

October 31, 2021 – “Humans Adapt, God Makes New” – Mike Eggleston at St Benedict’s

October 31 wears many hats, comes with many costumes. Today is Halloween, also All Saint’s Eve. Today on the Christian calendar this is Reformation Sunday or Ecumenical Sunday as St Ben’s celebrates it. St Ben’s also today celebrates the return of our pastor from Sabbatical, thanks be to God. Today is also the opening day of the UN’s Climate Change Conference. I’ll return to that soon. Here’s one more hat today. It’s also the fifth game of baseball’s World Series, which gives me a lead-in for this sermon.

For baseball at the World Series level is an awesome display of adaptation. Every pitcher has 3 or 4 major league pitches they can throw. They can spot them almost anywhere they want. So the fielders and especially the hitter have to adapt to whatever curve or changeup or slider or heat that might be coming. That’s not so unlike our circumstances today. Your preacher today is probably a changeup from what you expected. It’s a reliever off the bench, not your ace pitcher. For me also today, the scriptures threw me a curve. I had looked at what I thought was the playbook, the lectionary, and focused on four scriptures. It turned out Thursday I had the wrong lectionary and all four passages were different. So you’ve been thrown a changeup, I’ve been thrown a curve, and the world and its leaders face some major high heat as they start meeting in Glasgow today. But hurray, alleluia, we’re all players, we’ve all got skin in this game of life. We all bring skills, of which one of our finest human skills is adaptation. The sermon title today, is “Humans Adapt. God Makes New”

Looking first at our scriptures, all four are great Reformation scriptures. All four are partly about humans adapting, even more about God making major changes which call for our response. Jeremiah addresses his Jewish nation on the verge of collapse 26 centuries ago. Jeremiah says, I weep to tell it, but our kingdom is going to fall. Our nobles and priests and great men of valor will fall. Our city walls and temple where we thought God dwelt will burn. Our covenant with God as we understood it is broken, we broke it. And yet. Even so. Beyond all human strivings or failings, God is faithful and will do something new. God will make a new covenant with you. Notice who is the mover and shaker here. Thus says the Lord, “I will make a new covenant, I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts, I will be their God. They will be my people.” God acts. We adapt.

Much the same pattern is in Psalm 46. The world we know is shaking. “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdom totter, God utters God’s voice, the earth melts. Amid the chaos, God does some wonderful things. God makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth, God breaks the bow, God burns the chariots with fire. Our human part is to respond with trust. “Be still and know that God is God, exalted in the heavens, exalted in the earth”

Now I will pass over the passage in John, the sermon was too long. But I have to look at Romans 3. For it includes the most prominent pitch of the Protestant League which may also be the most misunderstood teaching of Protestantism. You know the short version of this. We are justified by faith, saved by faith through grace. Millions of sermons have replayed this message, justified by faith, not works. Yet if one takes a closer look at Romans 3 and 5 and Galatians and Ephesians, one has to wonder, hmm, whose faith in whom are we talking about here? The traditional answer is that is that it is our faith in Christ that sets us right. But it’s equally likely that the scriptures say it’s the faith of Christ, Jesus’ Christ’s faithfulness to God that has changed everything . If you were to look at

Romans 3 in your worship bulletin now you would see the traditional translation about six lines down, “faith in Jesus Christ.” But Biblical scholars can tell you that little preposition “in” is not in the Greek text. In Greek it simply reads “pistios Iesous Christos” faith Jesus Christ. I like the translation of the Common English Bible, “God’s righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” That’s a lot more in line with how Ephesians 2.8 says it, “By grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” So, many sermons have addressed this teaching and today’s is not the only one to take a swing and at best get a piece of it. Yet to me in each of Paul’s passages on justification by faith, here is the pattern. We humans and our world are in trouble as we go astray. Even so God acts faithfully and gives us a hand up, in this case, the two hands and faith-full life of Jesus Christ. We can’t pull ourselves up very far by our own bootstraps, but Christ can. Now our task is to follow him, adapt to him, abide with him.

Which brings me to the two-week-long UN Conference on Climate Change, the 25th Conference of the Parties which begins today in Glasgow. All the nations and all the people on earth have skin in this game. Secretary of State John Kerry has said, COP 26 may be our last good chance for humans to solve the climate crisis. He says he is optimistic. “Glasgow has already summoned more climate ambition than the world has ever seen,” Kerry said last Thursday. Part of what I’ll say now you can also read in next week’s Benediction.

What’s the main order of business for COP 26? At the Paris Conference six years ago, all 195 nations present agreed to set targets to hold the world’s global average temperature increase to below 1.5 degrees centigrade in the 21st century, and to each develop their own plans for reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050. At Glasgow each nation is to share their updated plans to reach that goal.

Why is keeping temperature increases under 1.5 degrees the target, not more nor less? Well, at 2 degrees centigrade or more, one third of the world’s population would be exposed to severe heat. Almost all warm water coral reefs would die. Irreversible ice sheet melting in Greenland and Antarctica could be underway. 1.5 degree centigrade rises are almost inevitable already, but would bring less severe, more bearable impacts.

What are more specific goals on the agenda? Those include: 1) Secure net carbon zero by mid-century to keep 1.5 degrees within reach. 2) Protect endangered communities and natural habitats 3) Send 100 billion dollars each year from the world’s more developed nations to the less developed for climate mitigation. 4) Finalize the rules needed to implement the Paris Agreement. A good sign would also be if COP 26 is able to negotiate an agreement on carbon trading.

Is there progress in limiting climate change? Generally, the answer is yes, though not nearly enough. On the positive side, two nations Suriname and Bhutan, actually have negative net carbon emissions already. 137 countries representing 73% of the world’s economies have announced their plans to be net zero by 2050. As one example, the United Kingdom, has become the world’s largest producer of off-shore wind energy, and has announced their sale of new petrol and diesel cars will end in 2030. On the negative side, the UN itself estimated just last week that, if all targets presently set by nations are actually reached, that would still result in a 16% increase in carbon emissions by 2030, instead of the 45% decrease needed. There’s progress. So much more is needed.

My last question about COP 26 is, what can we do to help as concerned earthlings and Christians? My countdown for three best answers are, **3.) Follow** the daily news from COP 26 from whatever your go-to source of news is, the Times, the Guardian, Interfaith Power and Light, Twitter, Instagram. Be informed. **2.) Pray** about this conference daily. Not only for what COP 26 can do, but for what God guides you to do. **And 1).** Hope. Cultivate hope for earth and all its creatures. Ecologically, hope is not my strong suit. Yet theologically, wherever God is, hope is there. Humans adapt. God leads with faith, hope, and love.

Which brings me to one story of hope to share, featuring an environmental hero. Her book Searching for the Mother Tree was published just this year, I read it last week. Suzanne Simard is one of the world's leaders in the field of forest science. She's a British Columbian, a fourth-generation forester, the first of her family to be a professor of forestry. That wasn't her plan. But growing up with a love for the forests and a ton of tenacity, she learned things that maybe no one knew except some indigenous peoples. She learned by digging in the ground, experimenting, and networking.

Among the first things Suzanne Simard learned was that forest trees are connected, not by their roots directly but by so many threads of mycorrhizae just underground: the commoner name is fungus. The fungi, of which there might be 100 miles of filaments in one cubic foot of forest soil, linked the roots of this tree and that tree and those trees. Without fungi, seedlings didn't grow well. A second thing she learned is that the trees were passing resources one to another through the fungi, sharing carbon, nitrogen, water, minerals needed for life. A third thing she learned is that the trees were not only sharing resources with their own kind. The firs and pines, cherished cash crops, were sharing resources with the birch, considered weeds by the forest industry. Yet those trees helped each other, the pines sending more carbon to birches in dark seasons, the birches sending more with more sunlight. A fourth thing she learned is that big old trees were nurturing the little ones through the fungal network. Nature Magazine when it put her first major study on the cover coined a term for this in the early 1990s. The Wood-Wide Web.

Simard and her colleagues over the years continued to learn more about tree communication. Yep. The trees communicate to their kin and their neighbors. The cedar trees, incidentally, weren't in the same network because they linked with a different family of fungi, which may be why, Don and Liz, the lonely little incense cedar you planted for me is not thriving here. Neither are the vast British Columbia forests, so often clear-cut now and replaced by mono-crop plantations, which lack the older trees and underground fungi they need to thrive. Yet the field of forest and fungal science is still learning so much. Trees can warn one another of incoming dangers, like bark beetles. Dying big trees will discharge all their remaining energy before dying to nearby trees, especially their own descendants. This is not just abstract, treetop learning. The forest industries in Western Canada are actually changing their clear-cutting practices some, spraying fewer toxins and leaving more of the mother trees. And Suzanne Simard at 55 years old launched a 100-year research project, the Mother Tree Project, preserving and monitoring seven separate forests with mixed species, mixed ages of trees, and untold miles and miles of mycorrhizae. If you're like me, you have to love this. Someone is proving that trees talk to each other. And help each other. And if they share resources even when they're dying, they share hope with each other. God is at work in this world. May we adapt and learn wisdom and hope. Amen.

