

# Climate Church

## Psalm 24

A sermon given July 31, 2022

Smith Memorial Church, UCC, Hillsboro, NH

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This service is taking place on N'dakinna, the traditional ancestral homeland of the Abenaki, Penacook and Wabanaki Peoples past and present. We acknowledge and honor with gratitude the land and waterways and the people who have stewarded N'dakinna throughout the generations.

Good morning! I am honored to have been invited to help lead worship this morning, and open a conversation which I hope extends into our time after worship and then into the weeks and months beyond. My name is Rob Grabill, and I am the Associate Pastor of the Church of Christ at Dartmouth College, an Open and Affirming and Climate Justice congregation of the United Church of Christ. That's a mouthful, and it's a lot to cram onto a business card or into a gmail address, but right away you know where my church stands. I have been a member of the church for 33 years, and have been a staff member for 12 years and an ordained Pastor for six. Being an Associate Pastor means that you can spend parts of the year preaching elsewhere. This is the first of three guest sermons I'll have the opportunity to preach in the next six weeks. Same subject, different settings.

I'd like to begin by describing the way I spent two weeks at the beginning of this month, particularly because it's pertinent to today's topic of climate justice. I spent two weeks as a "Dean" at Horton Center in Gorham, the amazing summer camp sponsored by our New Hampshire Conference of the UCC. I am going to guess that more than a few of you have heard of Horton Center, and perhaps some of you have even been there. If not, it makes sense to add it to your bucket list. I have actually constructed a modest power point presentation about Horton Center, and would love to have time to share it later. Even if you know it well, I would like to present a brief report from a place that does outdoor ministry as well as it can be done. This was our second summer back in person on Pine Mountain, following an innovative "HC @ Home" summer in 2020, when all camps were shuttered because of COVID. A year ago, we went back to camping

in person, with mask-wearing and all sorts of new safety protocols. This year, we had a safe session with far fewer encumbrances. Enrollment has climbed steadily. Camp is back from the brink, thanks to the support of the trusting families, and many supporting churches, and our Conference Minister Gordon Rankin, who truly believes in the power of outdoor ministry. That's a belief I share strongly, and it's one of the ways that church communities can become greener. It's simple: send your kids to Horton Center. If you want children to grow up as fierce protectors of the planet, they first have to fall in love with the natural world, and the lives of children are lived these days in ways that make this love harder and harder to develop. Generations of children are growing up with Nature Deficit Disorder, deprived of the contact and understanding of the natural world that came as part of childhood generations ago. This plugged in generation has learned to bypass and avoid learning to live in and love God's creation. Any camper at any session at Horton Center experiences this automatically. Scientists have now documented the value of "forest bathing", suggesting that even an hour-long walk in the park lowers blood pressure and reduces anxiety. Imagine what an unplugged week of forest bathing can offer. Imagine how much better Sunday School is when your chapel has a sweeping view of the mountains, and you can sleep under the stars, swim in a river, and stare regularly into a campfire, learning camp and church songs that will be a beloved part of your life.

So we have established that any week at Horton Center can create a path to climate justice. Now I can report to you that we went even further for one of our weeks this year for the first time, offering a session for pre-teens called "Climate Superheroes". It turns out that what this group of campers, staff and volunteers accomplished may be reverberating on the national level of the United Church of Christ. All from little old New Hampshire. In addition to all of their favorite camp activities, the Climate Superheroes kids did a lot of learning about climate justice. They dove into the heart of the problems caused by the climate crisis. They learned about what many dedicated folks are doing to address the issue. They learned that this is indeed the work of the church. They learned that they can play part, even at their age. And these kids, some of them already angry about the world that they are being handed by our failing generations, learned that they can have hope. The kids wrote and performed an amazing play about climate justice. They made protest signs. Some of them wrote letters to the Supreme Court (Their idea. They are MAD). All of this was accomplished thanks to several volunteer counselors who are members of the NH Conference of

the UCC's Environmental Justice Mission Group, who led all of the teaching. One of these volunteers is 75. Another is 15. They worked superbly together. But wait, it gets better. A third volunteer, age 16, spent the weeks with us at Horton Center, taking careful notes. Lydia Hansberry (remember that name: Lydia's middle name is "next Greta Thunberg") was just awarded a national Climate Justice Fellowship Grant by the UCC's Creation Justice Council. (That's the same group that oversees the Climate Justice Church program – we're getting warmer!). Lydia was one of three grant recipients nationally, chosen via a rigorous process that recognized the NH Conference and Horton Center. She has been awarded the grant to create a climate justice curriculum for summer camps like Horton Center. Many camps offer nature education superbly, but few do it through the lens of the moral challenge of climate justice. The curriculum Lydia develops will be made available to many camps, and there have already been inquiries. So, it was a good few weeks at Horton Center. Very good weeks.

