

## FUTURE PROMISE

A sermon given for the Touchstone of Covenant service

by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason

at UU Wellesley Hills on

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What on earth ever gave us the idea that Noah and his Ark made a good story for children? And yet, somehow, we tell it to them early and often; it makes a deep impression, one they never forget. I still remember illustrated versions of that tale from my youth; I remember playing with various model arks replete with figurines of Noah and his family and all of those animals, two by two, nestled on board, safe from catastrophe, floating above it. My friends had these miniature arks in their collection of toys, and Noah was our collective hero. What was missing in the scenes we played out, of course, were the flood waters. They already had receded and a rainbow had appeared over the heads of Noah and the other survivors; that was the sunny conclusion we remembered most vividly from the children's version of the Biblical account.

That rainbow represented the covenant that the Creator God made with Noah in the Book of Genesis, that God would never again destroy the creature life of this world. The rainbow appears along this first mention of covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures, where covenant is a central religious concept throughout. Living in covenant, a faithful people hold to promise — both a promise made in the past and a promise offered to the future. Made in the image of this Creator God, these scriptures tell us, we continually make promises of our own. As Jewish theological Martin Buber has observed, we human beings are “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, and promise-restoring creatures.”

The flood almost immediately becomes a source of regret for God, because God soon recognizes that God has broken an implicit promise with Creation itself. Certainly, Creation had become a sore disappointment to God; it had become over-run by giants who were prone to such wickedness such that God doubted whether any earthly life was salvageable. What could be saved, God concluded,

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was the one who was righteous in his generation, namely Noah. So Noah and his family were given very precise instructions to ensure their survival and also very specific instruction about what to save, all those living things that ought to be kept alive, two by two, in anticipations of generations to come.

After the flood, God enters into an explicit covenant with Creation, evoking those later promises God makes to the Chosen People — of blessings of ever more and continuous life, life abundant. The rainbow serves as the emblem of that new promise that God puts in words, telling Noah: “As long as Earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

While those natural rhythms have not ceased, we notice that they have become increasingly irregular with sudden climate change and rapid global warming. Extreme weather events have had catastrophic effects on entire islands and countries; rising global temperatures only make those likely to become more frequent, leading to the displacement of populations, the widespread failures of crops the decimations of habitats. In recent years, I’m sure that several of you here have noticed how our own local seasons have skewed. If we do not stop our current rates of pollution and consumption in America, we will be poised on the brink of environmental cataclysm within a decade. This is a point in human history when we need to stop and consider what can and should be saved. We are confronted with our own obligations to creation. What will we promise today?

A recent voyage over rough waters brought such crucial questions to home our shores, when teenaged climate activist Greta Thunberg arrived in New York harbor. She was in the city in advance of the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit, but sailed there from Sweden, since Greta refuses air travel because of its environmental consequences. She took a high-speed but carbon-neutral sailboat on her trans-Atlantic trip, and although she arrived somewhat behind schedule, she landed in time to participate in the #ClimateStrike that youth led worldwide held this past Friday, in a mass action that involved millions and millions of people worldwide, made international headlines, and captured the attention of enormous audiences. She travelled to these shores, our shores, across seas that are rapidly rising, and she will not let any of us forget that fact.

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If you have seen or heard Greta speak or read any of the collected speeches contained in her book, No One is Too Small to Make a Difference, you know her communications are quite blunt and also deeply affecting. She claims that her being on the autism spectrum makes it impossible for her to soft-peddle her sense of urgency around the current climate crisis and her panic at the lack of coordinated efforts, a panic that I know many of you here in this Sanctuary share. “There are no gray areas when it comes to survival,” Greta declares. “Either we go on as a civilization or we don’t.” She has concluded: “We cannot save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change — and it has to start today.”

Greta entered the global arena just last year, and at the tender age of 15, when she began going on strike from her high school and sitting in front of the Swedish Parliament to protest continued governmental inaction around the climate crisis. This launched the now-global Fridays for Future student movement. Greta she spoken on major stages, and very recently before the US Congress; in recognition of her advocacy, she was awarded an Ambassador of Conscience Award by Amnesty International and nominated for a Nobel Prize. She will remain a vocal proponent of what she calls “transformative climate action” thought the coming Climate Week.

“You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes. Until you start focusing on what needs to be done rather than what is politically possible, there is no hope,” Greta tells her audiences. “We can’t solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis... We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people.” The people, Greta suggests, are indeed promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, and promise-restoring creatures.

