

Expectations of a Changing Climate©  
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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This morning, Unitarian Universalist ministers in congregations across our country are focusing on the same topic I am, namely, our changing climate. The reason for this intense and widespread focus is that children and youth are calling us to unite in raising our voices about this issue—an issue that isn't merely important, it is an issue that is critical. Global climate change may not seem critical to many of us today, especially as we enjoy this beautiful late summer day. But our youth have been paying attention to what scientists have been saying and they get it. They get that if we don't change our ways their lives will be significantly and very negatively impacted by the climate changes that are predicted to occur. So this morning I am speaking on behalf of our children and youth. My intention is to address their calls for us to join in raising our voices with theirs regarding this critical issue.

Some of you may not be aware of why this issue is critical. I won't go into detail here because there is so much information available and easily accessible. I will instead touch on a few main points. There is a high degree of consensus in the scientific community that we humans and our use of fossil fuels are having a significant impact on the earth's environment. Our reading this morning mentioned the IPCC report. In actuality, the IPCC or International Panel on Climate Change, has put out a number of reports—each one more dire than the previous one. The IPCC's "Land is a Critical Resource" report, published in October of last year, states the following. "Reducing greenhouse gas emissions from all sectors is essential if global warming is to be kept to well below 2°C, if not 1.5°C." The rise in temperature the report mentions is based on the average preindustrial temperature of our planet. It might seem that an increase of just 1.5°C in the average global temperature is not all that large or significant. Converted to Fahrenheit, a rise of 1.5°C equates to a change of 2.7°F. In the last 100 years the average global temperature has risen almost .8°C, more than half the 1.5°C that scientists tell us we need to avoid reaching. Two-thirds of that warming has occurred since 1975. This change in average global temperature is having significant impacts on our planet and the life it sustains. We can observe this in melting glaciers worldwide, in increased severity of storms and in the increasing speed at which species are becoming extinct. A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2017 indicates the level of the crisis we are facing. Here I quote, "All signs point to ever more powerful assaults on biodiversity in the next two decades, painting a dismal picture of the future of life, including human life." The scientists who wrote this report cite "climate disruption" as an important factor in the significant decline of species since 1900. Findings such as these are the reason I stated just a few minutes ago that the issue of global climate change is a critical issue. One that needs our attention and our efforts.

Yet even with the general scientific consensus around the causes and effects of global climate change, many of our political leaders are intent on avoiding this critical issue. Some of them go so far as to deny that global climate change even exists. These

climate change deniers try to convince us that the scientists who are doing their best to give us the facts are just alarmists. They try to make us believe that these dedicated and hard working scientists are like Chicken Little, running around claiming that the sky is falling. Let me assure you that the sky isn't falling. I don't say that to console us. The scientists aren't alarmists. They are telling us the truth. The truth is that we have a crisis on our hands. What we are doing to our atmosphere may very well result in the collapse of the diversity of life which currently exists, including human life.

Our youth have watched what our politicians are doing. More than that, our youth have watched what our politicians aren't doing. And our youth are telling us that something has to change. Ten days ago I participated in a webinar put on by the UUA Organizing and Strategy Team. The webinar featured several UU youth who are challenging us, our elected leaders and our government to take the threat that climate change poses seriously and to do something to address it. One of the youth participating in that webinar was Levi Draheim. Levi is a 12 year-old youth from the UU Church of Brevard, Florida. He is one of the 20 youth plaintiffs from across the country who are suing the Federal government regarding its role in the current climate crisis. He spoke clearly and passionately about the importance of each of us doing all that is in our power to challenge the status quo. He let all of the webinar participants know that we have to demand action. He is leading us through his involvement in a legal action on the national scale.

Another youth that we heard from was Sophia Geiger. Sophia is 16 and attends the UU Church of Silver Springs, Maryland. In her role as the National Organizer of Fridays for Future, USA, Sophia spoke to what she is doing to motivate people to bring the issue of climate change to the forefront of national attention. Sophia is one of the people who has been actively engaged in organizing the Climate Strike that will be happening this Friday, September 20th. Youth such as Levi and Sophia inspire me. They also make me aware that there is much more I could be and need to be doing on the issue of climate change.

One of the other webinar speakers was Maeve McBride, Director of 350Vermont and a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, Vermont. 350Vermont is an affiliate of 350.org, a national organization that is working to build "a future that's just, prosperous, equitable and safe from the effects of climate change." Maeve told us that 350 is partnering with youth in helping to organize strikes, not just across this country but around the world. As of September 5th, 450 climate strikes are planned in the U.S. and 1100 will occur worldwide.