But now I would like to engage you about your journey, and your consideration of becoming a Climate Justice Church. I hope to hear specifically about your history, and your questions, and your resources, especially your human resources. Every church has the opportunity to make their approach uniquely suited to them. There are outlines, and a checklist, and a review by the Climate Justice Council, of course. But one of the great benefits of the Climate Justice process is the way it can be your individual journey, on your timeline.

One of the first steps, of course, is to understand the magnitude of the problem. I will borrow an appropriate topic sentence from author David Wallace-Wells: "It is worse, much worse, than you know". It is, I am afraid. I do a lot of reading about these things. I trust the science. Although most of the threatened extinctions we are reading about now are the monarch butterflies and polar bears, our unique and pervasive sense of denial has prevented us from recognizing the very likely possibility that the sixth extinction, the Anthropocene age, will be our last act. Earth will go on, and evolve quite well without us, but some writings forecast that humanity has perhaps three hundred years. And at the projected rate of climate change, it will be pretty unliveable after the next hundred. No wonder the kids are angry.

When I preach on climate, I always to limit my graphic examples to things that have occurred withing the last few weeks. So my graphic examples today would

include the climate-enhanced floods in Kentucky and the fires in Nevada. Last week, it was the hundred-degree temperatures in London and the heat deaths of tens of thousands in India. The weeks before that, the unprecedented floods in Europe. You get the idea.

Addressing this is without a doubt the work of the church. It is as basic as Jesus' Gospel message to care for creation, and all that are a part of creation. It is as basic as loving our neighbors. Not only can we bring the strength of community power to the fight, as was done when confronting slavery or segregation, or injustice to the underserved, but we can also do so as part of the process of recognizing and undoing the harmful work of the church in creating the problem over the centuries. It was the church that created the Doctrine of Discovery, which set in motion the age of exploration and the age of slavery. It was the flawed interpretation of scripture that led us to believe that we had dominion over all creation, which could be exploited limitlessly for our needs. We made gods of ourselves, and with the help of the church we set in motion the systems that are threatening our existence. The church helped get us into this mess, and we are obliged to acknowledge this in a way that can begin to reverse our course.

There is another role for the church in confronting the climate crisis that the church is uniquely capable of filling. We are all, every one of us, weighed down by grief that at the very least is undergirded by the climate crisis. Part of us is very good at daily denial, not unlike the example regularly given of the frog unaware of the gradually rising heat in the pot. But part of us knows. We grieve the loss of species that we love. We are headed toward a world that will soon be a world without honeybees, pollinators, songbirds. We grieve for the children and grandchildren who will inherit a diminished and challenging future that they did not create. We grieve for what might have been. Our species had the capability of doing so much, and in the end we may be undone by unchecked greed and arrogance and self-interest. Churches know how to help with grief, and this is a task that can produce understanding and even hope. I am ending with hope. I know we may be doomed, but that is truly beside the point. It's what we do with the time left that now matters. If we engage as individuals and communities to mitigate the impacts of climate change. If we recycle, and work toward sustainability, and educate ourselves about the intersection of climate justice and racial justice, and lobby and write letters and vote and install solar panels, pressure the banks to stop funding fossil fuels, we can make a huge difference.

We can make our dying world a better place. We can offer palliative care for our species and our planet. It's a unique and badly-needed role for the church.

Engaging in the work of climate justice can bring benefits to faith communities. Young people leave churches that are not relevant to the issues they are most about. Young people are attracted to churches that take stands on issues of importance, and work for justice. The young people that I have worked with ask hard questions, and as we have observed, are angry about what they have been handed. But once anger and grief have been engaged, and once the work toward justice is begun, there is room and time for real hope. The church has been wrong before, but now is the time for righting wrongs, and working in community, and living into the Gospel message of creating the beloved community. This is what striving to be a climate justice church can provide. I am excited to walk with you on your journey. Amen.