



Young people stand outside a courthouse in Portland, Oregon awaiting outcome of case Photo credit: Robin Loznak/Our Children's Trust

The Fierce Urgency of Now

For those who care about God's creation, the present time is one of crisis, and yet it is also a time of possibility. It is a time in which the persistent call of God is reaching out to us amid climate threats, burning forests, and poisoned waters. Fortunately, we are gifted with a rich theological tradition from those who have faced immense dangers and powerful forces in the past. The prophets of our faith have continually pointed to the need to act with all speed to meet the imperatives of justice. As 2020 marks the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, we are confronted as much as ever with the fierce urgency of now.

www.creationjustice.org/urgency

“The Fierce Urgency of Now”

A Prophetic Christian Understanding of the Climate Crisis

“The Fierce Urgency of Now” is a phrase that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. deployed in his address at New York’s Riverside Church when he articulated his opposition to the Vietnam War:

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The ‘tide in the affairs of men’ does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: “Too late.”¹

King’s words resonate for those addressing today’s ecological crisis: now is the time for decisive action before it is too late. After 21 youth faced yet another delay to the start of their trial of a lawsuit against the federal government over its failure to protect their generation from climate change, hundreds rallied outside a courthouse in Eugene, Oregon with signs and banners that read: “fierce urgency of now.” The phrase speaks powerfully to how people of faith confront critical dangers and possibilities in a time of crisis. Indeed, such a prophetic awareness of time amid peril extends back to the Bible and even the first words uttered by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark.

KAIROS: JESUS’ UNDERSTANDING OF TIME

Jesus’ ministry begins in a time of turmoil following the arrest of John the Baptist. In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus declares, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Theologians such as Paul Tillich have unpacked the nuance and significance of the Greek word for “time” in these opening words of Jesus.

Unlike English, Greek has two distinctly different words for “time”: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is time that is measured and definite, as of a ticking clock. *Kairos*, by



Rev. Dr. Terri Hord Owens approaching the Pacific Ocean. Photo credit: Creation Justice Ministries

contrast, signifies the fulfillment of the right action at the right moment. In the New Testament, the coming of Jesus is what the apostle Paul describes as the *fullness of time*.

Tillich elaborated an understanding of *kairos* by situating it within moments of profound catastrophe which are paradoxically also moments of unique opportunity. For Tillich, such moments are charged with God as “the eternal breaks into the temporal, shaking and transforming it.”²

Reflect: What unique gifts, perspectives, and actions can Christians bring to this kairos moment in struggling to address the twin crises of climate and inequality?

“...we act as if we have all the time we want and all the solutions. I’m only a child and I don’t have all the solutions. I don’t—I want you to realize, neither do you... You don’t know how to bring the salmon back up in a dead stream. You don’t know how to bring back an animal now extinct. And you can’t bring back the forests that once grew where there is now a desert. If you don’t know how to fix it, please stop breaking it.”

Severn Suzuki, child speaker at 1992 at Rio de Janeiro United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

AN INSPIRED TIME

On at least one occasion, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke explicitly about the meaning of *kairos*. Upon leaving Montgomery, Alabama to pastor in Atlanta, he reflected on the beginnings of the civil rights movement and spoke of *kairos* as the fullness of time when “history is pregnant, ready to give birth to a great idea and a great movement.” Such a prophetic awareness of time is ultimately not about consciousness of the dire situation faced. It is about consciousness of the great possibilities at hand in a God-charged moment. It is this awareness of time that people of faith can bring to addressing the great crisis of our time, the climate crisis.

KAIROS AMID APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA

The power of *kairos* as a theological concept has resurfaced in other moments of extreme crisis—most notably, during apartheid in South Africa, when *kairos* was distinctly related to justice. The reflections that emerged gain significance today as the climate crisis hits with disproportionate force upon communities of color, people living in poverty, and the global South. Notably, a United Nations report warns of global “climate apartheid.”³

In 1985, a group of theologians, clergy, and lay leaders in South Africa formed in response to an intensifying crisis of death and destruction. Their manifesto, the *Kairos Document*, defined *kairos* as “a moment of grace and opportunity, the favorable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action.”



