

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Earth Day - Sunday, April 22, 2018
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Nowhere to Run!
Abraham Lincoln and Climate Change

The earth is the lords and the fullness thereof and all they who dwell therein.

I have a joke for you for earth day but first I must ask forgiveness in advance from any lawyer who might happen to be present. By way of explanation the devil has a wicked sense of humor 😊

An environmentalist died and reported to the pearly gates. St. Peter checked his records and said: 'Ah, you're an environmentalist - you're in the wrong place.' Thinking that heaven could never make an error, the environmentalist reported to the gates of hell and was let in.

Pretty soon, the environmentalist got dissatisfied with the heat and smoke and started implementing eco-friendly improvements. After a while, global warming, air and water pollution were under control. The landscape was covered with grass and plants, the food was organic, and the people were happy. The environmentalist had become a pretty popular guy.

One day God calls Satan up on the telephone and said, 'So, how's it going down there in hell?' Satan replied, 'Hey, things are going great. We've clean air and water, the temperature is better and the food tastes better, and there's no telling what this environmentalist is going to fix next.'

God replies, 'What? You've got an environmentalist? That's a mistake; he should never have gotten down there, send him up here.'

Satan said, 'No way. I like having an environmentalist on the staff, and I'm keeping him.'

God said, 'Send him back up here or I'll sue.'

Satan laughed uproariously and answered, 'Yeah, right. And just where are you going to get a lawyer?'

From the Old testament:

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

“What is the price of five sparrows—two copper coins? And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows. Yet God does not forget a single one of them.

The fate of mankind, as well as religion, depends on the emergence of a new faith in the future. Armed with such a faith, we might find it possible to re-sanctify the earth. Al Gore

I want today to look at how Abraham Lincoln made a structural change in the world of slavery and apply the lessons learned for implementing the structural changes necessary over climate change. The challenges are remarkably similar...

Climate change is at its heart one of the greatest spiritual crises mankind has known in recorded history.

But why you ask is it a spiritual crisis?

Because when people deny the massive scientific consensus that climate change is even happening, that is a spiritual crisis; because when we don't let the truth set us free, that is a spiritual problem.

When we know that the burning of fossil fuels is killing us and the planet and we keep on using them because of special interest lobbying, that is a spiritual problem of greed.

When we run an economic system that exploits the earth and its natural systems- that is a failure to nurture the earth, its animals and plants and human beings. It is a failure of **connection** for spirituality is always about connection.

failure of stewardship of creation- again a spiritual problem.

So, what spiritual skills are we going to need to survive climate change and eventually reverse it?

Thinking outside the box, what are these skills and where might we look for them?

1) Timing and its twin: Foresight!

At the time of the civil war when Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States, he knew something that his followers and critics did not. **That the time of the civil war was the best most opportune time to end slavery permanently.** When the war would be over slavery would likely reignite in the South. Now was the time to end it permanently. It was not to be a bargaining chip to end the war. It was to be non-negotiable. History proved him right.

The timing to end carbon emissions and switch out fossil fuels is now. Why now? We are experiencing frightening weather all over the planet. Tornadoes, hurricanes, storm surges, floods, ever higher temperatures, drought, sea level rise, forest fires that are increasingly more difficult to control, melting ice caps and glaciers and rising sea levels etc. etc.

Worldwide polls show that the world and the General public know that we have a problem. They are believing the scientists at last. What does this have to do with a spiritual skill set? Timing is a spiritual skill that comes from being able to set aside ego and look objectively at the facts and then act when the situation is most opportune.

Lincoln could see far enough into the future to know that if the action was taken immediately, even when the war was at its height, the future would be changed permanently. The man was able to see into the moral future. This is a prophetic spiritual skill found in many religious traditions. Prophets are seers. They see forwards beyond the mists.

Foresight is a spiritual gift that can be asked for as a gift from God. To be able to see forward is not an easy gift to live with. It can be a painful burden to ask God for, but if ever we needed such a prophetic gift the time is now. Do you have a spiritual gift like that? The world needs you if you do!

2) Persistence is a spiritual skill taught by many faiths. Jesus was big on it, particularly when it came to prayer. Islam and Buddhism endorse persistence as a virtue. It is persistence in doing good that these faiths teach us- not to give up when the odds are against you. This is not a foolish persistence but a moral one- persistence when the Greater good is at stake.

Lincoln was a persistent man. He lost every attempt to achieve political office. Time and time again he lost every political office he tried for except one- the Presidency. When it came to getting the 13th Amendment against slavery through Congress, against huge odds, he persisted. He was counseled that it was political suicide for him. He went on anyway and succeeded.

Persistence will be required if we are to go on into the night of climate change. What is coming down the pike is truly frightening if our scientists are correct. It will take all the persistence we have got just to survive against the odds. But for the greater good we must persist; to break our addictions and live lives that will serve the greater good of all species for the rest of time.

3) The spiritual skill of **Resilience**. Resilience is a compendium of skill sets. It requires flexibility, adaptability and humility before what we don't know and have yet to understand. Resilience requires the use of imagination and creativity. As Scripture says: Your young men will have to dream dreams and your old men visions to say nothing about the intuitive gifts of women!

Lincoln told a story. A man had come to him and suggested that Lincoln needed to follow a moral compass and stick to his principles. Lincoln said to him that yes, a compass was necessary. It told the direction **but not how to get there**. There might be mountains in the way, or swamps. Was he to proceed through the swamp and get stuck in it following his compass or seek a way around the swamp?