We surely do need to enter a new kind of covenant with creation. “If we will have the wisdom to survive.. if we will make our seasons welcome here, asking not too much of earth or heaven,” poet, farmer, and conservationist Wendell Berry writes, “then... the lives our lives prepare will live here,” although likely in a different way than we do now. The lay leader I share the chancel with this morning, my Worship Associate Therese Kelley, this kind and gentle, determined and tireless soul you see before you has since my arrival here at UU Wellesley

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Hills been asking me what I plan for us to do in response the current climate crisis. She keeps asking because much to her consternation (and now also to mine), I have not yet formulated much of one. I have only harbored a stubborn belief that we can somehow find the wisdom to survive, together.

In honor of this Climate Week, we will be launching our own Rainbow Project in this congregation. During our Fellowship Hour, we will ask people to write on brightly colored ribbons something they love and fear losing due to climate change, or lament having already lost. It will give us all a chance to share our concerns and sorrow with one another. Then we will ask people reflect on those sorrows and concerns and to choose to sign those ribbons that declare a particular threat or cost they themselves are willing to combat or offset — either through legislative advocacy, direct action, or financial support, working for local zoning reform, say, or lobbying for the Green New Deal at the national level.

“Everything counts,” Greta has told audiences. “What you do counts.” As she has repeatedly said, “You are never too small to make a difference.” So while we can be savvy in working for large-scale systemic changes, we can also make personal commitments to changing our own behavior — and should, as a matter of remaining a faithful people. Consider this a basic spiritual discipline in your religious life. You may stop eating meat altogether, for instance, or drinking bottled water. You might avoid any unnecessary air travel. You may join a group that plants trees. You may start to rely on mass transit for your commute. In time, larger alterations will be required of us. Soon, it will no longer be enough for us to have a church that is a Green Sanctuary, as this one proudly is, or to drive electric cars. We will need to make major sacrifices of the sake of the future.

Greta explains that those who have the largest carbon footprint also have the largest obligation to see that changes occur as fast as possible. Make no mistake: everyone here has a large carbon footprint, myself included. It seems outrageous to me that I can get in my own automobile with its combustible engine burning fossil fuel and drive it any time I like for as long as I like wherever I like, just because I live in the suburbs now. I live like a giant in an are populated by other giants; I regularly get on the road and get caught in traffic with other people doing exactly the same thing when I can see plain as day, even if I am driving at night, that this is in no way environmentally sustainable and also that there is

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nothing whatsoever to stop me. Nothing, that is, besides the nearly forgotten notion of covenant.

Covenant asks us to keep promises that others will not make or perhaps might make but break. It is not a social contract to be endlessly renegotiated with others, whether those others include our immediate neighbors or foreign powers. Our covenantal promises remain our own to keep. “Let us covenant with one another to keep faith with the source of life knowing that we are not our own, Earth made us,” the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker declared. Earth made us and Earth sustains us and the rest of humanity along with all of creature life, and we strain the source of life at our peril. Already species are going extinct at an alarming rate; birds in North America are disappearing by the millions.

Our reliance on fossil fuels needs to end and we need to fast-track the development of natural energy sources. If we do not take our cues from environmentalists like Greta and start boarding those carbon-neutral sailboats, if we do not take radical measures soon, we might be faced with the dreaded prospect of building arks to no one’s specifications, with nary a rainbow in sight, under the threat of children, ours and others’, being left adrift.

Several of you participated in the #ClimateStrike this past Friday; some may yet participate in the one planned for this coming Friday. As important as it is to march in protests, but it’s more important to become part of this global movement to save our planet. Last week, a dear friend of mine called into his daughter’s schools so he could take the both of them into the Boston #ClimateStrike. I texted him to tell the girls how proud I was of the two of them, but I see now that I sent the wrong message.

Instead, I should have told them their witness, their calling all of us to account for their futures, was humbling, chastening, inspiring, and mobilizing, each in turn. I should have told them how grateful I was to them and Greta and those in their generation whose heightened sense of urgency is our clarion call to immediate action. They want us to enter faithfully into a new covenant with Creation and them.

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For years, I thought that children were captivated by Noah and his Ark because they themselves were so newly launched into life, and matters of life and death still seemed so stark to them. I think differently about that ancient story now. Regarding our climate crisis, Greta has said: “The main solution is so simple that even a small child could understand it.” We must make promises that bind us more tightly to the future and one another. Children never forget whether we have kept the promises we made or broken them, nor should they. Nor should we. My today prayer is that we become people who make big promises and then grow into them, called always into greater love for all of God’s children and creation itself.

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