FAITH, SCIENCE AND THE CLIMATE

Isaiah 32: 9-17; Psalm 8; Matthew 7: 21-29.

Today, we draw upon both the Bible and the newspaper. We bring together the ancient wisdom of the scriptures – which are foundational for our faith – with what's going on in our world right now. In other words, we intentionally place the world of the text, into dialogue with today's most urgent pressing dilemma facing humanity.

Specifically, what does the scripture have to say that is relevant to the urgent crisis of climate change? Apologies, though, for adding crisis upon crisis, and worry upon worry at this time of covid. But the climate is the ongoing, much more serious crisis, which we must face.

Obviously, the Bible nowhere mentions climate change. The authors never heard of it. But profound texts have a life of their own; they have power to speak across generations to the human condition, even beyond what the original author intended.

Obviously also, the prophet Isaiah, whose words we've been reading today, knew nothing about a corona virus or vaccines, and nothing about fossil fuels or renewable energy. But his words still have power to speak to us, with insight and eloquence.

First, a little background on the prophet Isaiah: He lived in the 8th century before Christ. That puts him more than seven hundred years earlier than Jesus, and about 500 years after Moses. Closer to Moses than to Jesus. We're fortunate to have the words of this spiritual and intellectual giant, who lived about 2,700 years ago.

Isaiah was probably a temple priest, and also an aristocrat of his time, perhaps the most brilliant man of his generation. The eloquence of his words makes him at least a literary genius. But most basically, he's a man of passionate faith in the God of the Exodus, the compassionate One, the God of justice and mercy, the God who cares about slaves.

Isaiah, according to chapter 6, had an overwhelming experience of the awesome holiness of God in the temple, perhaps what we would call an 'ecstatic' experience, not unlike that of Moses with the burning bush. He believed God was calling him to speak God's Word to the people.

In the first chapter of Isaiah we hear him calling out a message that he believed he had received from God. This could indicate a deluded megalomaniac. But this man of moral vision and eloquence was no maniac. Listen to his words:

"Thus says the Lord: When you appear before me…, bringing offerings is futile; I cannot endure solemn assembles with iniquity… even though you make many prayers, I will not listen…, cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

This is 'ethical monotheism': the passionate faith that God is good, and intends human creatures also to be good.

Isaiah is no megalomaniac, and he's also not a man with a crystal ball, not a clairvoyant who thinks he sees the future. Predicting the future is incidental to the prophet: A prophet is one who speaks out for God and God's will in the world. His words were powerful enough that we're still listening to them nearly 3000 years later.

Isaiah is notable as one of the early prophets who linked his faith in God to social justice. That was historically important in itself. From our perspective, we may see him as a shrewd social analyst and political commentator (though no such concepts existed in those days). He cries out publicly to the people, and also speaks directly to the king about the injustices that he sees going on in his country, and criticizes the foolishness of the king's international alliances.

Interesting, that in this particular text, Isaiah 32, he is addressing women specifically, and apparently the comfortable, prosperous women: "Rise up you women who are at ease!... Rise up you complacent ones!" Though

women were not politically powerful at that time, he apparently thought these women had some kind of influence.

Isaiah was telling them that foolish and unrighteous ways were leading the nation to destruction. Consequences would follow, he believed;

God would punish the nation for its sins. He tells the people to tremble, to shudder, about the horrible disasters that are coming. The land will be laid waste, the crops will fail, and the city will become the haunt of wild animals.

But the people didn't believe Isaiah. They ignored him, laughed him off, dismissed his message. But he turned out to be right. Just as he said: the nation was indeed attacked and ransacked by a foreign army, the Assyrians, and the city of Jerusalem lay long under siege. The people suffered terribly, and many were killed.

That was a long time ago, in a world very different from ours. But I suggest that we can hear God address us also, through this text. Considering what we reading these days in the newspapers and hear on TV, we too are a threatened people; we too are being warned of great dangers and disasters lying ahead.

Are we trembling, are we shuddering, about the calamities that have not yet touched us seriously here in southern Ontario, but will surely reach us eventually? Have you seen what's happening to California, Oregon, and Washington? Have you seen the pictures of the utter desolation of whole towns destroyed by drought and forest fire? Have you seen the drought, and floods, happening in many places all over the world? Are we trembling about the hurricanes, which more and more are devastating lives in the gulf coast?

One big difference between Isaiah's world and ours is the place of science in our modern world. Isaiah was a brilliant man, but did not have the benefit of modern science. In the case of the corona virus, we are urged to "believe in the science." "Trust the scientists." And surely that's right. We have to listen to the doctors, the epidemiologists and virologists, and vaccine researchers.

This goes for climate change too. The scientists have been telling us for at least thirty years now (almost unanimously) that great danger lies ahead, because of our human use of fossil fuels – coal, oil and natural gas – energy sources on which our whole technological civilization is built.

The warnings have come from very respectable places - like hundreds of scientists from all over the world, cooperating under the United Nations. These are the marine biologists, the biochemists, the astrophysicsts, the glaciologists, the oceanographers. Climate science is multi-disciplinary, and they all concur that human use of fossil fuels is perpetrating drastic climate change. Our modern industry and transportation systems are emitting millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year. CO2 and methane and other greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere, and are gradually transforming the climate and the biosphere.

We have basically ignored that warning. And powerful people, especially in the fossil fuel industries, have told us lies, and done all they can to confuse us and deny the facts. After all, the coal, oil and natural gas industries are huge and powerful. Many people have a lot to lose if the scientists are taken seriously.