In other words, was he to think outside the box to get where he needed to go and was that **more** moral than sticking to principles?

Many of us talk of sticking to principles no matter what. But that can get us stuck in the swamp of political deadlock. Spiritual resilience doesn't do that. Jesus said in this regard: "Be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves."

If a pragmatic move rather than an idealistic move would win the day is that allowable? In the film Lincoln, a scene took place on the floor of Congress. One congressman attempted to trap another into saying that all are equal and therefore the negro question would open up unacceptable alternatives **such as voting or even the enfranchisement of women.**

The Congressman replied that all are not in fact morally equal or equally gifted. Some people are in fact morally despicable and some not very intelligent, **but even the morally despicable and mentally challenged, like his opponent on the floor, had a right to equal treatment before the law.** 😊

The issue of climate change inaction has been around the world's political process for too long. But it has not been for want of trying to change that deadlock. When Governments are frozen in place, the spiritual skill is to recognize the swamp and go around it for the greater good. We will need to do this in a thousand ways whenever Governments follow an ideological compass into the swamp. Let's not go there with them!

4) Hope:

The last spiritual skill I want to lift up today is the decision of staying hopeful, no matter what. You say Hope is a decision? I thought it was something you had or not- some kind of a feeling that could come and go?

Not so for Lincoln! Hope for him was the creation of a united nation. When half the country wanted to split the union up Lincoln would have none of it. Lincoln held firm to the hope of Union.

This what he said about that hope and it is memorable. "My dream is of a place and a time where America will once again be seen as the last best hope of earth." How very far is America today from that dream, especially on Earth day! I am sure that Lincoln is rotating in his grave.

Environmentally we cannot look towards the US Federal government at the present for any hope. President Trump has rolled back environmental protections and withdrawn from the Paris Climate change accords. Where does the hope lie?

The Hope lies at the State levels where states like California are determined to uphold the Paris accords. They are making a decision to care for the earth no matter what. They have understood that our survival depends on it.

In Canada we are split over what to do with a pipeline that will take Bitumen to the sea. Saying that this pipeline is in the national interest ignores the fact that fossil fuels are no longer in the National Interest due to the acceleration of Climate change. We will never slow or stop climate change until we sunset fossil fuel use. Dragging our heels on a difficult issue like this one shows lack of leadership. It means taking our eyes off the ball.

Justin Trudeau made a great speech to the French government. I could endorse every word about the environment and sustainability but I know about the Kinder Morgan pipeline and its risks and its cost at \$7.4 billion. In my view it takes us further up the cliff that we have to jump off rather than taking us down the mountain. Trudeau is in my personal prayers. These sorts of decisions are not easy and so I ask what would Jesus do and in the spirit of this sermon what would Lincoln do?

For far too long we in Canada and America have dragged our collective feet on climate change and to our peril.

In North America we still consume and burn more fossil fuels than any other countries, with China and India racing to catch us up. Third world governments use our bad example to prevent any serious reform of practices that foster climate change, saying that this is the way the Developed world has come, and we must follow until we catch up. Then we will change!

Where is the hope? It is in the solar and wind collectors, the electric cars, the recycle programs, fair trade organics and little church services all over the world for earth day. It is planting trees and making individual sacrifices to maintain the hope going forward.

But if Western nations were to move in an earth friendly direction, if there was a sense of urgency to get out of the swamp we have created, we would **lead** climate change initiatives! We have the brains, the skill sets, the research models, the climate computers. All we lack is **the moral political will**. But that is huge.

The Dalai Lama says this:

Instead of an economy that emphasizes profit and requires perpetual growth to avoid collapse, we need to move together towards an economy that provides a satisfactory standard of living for everyone while allowing us to develop our full (including spiritual) potential in harmony with the biosphere that sustains and nurtures all beings, including future generations. He says; If political leaders are unable to recognize the urgency of our global crisis or are unwilling to put the long term good of humankind above the short-term benefit of fossil fuel corporations, we may need to challenge them with sustained campaigns of citizen action.

But how much better it would be if we did not have to do this at all?

How much better would it be if science and religions and governments got together and got down to work for the greater good? How much better it would be if we could put politics aside and cooperate with each other all across the planet for the greater good? I believe we can do this in the West. The slave trade was global at one point, not just a phenomenon in America. But it was ended.

As we learned in Western History, the American people and its Congress and the English people under William Wilberforce could become formidable forces for good. Canada did well as a refuge for slaves as the terminal for the underground railway! Consensus eventually came that slavery was evil.

Those who worked to end slavery did so against formidable odds. Ending slavery was fraught with the lobbying of special interests which is still the major problem with the ending of fossil fuel use. It was not easy to do that to win against special interests but that is what **we** have to do in order to survive.

Neither will it be easy to put the long term good above the short-term benefit of the powerful few, who make money as they wreck the earth.

But if we are able to do this, then we will live closer to the incredible ideals of our faith. For many in power in the world have chosen to forget something absolutely major. **The earth does not belong to us at all.** It belongs to a Great Someone else? Who might that be?

“The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof and all who dwell therein.”

We must save planet earth as a home for all creatures for the rest of time. That is the hope for our children’s children. That is the hope of Earth day. And under God we can and will!
For as Jesus mother said: “With God all things are possible!”

Thanks be to The God, and Father of our lord Jesus Christ, the Creator and sustainer of the universe and all that is. Amen.