer and president, Vaclav Havel wrote, “...[T]he kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us, or we don’t...

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or a willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpromising the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is... It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.”ⁱ

And so we remember PWRDF’s partners throughout the world who with us, are working to keep covenant with ALL OF CREATION and we pray the words of a hymn by American musician, Paul Winter:

For the beauty of the Earth, sing, oh sing today.
Of the sky and of our birth, sing oh sing always.
Nature, human and divine, all around us lies.
Lord of all, to thee we raise grateful hymns of praise.

(From *Missa Gaia/Earth Mass*, 1982)

Amen.

ⁱ From *Disturbing the Peace* (1990), by Vaclav Havel, writer, dissident, and former president of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic.