

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Right Reverend Steven Charleston, Dean and President of Episcopal Divinity School
Trinity Sunday, June 3, 2007, 11:00 a.m.
Isaiah 6:1-8; Revelation 4:1-11; John 16:5-15

A Call to Action

Good Morning Saint Mark's! It's very nice to be with you, and I wanted to tell you how wonderful my experience has been here in your congregation, and also here in Seattle on the couple of days I've been here. My name is Steven Charleston. I'm the President and Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School which is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, one of the seminaries of our Episcopal church that trains men and women for leadership. But I was invited to come to Seattle over this time because of a very special event that was generated over I think it must have been three years of planning and careful work by a whole group of people here, not only at Saint Mark's but many friends and partners from around your city who brought together an interfaith creation festival. And it's been a wonderful experience to see how men and women of many different religious traditions – Jews and Muslims and Christians – could come together and work together and pray together about the need for protecting the environment. So I had a very modest and small part in that much larger effort. There were many fine speakers and wonderful planning that went on, music, many communities here cooperating and working together. So I just wanted to commend that to you and explain that my purpose in being here is to sort of bring a word of that festival; of that inter-religious effort here to the community today. And I know that we have with us men and women from other traditions – Jewish and Muslim who may be with us. I welcome all of you into this community, this Christian context. And I hope that my words may be welcoming to everyone and at the same time challenging to all of us.

Let me explain what I mean and I'll try to do this very directly and very briefly. I had in my mind

some time ago an idea that I believed was an important idea that had in many ways come to me through a time of prayer and struggle. Because like many of you, I'm a human being who's been concerned about what's happening in the world around us through the destruction of our environment. Like many of you, I'm just an average person who has no special claim to knowledge or experience in the area of environmental justice or the science of ecology. I simply found myself being more and more concerned and more and more motivated to action as I continued to learn what was happening to the world around us. And I'm a person who feels very responsible that the world that I leave for other people – for children and grandchildren of all of us – is a world that is safe and healthy and one that they can enjoy for generations to come. I became convicted and convinced in my heart that I must do whatever I could do to try and help other men and women find answers to the path of environmental justice and the protection of our world that we all share. So it was natural that I would want to come to an event like this. It was natural that I be supportive and hopeful for the dialogue that was happening here.

But when I came to this event I did not come prepared to share publicly this idea that had been growing in my own mind. I thought I would do that later when I was back in my own home community in Boston. I thought that later when I had the time to write it into a call to action that I could publish it from my seminary and then people would respond as they would choose. But when I came to Seattle and was at this festival and saw the men and women who were part of it, I became inspired. I felt moved by what I saw in my Christian tradition as a movement of the Holy

Spirit. I believe that the Holy Spirit was with the planners of that meeting; I believe God was there in the midst of all that occurred during that conference. And that sense of inspiration has brought me to share my idea with all of you today under what I believe is an anointing of that same spirit that Jesus just spoke to us about in the gospel lesson.

Brothers and Sisters, listen, listen. We face a crisis unprecedented in the history of humanity. We cannot minimize, deny, ignore through our own arrogance the reality that this planet is continuing to be diminished by the pollution that robs it of its life; that destroys the water, the air, the animals, the very food that we eat; that is literally destroying the life of the world around us. We watch the ice caps melt. We watch the polar bears disappear. We watch the rainforest dissolve. We watch global warming continue to bring drought and famine, storms into our lives. And what do we do? What do we do? What do you do? What do you do? What do I do?

At first, like so many of us I was overwhelmed by the enormity of this challenge. I felt weak. I felt helpless. I felt ill-prepared. But then I turned in my prayer life to the power of God's spirit and God's goodness in my life. And I opened my heart to the Lord and I asked for the wisdom of the Spirit. Give me a vision. Give me something that I could contribute; that I could do that would help all of us who face this together. And the answer that came to me was, as usual in my life for I am a very straightforward and simple Christian. The answer that came to me was of equal simplicity. I understood in my mind that what I think we need to do, in this community of ours, in the Episcopal Church to begin, is to take a stand. To do something that is absolute and proactive and visible for others to see.

In my home community of Cambridge, the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts, has said that it will attempt to reduce its pollution, its greenhouse gas emissions, its carbon footprint, however you characterize it, in the world by reducing the amount of those greenhouse gas emissions that we use when we fuel our homes and our schools and our buildings in Cambridge. That the whole of the city will attempt to reduce that by 10%. There is a foundation who is providing great needed resources to try and make that happen in this one

city. And as wonderful as that may sound to your ear or to mine, in terms of its impact – Listen. Listen. In terms of its impact on global warming, it is but a gesture – a token. It will not – 10% reductions – will not turn the tide. A 15% reduction will not turn the tide.

The clock is ticking. The environment is dying. The people of the world who because of environmental degradation are forced deeper into poverty, into the refugee status, fleeing the destruction of their world continue to aid and abet the conflicts and fear that engulf all of us. The clock is ticking not only for the planet but for every human being that who lives on it. Ten percent is not enough. So what do we do? What do you do? What do I do?