September 2019 youth climate strike. Photo credit: United Methodist Women

For those issuing the document, there was but one choice:

Our present *kairos* calls for a response from Christians that is biblical, spiritual, pastoral and, above all, prophetic. It is not enough in these circumstances to repeat generalized Christian principles. We need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand.⁴

Reflect: From the pages of the Bible and voices of the oppressed, we are challenged to ‘do justice now.’ This often requires courage and sacrifice as we live out our Christian principles. How will you prepare spiritually to take on this role?

Reflecting on *Kairos* after the Crucifixion: Thoughts on Preaching

A critical question faced by the followers of Jesus after his crucifixion was how to continue living with faith and hope in a moment when the “fullness of time” experienced in Jesus appeared to have come to a violent end. In the first chapter of Acts, before Jesus ascends, he declares, “It is not for you to know the times or periods (*kairos*) set by God’s own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Herein lies an interpretive key for preaching during the Easter liturgical season and beyond: through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we continue to discern and bear witness to seasons of time charged with the power and presence of God.

The climate crisis of today can cause doubt in the power and possibility of God’s presence in the face of present suffering and future threats. For many, the climate crisis is a faith crisis. During this time, preachers have the opportunity to point to current signs of God’s presence.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The concept of *kairos* reflects the overarching understanding of hope found in the Bible. Over and over again, its pages present us with the seemingly impossible becoming possible amid the most difficult of circumstances. From the liberation of slaves from Egypt to the resurrection of Jesus, we are repeatedly presented with the undying hope of our faith. This hope is found even when the future seems bleak. In ancient Israel, as Jerusalem was under siege and people were on the verge of exile, Jeremiah purchased a plot of land demonstrating a confidence in a better future (Jeremiah 32). Like Jeremiah, we must make an investment in the present moment while keeping hope in future possibilities. The struggle for climate justice is the best investment to be made today for tomorrow.

What we do or don’t do right now will affect my entire life and the lives of my children and grandchildren. What we do or don’t do right now, me and my generation can’t undo in the future. Greta Thunberg in 2019, teen Swedish climate activist



September 2019 youth climate strike. Photo credit: United Methodist Women

Like trees planted as seedlings, we wait expectantly for the tree that will come, bearing fruit for a better future. We must tend and care for the tree as it grows, however. Environmental damage is not ‘fixed’ in a day or even a year. Like Jeremiah, we must work together now for a better future for all of God’s beloved creation.

Signs of God's Presence Today

BLACK CHURCH FOOD SECURITY NETWORK

The Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN)⁵ is building a sustainable, community-centered food system to combat 'food apartheid' by connecting Black farmers with historically African-American churches. By providing access to healthy, fresh, affordable food, pastor and BCFSN founder Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III, considers the network a "self-help" organization which provides guidance and support for people starting gardens on church-owned lands, establishing pop-up produce stands, and connecting with Black farmers to stock those stands. These churches are a powerful cultural and socio-political force that has been overlooked in many food and environmental circles. Since 2015, BCFSN has worked to change this by expanding to include many churches and farms in Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia.

UNITED METHODIST WOMEN TACKLE METHANE POLLUTION

United Methodist Women (UMW) has been actively working to stop methane pollution. The primary ingredient in natural gas, methane, is 87 times more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, with toxins linked to respiratory diseases, brain and spinal defects, cancer, and reproductive



Maxine working in Pleasant Hope's garden where she helped turn 1,500 square feet of yard into a nationally recognized garden which produced 1,200 pounds of produce per year. Photo credit: Rev. Dr. Heber Brown, III

problems. UMW acted with urgency, delivering almost 2,000 letters to Chevron's corporate headquarters calling on Chevron's CEO to decrease the company's methane waste. They have also released statements and testified at public hearings against proposed rule changes that would weaken federal pollution safeguards. "We are urging Chevron to reduce emissions of methane and other co-pollutants that harm the health of our grandchildren and God's earth," said Marlene Ward, president of Cal-Nevada Conference United Methodist Women.



UMW members mark their hometowns on a poster that urges Chevron to cut methane emissions. Photo credit: Mark DuBose.

Reflect: Amid environmental degradation and injustice, where do you see God's presence at work today?

“Oil and gas companies bribed my people with thousands of dollars to lease portions of their land so that they can drill for oil and gas... Our young children play outdoors, and they stand the greatest health risk from air pollution because their lungs are still developing. The risk of asthma is great and causes them to miss school. Our pregnant women will have problems with their unborn babies. The oil and gas industry must take responsibility for their pollution, rather than asking the public and our environment to bear the burden.” Daryl Junes-Joe is from the Navajo Nation Reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico serves on the national board of directors of United Methodist Women.

