

# **The Comforting Whirlwind God and the Environmental Crisis**

A Sermon by Bill McKibben

March 18, 2001

First Religious Society, Unitarian-Universalist, Carlisle, Massachusetts

Well good morning you all. I begin with a couple of apologies, it seems that every time I get a good cold that's the week I am scheduled to talk three or four times in the course of the week. I said earlier this week when I was talking some place that if we were a wiser and more sensitive race we probably would take a sore throat as a sign from God that this was not the day that we were supposed to speak. But you're here and I'm here and I will talk. I also have to tell you my apologies in advance that I'm not a preacher and I'm not a theologian. At best I'm a Methodist Sunday School teacher from a little rural church out in the woods, and I don't know about your Sunday School teachers but Methodist Sunday School teachers are not particularly well trained. The main qualification for the job is the ability on Christmas Eve to turn tea towels into Palestinian headdresses for shepherds. If you can do that then you can teach Sunday school in our church. Nonetheless, I feel called upon to talk to you a little bit about some of these questions about the environment, which, it seems to me, are at the root and at the bottom of the interesting, powerful, profound, spiritual questions of our time.

I wrote a book some years ago that Dawn referred to, called *The Age of Missing Information*. Strange book. I went out and found what was the largest cable television system in the whole world, which at the time was in Fairfax, Virginia and had 100 channels. I got people in Fairfax that taped for me everything that came across these 100 channels. I took it home to the Adirondacks and viewed all the 4 country music channels, the infomercials – you haven't lived until you've watched 48 straight hours of home shopping. The book, which I actually quite like, which is not true of all my books, was filled with all kinds of interesting insights about different things: about history and about community, and how it is that we have developed into some of the things we've developed into, but distilled down to its essence, boiled down to the way my neighbors yesterday were all busily boiling sap down into syrup, boiled down like

that, the message that comes through that television all the time every day and it comes through most of the other instruments of our consumer society is simple. It's that "you're the most important thing on earth. You're the absolute center of the universe, you're the heaviest object and everything is going to orbit around you."

If you had to pick one message that was most effective for building a huge, strong economy that would probably be it. It's worked incredible wonders. We have consumed and thus produced and raised our standard of living in ways that no one in any previous time or place could even have imagined. We created here what passes in physical terms for a utopia, where we don't have to work particularly with great physical difficulty, where we live in comfort and convenience and security. But if you wanted to create a message that was profoundly troubling from a spiritual point of view and one that made progress on issues of great importance, especially issues of the environment, particularly difficult ones, you couldn't pick a better one than "You're the most important thing on earth. You're the center of the planet." This is an old question, where we stand in relation to everything else.

Now the reason I read a bit from Job to you today is because it seems to me that that is the question that animates Job. All of you know the book of Job as well as I do, so forgive me for just running over it briefly. Job, prosperous, rich man, good man, always does his bit for the community and everyone else, treats his family well, greatly prosperous, one day wakes up and finds himself seemingly cursed by God. His cattle start dying of hoof and mouth disease, his children die, his property is taken from him, he ends up living in a dung heap at the edge of town covered with oozing sores. As one would in such a situation, he begins to question why this has happened to him. His friends come and visit, representing the Orthodoxy of the day, and they tell him it must be because he has sinned even though he does not really remember particularly sinning. He must have done something and now God is punishing him. This is the standard operating procedure of that day, the standard operating belief.

Job, surprisingly, won't take that for an answer. He keeps saying, "But I didn't do anything that bad. I know I didn't. There must be some other explanation," and he demands, which is a fairly audacious thing to do, he demands an interview with God. He wants God to come justify

himself to Job. He demands this in increasingly belligerent language through this long book and finally God appears. God appears speaking in a voice from a whirlwind, from a tornado and it's, I gave you some little flavor of it before, it's an amazing diatribe God embarks on. Job has stirred up a hornet's nest. God is in a sarcastic mood and keeps asking him "Well, where were you when I laid this whole thing out? Do you know how to stop the waves from breaking? Do you know where they should go? Do you know where I keep the hail and the snow? Do you hunt game for the lioness?" On and on and on down the whole list. It's a beautiful piece of writing. It's the first piece of nature writing, at least in the western tradition, probably the most beautiful and biologically accurate and sexy and crunchy and just an amazing piece of writing.

On the one hand its message is clear, I think, that Job, and by any extension the rest of us, are not at the absolute center of God's universe. That we're one small part of a large creation, and in some sense, through the straw man of Job, cut down to size in the course of this exercise. But that's not the only message, the other message is that this world of which we are a part is incredibly beautiful, full of meaning and sweetness and beauty. Do you show the hawk how to fly stretching his wings to the wind? Do you teach the vulture to soar and build his nest in the clouds? He makes his home on the mountaintop. On the unapproachable crag he sits and scans for prey. From far off his eyes can spot it, his little ones drink its blood. The unbearably are his. These things, which are in some sense most vile to us, are clearly dear to God. This world is not always as we see it through our own particular lenses of justice and rightness. Then God asked Job, "has God's accuser resigned? Has he swallowed his tongue?" Job simply says, "I am speechless. What can I answer? I put my hand on my mouth. I have said too much already. Now I will speak no more." Which seems like a good answer in this situation.

And that has been one of the profound ways in which human beings have understood the relationship with the world from before that time and from that time forward - that there is some force larger than us, perceived in the operations of the physical universe around us. That's one of the ways that we have managed to remind ourselves to keep our hubris within at least some bounds. In our time, that answer is changing. That answer is disappearing.

Human beings are putting themselves not only at the center in the sort of ways that we always have – in our pride and in our appetite – but also increasingly in the absolute chemical reality of the planet on which we live.

Let's take the example of climate change. Right about the industrial revolution human beings began burning large amounts of coal, gas, and oil, carbon-based fuels. Those saurians we were just singing about having decomposed a long time ago are now being pumped up to the ground and burned. One effect is obviously the kind of pollution we are used to - smog over cities etc. - that's a minor effect. The major effect is that when you burn those fossil fuels, you release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. A colorless, odorless, non-poisonous gas the concentration of which in this room is higher than it will ever be outdoors, but a gas which by its molecular composition traps heat close to the atmosphere, that would otherwise radiate back out to space. The atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> was about 275 parts per million before the industrial revolution. It is now about 385 parts per million and it will be above 500 parts per million long before the middle of this century unless we do very dramatic things in the next few years to dramatically curtail our use of fossil fuels. If we don't, we have now been warned by scientists whose data has grown ever stronger and more robust exactly what to expect.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 1,500 climatologists from around the world spent the last five years in an endless series of research and analysis on this problem. They reported in their gathering at Shanghai in January when they released their final 5-year assessment, that in this century we can expect to see the global average temperature increase about 4 to 6 degrees Fahrenheit. That would take it to levels higher than it's ever been in human history, indeed than it's ever been long before human history - the worst case scenario this century, just in this one century. If everything tops out at the upper end of the parameter we could see temperature increases as high as 11 degrees Fahrenheit as global average temperature. The planet would go from about 59 degrees at present to about 70 degrees. Any of those changes are completely unacceptable, we know that they are unacceptable because we've already increased the temperature about 1 degree Fahrenheit and we've begun to see what happens when you do that. For instance, one of the things that happen is that the world

gets a lot stormier, a lot wetter. That's because warm air, in the fashion that God designed this planet, warm air holds more vapor than cold air. So to increase the temperature you get a lot more evaporation in arid places and you get a lot more drought. That water vapor gets up in the clouds it has to come down someplace, so in places where it's wet you get a lot more precipitation, a lot more deluge, a lot more flood. Severe storms that drop more than two inches of rain in a 24-hour period have increased about 20 percent across this continent against the baseline. That's a very large increase in a basic physical phenomenon.

Consider what is happening to the cryosphere, to the frozen parts of the planet. Every glacier system in the world is now in rapid retreat, and remember, this is just with a one-degree rise in global average temperature. Many of you saw the story on the front page of the New York Times a few weeks ago indicating that by 2015 the snows of Kilimanjaro will have completely melted, that will be a rock top. Glacier National Park will have no glaciers by about 2030. The ice cap over the Arctic has thinned 40 percent in the last 40 years. We have tremendous data on that because we ran nuclear submarines underneath it for a long time and we know how thick the ice has been and it's now almost half melted away. Those are unbelievably large changes in very fundamental elements of this planet in a very, very short time. They come with real consequences.

Forgive me for using harsh language for a few minutes, but I'm going to. I have been working on these issues for 10 or 12 years and have reached the point where I am unwilling to pussyfoot around them too much longer. These things are happening in large measure because of us. We in this country burn 25 percent of the world's fossil fuel, create 25 percent of the world's carbon dioxide. It is us – it is the affluent lifestyles that we lead that overwhelmingly contribute to this problem. And to call it a problem is to understate what it really is. Which is a crime. Crime against the poorest and most marginalized people on this planet. We've never figured out, though God knows we've tried, a more effective way to destroy their lives. I spent much of last summer in Bangladesh, a wonderful country, vibrant, green, alive, feeds itself even though there are 130 million people in an area the size of Wisconsin. Amazing place. The biggest problem is that it is low to the Bay of Bengal – it's a river delta. The Ganges and the Brahmaputra come pouring out of the Himalayas, cascading

down through the mountains, and they flatten out when they reach Bangladesh and broaden out. The country is half water – it's as much water as soil when you fly over it. That's one of the reasons it's so fertile. Every year they flood out and lay this little beautiful layer of silt, and things pop out of the ground. Trees as big around as that white pine there might be 2 or 3 or 4 years old in Bangladesh. You can just watch things grow – it's amazing.

But let's say you raise the level of the Bay of Bengal just a few inches, and that's what we're doing because thermal water, forget all the melting glaciers, warm simply because thermal expansion takes up more space than colder water does. So we're going to raise, by every forecast, the level of the sea at least a foot in the next fifty years. If you raise that, then those waters cascading under the Himalayas have no place to go and they just back up and go out all over Bangladesh. That's what happened in 1998. The water was a little higher than usual in the Bay of Bengal and a lot of water was coming down out of the mountains and for about 90 days, about a quarter of the year, two-thirds of the country of Bangladesh was in thigh deep water or worse. That's just how people lived. They are incredibly adaptable and resourceful and did a heck of a lot better living in thigh deep water than we would have done. But they can't do that year after year after year. Can't plant the rice crop. They weren't food self-sufficient that year.

And Bangladesh is just one on the list of a hundred places that will be similarly traumatized in this century to come unless we do really significant things. It's a crime against the rest of creation, against all the other interesting corners of God's brain, against the lion and the antelope and the vulture and you can just go on down the list. Think about coral reefs. I'm sure some of you have taken vacations in the tropics and dived on coral reefs. Enchanting beyond belief. An ecosystem almost impossible to imagine in its jewel-like beauty and its sort of gentleness that you could sort of be in there and hardly troubling the rest of the fish that are swimming near by. Coral reefs, probably by current forecasts, will disappear as an ecosystem by about 2050. As you raise the temperature of the ocean it kills the small animals that create the coral that create the reefs, they're bleached, they die. Once those corals begin to die all the fish populations that they support die off and so on up the chain. The coral reef researchers issued a kind of manifesto at their meeting in November urging people please to

take into account what was going on, lest in 50 years our only record of this world beneath the waves will be the films and pictures and things that we've made of them.

In the high Arctic the polar bear - this incredible incarnation of the other, fiercest of our brethren, uninterested in us, not scared of us - the polar bears in large parts of the Canadian north are about 20 percent skinnier than they were 10 years ago. They lost all this weight in the last decade. Because as you melt the pack ice it becomes incredibly difficult to hunt seals and that is what polar bears do for a living. No pack ice, no hunting, no polar bears.

Its crime against the future, against everyone who is going to come after us. No one has ever figured out a better way to permanently alter and degrade the world around us than this. To strip mine the future. If we could imagine how we would feel about people who would have done that to us several generations ago, if it had happened then, then we can imagine how people will one day consider us in this regard, unless again, we do something soon. At the moment we are not doing anything about it. Though our scientific system has done a tremendous job alerting us to the dimensions of this problem, our political system, our cultural system so far has yet to respond in any meaningful way. The reason that it hasn't responded goes back to this question at which we began. As long as we consider ourselves to be enviably at the center of everything and our immediate comfort and gratification the most important of all tasks, it is extremely unlikely that our leadership will rise to the occasion and demand of us any real change.

Al Gore, who knows about these issues better than any politician who ever lived, when he was running for president last year and the price of gasoline began to go up, immediately called for the opening of the strategic petroleum reserve to flood the market with more oil and hence drive down the price of gasoline. You can't blame him for doing it. He understood that he was going to lose the election if he didn't do that. If the price of gasoline got out of control we would not stand for it because we had come to believe that dollar a gallon gasoline was some kind of constitutional right in this country.

George Bush last week announced that he was not going to regulate carbon dioxide in any way, that in essence he was going to kill off the Kyoto Treaty, the one attempt internationally

to deal with these questions. The reason he said he was doing it was because his analysis had indicated that taking any steps would drive up the price of electricity and that would hurt American consumers. Well, he is correct. It is going to cost some money to transition from coal and oil and gas to a renewable energy future. It is going to cost some money and he doesn't think we're going to stand for it. He might well be right and that may be the calculation he's making.

So that's where you and I are right now. How do we get off this dime? How do we learn to stop putting ourselves at the center of everything and help our neighbors, our culture, our country understand the same thing, so that we might rise to the obvious challenge that is put before us in our time - the challenge that is just as square faced as the civil rights challenge was a generation ago or the challenge of fascism a generation before that.

I don't have any easy answers for you – in fact, I should probably just stop here now having alarmed you enough. Let me suggest, at the risk of getting in trouble, that there are a few beginning symbolic but powerful things we could start to do. One of them you've already heard about today. This issue of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is coming before us today as a country. It's been presented as a kind of wilderness development versus oil drilling and it's true it would harm that wilderness to drill in it. But the single problem is what's underneath that. Well, what's underneath that is a big pool of oil and if we bring that oil out and burn it what happens? We release a lot more of that carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. We heat the planet a little bit more. We do a little bit more to contribute to making the Arctic Wildlife Refuge no longer a place of permafrost and caribou but a place of muskeg swamp where no caribou will tread.

And so there are people here I think who will feel moved not only to sign that petition but also to come to Washington in May and to witness there and perhaps to get arrested there. I had the great pleasure of getting arrested in Washington last year with a wonderful woman named Granny D. whom you may have heard about. This 90-year old woman walked across the country for campaign finance reform. We held up a banner in the rotunda of the Capital that said "STOP GLOBAL WARMING. STOP CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS FROM GLOBAL



WARMERS." Turns out you're not supposed to try to communicate that directly with one's representatives, and so we went off to the pokey for a while and she turned to me and said "you know, I'm 91 and I've never been arrested. I should have started long ago." I felt good – like I'd had a 50-year head start on her now and had to live up to her.

Just to try to bring this as close to home as possible, and probably uncomfortably close. It's not just actions in Alaska. It's actions all around us that are important. Symbols all around us. Symbols like the huge houses that more and more we are building and do not need. Symbols like, and here's one that I think we can act on quickly, symbols like the sport utility vehicles, SUVs, that have increasingly taken over this part of the world. Now I grew up in Lexington and I was amazed when I'd come back to visit in recent years. I live up in the Adirondacks, where it actually is sort of icy and we have bad roads and all of this, but no one has any money, so they just drive cars or maybe pickups. I was amazed to come back to Lexington a few years ago to see my folks and just went down to the Stop & Shop to get a few groceries. It looked as if the 8th armored infantry had come to Lexington on maneuvers. The only logical conclusion you could possibly have drawn is that Lexington had suddenly been riven by three or four raging rivers one had to cross in order to get groceries. It was the only way that you could perceive what was going on. If you drive a normal car and then you go out and trade it in and get a big SUV and you drive them both the same average distance for a year, in that one year the differential in the amount of energy you use, hence the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> you put in the atmosphere, is the equivalent of opening your refrigerator door and leaving it open for six years.

That's what we're talking about in realistic terms and in symbolic terms. What we're talking about is the endless, gullible elevation of necessary levels of comfort and status and everything else at the complete expense of all around us. It's going to take us a long time to learn how to climb down a little bit from the heights on which we have put ourselves. We've been at this work for a very long time. All the witness of our religious gurus from Buddha to Christ to Francis to Thoreau notwithstanding, we've done a good job of paying all that lip service and going on about our ways. Now the signals from the physical world, from God's creation, tell us that we have definitively gone too far and it is time to turn around in some

new direction. We will need each other's encouragement and help in doing that. That is why it is so good to see all of you here.

In a community like this one, our religious communities are deeply important, almost the only institutions left in our society that posit some goal other than accumulation for our existence here on this planet. Take good care of each other, but don't just take good care of each other - push each other a little bit too. This work has to be done fast and it has to be done lovingly, and it has to be done not only with an eye on the temperature around us, but with an eye on the temperature inside of us - on our understanding of who we really are, not who we've been told we are over and over and over again by all the images that flow through the cable or through the billboard or any of the other places that we increasingly have come to find our identity.

There I end. Thank you much.

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