I believe the Spirit opened my eyes to a possibility. And it was so straightforward. My idea is simply this: that we in the Episcopal Church say that we will announce to the world; to any who will listen; to any who will join us, what I call the Genesis Covenant. The Genesis Covenant would say that in the Episcopal Church we pledge ourselves, all of us, every parish, every congregation, every diocese. From the national church headquarters in New York City to the smallest mission in the most isolated region of our country. That here, in the Episcopal Church we pledge ourselves to a minimum reduction of our carbon footprint in this world by 50% - a minimum of 50% - by the year 2015. If we can exceed 50% and go to 75% or 90%, that's our effort. But we will make a minimum effort of 50% reduction in the waste, the pollution, the destruction we add to the planet. Through the energy uses that we make in all of our buildings in all of our facilities – every single Episcopal Church.

But that's not enough in itself. This Genesis Covenant is a covenant. It is an attempt to bring other men and women into agreement with us. Therefore I would call upon, not just the Episcopal Church, but through the Presiding Bishop of our church, a call to every other Christian community in the United States to join us. Think about it. Think about it. Every Presbyterian church in America; every Methodist church in America; every Roman Catholic church in America; every Unitarian community in America; every Assembly of God church in the United States; Pentecostals, Protestants, Roman

Catholics; every Christian denomination and community in this nation, in the Genesis Covenant, standing up and saying “We will reduce our use of energy and we will lower the amount of emissions that we place into the atmosphere of this planet by 50% minimum by the year 2015.”

What impact would that have in this country? What witness would that make to the world, especially in a culture and in a society that consumes vast amounts of the earth’s resources to maintain itself? And that produces vast amounts of the pollution that is killing this world? What would it say? Think, good Christians all, what would it say if every Christian denomination and family, whatever theology they may profess, whatever their attitude about the bible, whatever their hierarchy may be, we put aside our differences and stand together? What would that do? What effect would that have?

Let us go beyond that. The Genesis that I speak of is a Genesis that is recognized not just by Christians, but is recognized by all of the people of the Book. Our brothers and sisters who are Jewish and Muslim, they all embrace the understanding that God’s creation in the genesis of the world was good. And in the eyes of God and the eyes of Allah, this is a good creation that we should preserve. What if we extend the Genesis Covenant to every synagogue and temple in the United States? What if every Jewish community in America stood with the Christian community and said, “We sign into the covenant; we will stand with our brothers and sisters and make this commitment too?”

What if every mosque, every imam, every Muslim community joined the other people of the Book and made that same commitment. What if every religious community in the United States stood together and said, “This is our commitment, this is our covenant?” What impact would that have on our politicians? What impact would that have on our politicians? What witness of hope would that have to others around the world? How would that reach out to inspire them and to inspire people with a new beginning and a new hope, not only for the salvation of the planet, but for the cooperation between those self same

religions that seem to be caught in an endless cycle of conflict and war? Can you see the witness as it reaches out and draws us to a new place together? That gives us a new vision and a new hope for all humanity? And that through the witness of faith of men and women of good conscious of every creed in this country, we could put a lever against the threat of environmental destruction and turn this world in a new direction? And would this message and witness of our reach around the globe? Do you doubt it? If in a place where we consume so much and waste so much we suddenly saw people of faith standing up and saying, “Enough is enough. For me and for my house we stand for justice for the environment and for the sane use of this world for the benefit of all.” Can you see how that would echo around the world? And then imagine religious communities in India and China and in Europe and in Asia and in Africa all standing up together until the world was ringed with a light of the Genesis covenant, of a new beginning for all of us and for our children?

Is my vision too bold and too broad? No. We should not be timid. When I ask you “What can you do?” there are many things you can do. But let this idea be among them. Let this one idea be a call to action for all of us who want to stand up and be counted - that we are not going to simply sit by, wringing our hands in helplessness, as we watch the light from our world silently ebb away from us. We are not afraid of men and women of any other tradition or faith, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, we stand to extend the hand of partnership and of friendship with them. To say “Come, be a part of this covenant and together let’s change history.”

I chose to do this here, in Seattle, because your community, those folks who were part of the wonderful festival have inspired me not to wait, not to be timid, but to have the cold fire of the Holy Spirit touch my lips and let this message be spoken. And to commit myself, my community with those others who will

join us in doing this to this ideal and this vision and this mission. In doing it, and I'll ask Chris if you'll stand for just a second. I didn't acknowledge in the first service, but Chris is my partner in crime here along with several others. And she will be helping to organize and coordinate with others here in your community, a conference that we will have the Presiding Bishop of our church at in April. She will be here and we will begin to do the serious planning to take this onto a national scale.

Will you help us? Will you join us? Seattle, Saint Mark's, will you be with us? I chose this moment and this place for a reason. For I wanted to stand before a congregation in the house of God and I wanted to say, that for myself as a person of deep faith, this is the pledge that I make; this is the covenant I proclaim.

This is the time.

This is the place.

This is the moment.

This is the faith that moves us to action.

Change starts today at Saint Mark's. Hope is born in this cathedral even as I am speaking, and the vision of the Holy Spirit of God spreads her wings wide in this church for the salvation of the planet and for the hope of all humanity. Amen.