THE STORY OF RENEWABLE NATICK

In Natick, Massachusetts, bolstered by his faith community and in partnership with other allies, Rev. Dr. Ian Mevorach helped launch an advocacy campaign called “Renewable Natick” to move their town into a 100% clean energy future. For months, the group lobbied local town meeting members and worked to build public support, resulting in the passing of a resolution calling for a transition to net zero greenhouse gas emissions, in the public and private sectors, by 2050. Speaking of his role in the initiative, Ian

remarked, “The moral language and spiritual practices of our traditions help people discover a sense of calling, of conviction, and of partnering with God in the movement for justice. We also know how to build communities of trust and action.”

For more inspiring articles as well as additional Earth Day materials, please visit our website at www.creationjustice.org/urgency.



First Congregational Church of Palo Alto. Another UCC church at the 2018 climate march. Photo credit: Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt

Reflect: As we face the current ecological crisis, each community of faith can discover an environmental justice calling in its own backyard. What is your next step?

A Fierce Urgency of Now

In 2018, the UN's *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)*⁶ issued a call for immediate action on the climate crisis. The report highlighted the effects of global warming limited to 1.5°C and also included the notable adverse consequences projected if this mark is missed, placing hundreds of millions of people at extreme risk for droughts, floods, forest fires, sea level rise, food scarcity, poverty, and more. The report concluded that CO2 emissions would need to be drastically cut by 2030 to avoid these catastrophic risks. The ramifications of this report go well beyond predictions of severe weather because the groaning pains of a hurting earth are intertwined with the socioeconomic realities of injustice. Later, the UN called upon “spiritual leaders to unlock spiritual pathways for addressing climate change. We call on them to help their followers reconnect with the wonders of nature and creation, nurture love for the planet and foster compassion and reconciliation.”⁷

CHILDREN'S SERMON—HOPE AND TREES

Obtain several tree seedlings to have in front of the children—enough for every child. Explain the amazing job trees do for us and the world, such as helping us stay healthy, by providing and cleaning the air for us, keeping us a little cooler in the summer with their shade, and providing homes for countless creatures. Much of our food comes from trees—apples, oranges, cherries, almonds, and more! Ask the children what they like about trees.

A little girl named Mae and her family were having a really tough time. Their pastor, Reverend Ruffin, wanted to help them. He told them about a story in the Bible about a tree. He wanted to give them hope—not the kind of hope when you say, “I hope I have pizza for lunch,” when we’re saying what we wish it would happen. He wanted them to have hope in God—which is about trusting God and knowing that God will help us every day.



Recruiting at the 2019 Disciples General Assembly.
Photo credit: Creation Justice Ministries

Rev. Ruffin told Mae’s family about trees. He told them about a tree of hope in the Book of Job. It was a tree that refused to die. If you tried to cut it down, it would grow back again. It would keep “sending out new branches” (Job 14:7, ICB). Mae and her family began to believe that God would give them the strength and the courage they need to grow each day in the face of hardship. God’s hope-filled presence would not die. It would keep coming back each day.

Conclude the sermon by telling the children that trees can be reminder of the life and hope that God brings, so today we’re going to plant these trees. God gives us trees to feed us, to help us breathe, and sometimes to climb and have fun in! And God gives us trees to remember that we have hope for the future.

Reflect: Many Christians participate in hunger, refugee, and disaster relief ministries. How might such ministries become informed by the numerous inequalities compounded by the climate crisis? For example, consider what drought and food scarcity mean in a world where women and children make up 70 percent of those under the poverty line.

“Our faith in the creator, our love for creation, and our discipleship in the company of Jesus are all being put to the test by this crisis. In fact, our futures, the well-being of our common home, and the very existence of our species are at risk. The call to our churches and ourselves could not be clearer; and our unity, solidarity, and determination have never been more needed by the world.” December 2019 Pastoral Letter on the Climate Emergency, Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches



September 2019 youth climate strike. Photo credit: United Methodist Women

¹ http://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/MLKriverside.htm

² https://www.academia.edu/37691671/The_Rhetoric_of_Kairos_Paul_Tillich's_Reinterpretation

³ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/A_HRC_41_39.pdf

⁴ <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-south-africa-kairos-document-1985/>

⁵ <http://www.blackchurchfoodsecurity.net/>

⁶ IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. *World Meteorological Organization*, Geneva, Switzerland, 32 pp.

⁷ <https://iefworld.org/Talanoa3>



Creation Justice Ministries educates, equips, and mobilizes its 38 member communions and denominations, congregations, and individuals to do justice for God's planet and God's people. Learn more at www.creationjustice.org



TAKING ACTION

Before us is a ten-year window of opportunity to demonstrate how we will respond to God's call. Each church can discern the best ways it can address climate and inequality with all of the means and opportunities before them. To generate thought and conversation in the discernment process, here are a few ways churches can mobilize:

- Pray for people who are currently affected by environmental degradation in all its many forms, and pray to discern ways that you can minister in solidarity with those most impacted.
- Prioritize creation care as a ministry through how you worship. Plan inspired services that continually focus attention on creation care, especially in the present season of *kairos*.
- Complement your worship with educational programing and public forums that develop a robust and informative conversation about the present climate crisis. Enter a period of study and immersion on the climate crisis. Study what the Bible and other theological sources say about creation care.
- Cultivate a climate positive landscape. Through tree planting, gardening, and habitat restoration, pull carbon out of the air through how you make use of your church's landscape.
- Make every election a time to call for values-based voting that expresses care for creation and justice for all. Invite members to take the *Creation Care Voter Pledge* which is a non-partisan effort that supports people of faith in consistently voting their values.
- Become an advocate in your neighborhood, community, or beyond. With the help of local partners, learn about and engage in environmental advocacy issues near you. Write or visit your congressional representative and local officials. Champion legislation that reflects the urgency of our times.
- Become a *kairos* mobilization hub. Through the use of your church building and the actions of your members, provide hospitality and solidarity for those working to address climate and inequality. Prepare your houses of worship to serve as places of refuge during times of natural and human-made disasters.
- Activate a Creation Care team comprised of laypeople, facility management staff, clergy, and respected community leaders. Task them with responsibility for designing and implementing actions that address our climate crisis.
- Invest church money responsibly. Not all banks are equally prudent in what they do with their money, so make sure your church invests and banks with financial institutions that prioritize sustainable, ecologically responsible investments.
- Tell your story! Whether it is your church website or a press release, make what you do for God's creation a visible example of action and hope.

Bike to Church for Earth Day at Second Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. Photo credit: Donald Cochran



THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW—LITURGY

Call to Worship

Reader: Just as Jesus appeared before his disciples in his resurrected form still bearing the scars of the crucifixion—this world is wounded, deeply, yet at the same time, there is resurrection and transformation. We are called to care for creation in its beauty and in its wounded-ness. The resurrection of Jesus offers hope of new life, for all of creation, and for generations to come. God of creation, fill us with this hope, for in our brokenness we can do nothing apart from you, but only through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Responsive Reading (Taken from the Psalms)

Reader: Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent.

All: Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. Grant us courage to act as your hands and feet.

Reader: God covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry.

All: We ask forgiveness as more of your world is wounded, as people suffer, as species die.

Reader: You made people rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

All: Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Prayer

Lord, the wounds of the world are too deep for us to heal. We lift up the sick in body and mind as well as the withered in soul and spirit. We lift up the victims of greed and injustice as well as the prisoners of grief and heartache. We ask for your care and mercy upon all of us. Instill compassion within us for those suffering from injustice. Make us generous with the resources you have entrusted to us. Let your work of rescue be done in us and through us all.¹

Reader:

The words “something is not right” echo within our souls:
The cry of Creation
The voice of God.

Recognition that “these are not ordinary times”
may be the path toward our resurrection.

So we bathe in courage, grasp for community,
Leave the shelter of business-as-usual,
And stare into the face of this unknown future.
We leave our little boxes and cast off our blinders,
And the bright light of Creation’s pain nearly blinds us
And grief nearly chokes us.

But not quite.

Because when there’s enough of us stumbling around,
trying to make a way,
Sooner or later we’ll begin to connect,
And the power of that connection explodes in hope
And a different way can be made
And life can flourish in new and extraordinary ways.

Do you believe? Do you dare?²

¹ Adapted from *The Oxford Book of Prayer*

² Adapted from *Not Ordinary Times*, Allyson Sawtell ©2019



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