Now, in the case of climate change, we're beginning to see the scientists' predictions coming true. The governor of California declares: "If you do not believe in science, I hope you believe in observed reality. The hots are getting a lot hotter, and the wets are getting a lot wetter."

It's not just in California. In January in Australia, we saw 50,000 sq. kilometres of land consumed by fire. Record wildfires have raged also in B.C. and Alberta. A Siberian town in the Russian Arctic registered 38 degrees Centigrade. We hear that in India temperatures can reach to 50 degrees. Recently we've heard of unprecedented melting of the Greenland ice sheet, and a huge cavity, 1000 ft. deep in an Antarctic glacier, threatening to raise the sea levels, which are on the way to inundating huge stretches of coastal land all over the world.

Other scientists and engineers have been telling us about the possible alternatives – namely, about forms of renewable energy that do not have

these destructive side effects. Besides the use of water power, there's also wind and solar, and a few other things, which have to be, and can be, massively implemented.

But most of us don't want to know this, we'd rather not hear that we must change the way we do things, must transition, urgently, to new forms of energy production. And so, by and large, for decades now, we – I mean most of the population, and our governments leaders – have refused to listen to the science, and time is running out. Consequences will follow.

This reminds me of the text from Jesus, that we read today in Matthew 7. Jesus talked about someone who built his house on sand: "the rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew, and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was the fall of it." So also, today, if we build our economy on the sands of oil fields, on coal, and natural gas, our civilization will fall, and great will be the fall of it.

If Isaiah were here with us now, he'd be shouting out: Tremble! Shudder! It will come to you also, even you, comfortable, complacent ones, right here in southern Ontario!

Now, as I've said, we in our time are different from Isaiah in many ways. He was a man of the ancient world, who thought in terms of divine, supernatural intervention, of God up above, pulling strings and controlling both the weather and the politics.

Today we still believe in God, but we can no longer think of God intentionally sending out armies, or hurricanes, or forest fires to punish us. We all have, in some degree, a scientific mentality. Even if we have no higher education in the sciences, our high school science has taught us the rudiments of scientific method: methods of disciplined, critical investigation, of testing and verification, of double blind studies, and peer review.

We don't need supernatural explanations of what is happening with our weather. And we know about viruses never heard of in Isaiah's day. We have learned over the last few centuries that the physical sciences give us

the right way to know the physical world. We cannot allow ourselves to be deceived either by ideologies, or religious delusions.

But of course the physical sciences can't tell us everything. The physical sciences have nothing to say about why we exist, can tell us nothing about the meaning of our lives. The physical sciences can tell us nothing about justice, love and mercy. And this is important, because the climate dilemma is moral and spiritual at its base. It's about moral choices, it's about wisdom or foolishness, greed and responsibility.

Our knowledge of God, which we call faith, is not, of course, something verifiable in a laboratory. It's a completely different way of knowing. But rational people can still choose to believe.

Our faith in God is very different from scientific knowledge. It's more akin to our knowledge of beauty; more like our moral or ethical awareness. Faith in God is more like our love and trust in the people we are close to. There are deeper things in life than what the physical sciences can tell us. The knowledge and wisdom that faith gives you is something you know deep in your soul.

Jesus told us to love God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength. In other words, he was saying that we respond to God's truth with our whole being. Our minds and critical intelligence, Yes! And, more than that, with our whole selves, our whole lives.

So our faith is not so much about facts, as it is about wisdom. Wisdom about loving and just relationships, and also, wisdom in our relationship to the natural world.

Because faith, love for God, and love for the world, is not just an intellectual theory about the existence of a Supreme Being. No, it gives us a certain special kind of truth, and it also motivates us to act.

Notice that action is very much part of these texts we've read today. Jesus says, "Those who say 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do the will of my Father," – they are not part of his movement.

Isaiah, 700 years earlier, said something similar: that God rejects our worship, if we persist in living unjustly. God is not interested in our solemn assemblies – i.e., our church services, our hymns, our prayers – if we do not do justice. “Seek justice,” he says. “Rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Now, we have a slightly new slant on this in our time. Our righteousness must include environmental justice, ecological justice.

Because we’re in an unprecedented situation, wherein the natural world, the animals, the fish, the forests and the lakes, the oceans, the coral reefs, are in danger from us.

The Psalm we read today, Psalm 8, speaks of our human dominion on the earth. Centuries before Christ, the psalmist wrote:

“You [O God] have made us a little less than divine, and crowned us with glory and honour. You have made us rulers over all your creation, and put all things under our feet…

It’s a fact. We humans, with our clever brains and hands, are very powerful. We really do have dominion. But not ultimate dominion. If we abuse our power, eventually nature catches up with us and reins us in.

The concept of ‘ecological justice’, or ‘eco-justice’, means we actually have obligations to other creatures, on whom we depend, who deserve our respect and care.

So today Isaiah would say to us: Seek a sustainable life style! Rescue the forests. Defend the lakes and the oceans. Plead for the wild animals and the thousands of species threatened with extinction. They, together with us, are all intimately related in a fine, intricately balanced eco-system.

So what do we do? Perhaps we can all be prophetic in our small ways. None of us is a Moses, or an Isaiah, and certainly not a Jesus. We can all speak God’s truth. We can all send ripples of truth and justice out into the world around us. We can all be part of an ecological culture, by what we

do, by what we say. As citizens, as voters, as advocates, as consumers, we can all be part of the solutions that are so urgently needed.

A hymn writer summed it up beautifully:

“Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently; nourish the life of the world in our care; gift of great wonder, ours to surrender, trust for the children tomorrow will bear.”

Hymn: 307: “Touch the earth gently.”