What I have just shared gives you just a small sample of how Unitarian Universalists across this country are getting involved around the issue of climate change. At the national level, Unitarian Universalists have been raising the red flag around climate change for more than a decade. In 2006 the delegates to the UUA General Assembly in St. Louis, Missouri voted overwhelmingly in support of a Statement of Conscience titled, "Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change." Here is a small portion of what that Statement of Conscience says:

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called by our seventh Principle to affirm and promote "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." We envision a world in which all people are assured a secure and meaningful life that is ecologically responsible and sustainable, in which every form of life has intrinsic value. In other words, Unitarian Universalists are called to defer to a balance between our individual needs and those of all other organisms.

The issues just mentioned in that Statement definitely resonate with the members of this Fellowship. I say that because in January this congregation voted to add a sixth line to our recently adopted Mission Statement. You can find our Mission Statement on the front page of your Order of Service. Notice the last line—"sustain our living planet." Working to sustain our living planet is exactly what the youth and adults I spoke of previously were and are asking of us.

The moment a Fellowship member pointed out that this line needed to be added to our Mission Statement, I knew that people here felt passionate about this matter. With that in mind, I have made a couple of significant decisions this year about where to invest my time and energy. Several months ago I was approached about serving on the Board of a newly forming statewide organization, the Montana Interfaith Power and Light. The purpose of this organization is stated clearly in its Bylaws. "Montana Interfaith Power and Light inspires, organizes and motivates people of faith and conscience to take bold and just action on the climate crisis." With the sixth line of our Mission Statement in mind, I knew what my answer ought to be and my response was yes, I would serve on the Board. And then last month, at the first official meeting of that Board, I was asked if I would be willing to serve as its President. Like before, I thought I knew what this congregation would want my answer to be. Again, I said yes. And in the role of President of that Board the third vote I asked for was to acknowledge and demonstrate support of the Gallatin Valley Climate Strike. The vote from the Board members was affirmative. The Strike will occur this Friday afternoon. You can find information about it in your Order of Service inserts and on the bulletin board in the Social Hall.

And just this week, I had the opportunity to again affirm this congregation's interest in and dedication to the issue of sustaining our living planet. At the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association meeting, the Rev. Jody McDevitt asked that the group vote to support the Gallatin Valley Climate Strike. About 20 people were present at the meeting, people of a wide range of religious traditions. There were Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Christian Scientists, Latter Day Saints, Muslims, Buddhists and others traditions as well. That group, which as you might imagine, has had difficulty at times agreeing on some things, voted unanimously to support the climate strike. Those present committed ourselves to going back to our respective congregations and asking them to show up for the march. Rev. McDevitt then invited everyone planning to participate in the strike to attend a poster and sign making gathering at First Presbyterian Church starting at 7:00 pm this Thursday evening. Poster making supplies will be provided.

Since I know how perceptive and intelligent you folks are, I am pretty sure you know where I am heading with this sermon. So let me get to the point. I come to you today to invite you and to encourage you to join me and members of congregations

throughout our valley in participating in the Gallatin Valley Climate Strike this Friday afternoon. At our Board meeting tomorrow evening, I will be asking our Board to authorize those of us who show up for the event to carry our UUFB banner during the march that will occur.

In my time as your minister one of the things I have heard again and again from people in this community is that UUFB members show up when it comes to important social issues. Folks, I am here to tell you that the issue of global climate change is, without a doubt, the most important issue of our lifetime. We don't have time to sit back and wait to see what is going to happen. We don't have time to allow our elected officials to kick the can down the road. If we delay much longer, there won't be any can to kick, there won't be any road to kick it down, and there quite possibly won't be any human left capable of kicking anything, let alone a non-existent can.

The stakes are very high my friends. I know that it may seem there is little any one of us can do to change the situation we humans have gotten ourselves into. As individuals, that is true. Any one of us can do very little. But we must do the little we are capable of. Possibly the best thing we can do is unite with other individuals in a common cause. Together, we can do so much more than any one of us can do by ourselves. That is the reason I am asking you to join me, members of other faith communities, and youth of the Gallatin Valley at the Climate Strike this Friday. I can't tell you that by attending the strike we will change the world. But I can tell you that if we continue on the path we are currently on, the world will change in ways that will leave the children of the present and future wondering how we could have been so complacent about, and so complicit in, the devastation of the environment that has made it possible for humans to survive and thrive.

In closing, I would like us to hear again the words of Rebecca Solnit from our earlier reading.

...Taking action is the best way to live in conditions of crisis and violation, for your spirit and your conscience, as well as for society. It's entirely compatible with grief and horror; you can work to elect climate heroes while being sad. There are no guarantees – but just as Sakharov and Sharansky probably didn't imagine that the Soviet Union would dissolve itself in the early 1990s, so we can anticipate that we don't exactly know what will happen and how our actions will help shape the future. The histories of change that have made me hopeful are often about small groups that seem at the outset unrealistic in their ambition...

None of us is able to change the past. What we have done is done. We may, however, be able to make a positive difference in what the future will be. Let us set ourselves to that task as we head to the streets to make our voices heard.

So may it be.