

NOAH AND KLAATU WALK INTO A BAR...

Written for “National Preach-In on Climate Change” Day, this is an angle you’re not likely to hear anywhere else, linking Noah (of Ark fame) and the main alien from “The Day the Earth Stood Still” to help us come to grips with climate disruption. *Joke, No Joke.*



Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove, co-minister, [Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church](#)

Bainbridge Island and Greater Kitsap County, WA — February 16, 2014
(Please also see copyright notice at end of document.)

NOTE: Since numerous references within the sermon are thematically connected to other sections of the service in which the sermon was embedded, the author recommends that this entire document be experienced as one integral presentation.

Four service elements that are referenced in the sermon that follows:

1. Flaming Chalice Dedication — by Jan Forrest, *Worship Associate*

It’s a shame that the looming disaster caused by climate change has been called in the popular press, “global warming.” Because for at least half the year in most of the places I’ve lived —Spokane, WA; Minneapolis, MN; Fargo, ND—*warming* sounds very good indeed.

Of course, that’s entirely beside the point. Our planet is in crisis due to climate change. To name just one impact of the rising CO2 levels, we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction of plants and animals in the past half-billion years. You can’t blame the first five on us—we hadn’t evolved yet! But by some estimates, the current crisis is almost entirely caused by us. As many as 30 to 50 percent of all species are possibly heading for extinction by mid-century.

Why is this happening? Well, it’s very complicated, but I think Klaatu, the alien that Jaco is going to talk about, put his finger on a key reason. In the science fiction movie, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Klaatu was sent to destroy us human beings because we are so nasty and war-like. “You treat the world,” he reproached us, “as you treat each other.”

I dedicate the lighting of our Flaming Chalice to the perhaps faint yet hopeful dream that someday an alien would come to earth, notice our renewed and sustainable habits, and say that *as a well-deserved compliment*: “You treat the world as you treat each other.”

2. Story for All Ages — *Noah Meets the Rainbow* by Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*

In which old Noah, as he builds and fills the Ark, cannot resist also bringing along a diverse handful of other humans, reminding God of the fuller, unifying definition of “family.”

3. Reading — *Climate Change Science 2013: Haiku*

Before I get around to explaining my rather oblique reference to a film alien and connections with good ole Noah and climate change, let us slide in that direction with an intriguing piece of poetry making the rounds recently out of Seattle via the Sightline Institute, a very active and helpful sustainability think tank.

A northwest oceanographer, Gregory C. Johnson, was lead author of the highly technical summary document issued by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the most internationally accepted authority on this global topic. But the full assessment report was over 2,000 pages long, and Johnson's summary "brochure" was still 27 thick pages.

So, one weekend last fall, when he was stuck home with a nasty cold, Johnson found himself sorting and simplifying his key learnings from the IPCC report into haiku, a form at which he is experienced, since his personal discipline is to post on Facebook only in haiku, the ancient Japanese poetry style of three lines consisting of words totaling 5-7-5 syllables.

He described the process as a kind of meditation and never intended to share these IPCC poems. Nonetheless, they have caught on and resonated widely.

His daughter suggested he add a watercolor to each verse, which he did, and the result is quite beguiling. (See it all [HERE](#).) Johnson distilled the technical material into 19 verses of haiku, of which I've chosen a dozen that we will share with you now, also as a kind of meditation...

CLIMATE CHANGE SCIENCE 2013 HAIKU — by Gregory C. Johnson

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|---|
| 1 | Big, fast carbon surge:
Ice melts, oceans heat & rise.
Air warms by decades. | 12 | Forty years from now
children will live in a world
shaped by our choices. |
| 3 | Abyss warms, coasts flood.
Air moistens—salt patterns shift.
Carbon sours oceans. | 13 | Arctic will warm most
and land more than sea—too hot.
Still, choices matter. |
| 4 | Glaciers and ice sheets
melt worldwide, speed increasing.
Sea ice, snow retreat. | 15 | Oceans will warm, yes,
deep and wide, changing currents
that flow 'round the world. |
| 6 | Burning fuel, farming
trap heat and sour the oceans
beyond human ken. | 17 | Glaciers melt, seas warm,
giant polar ice sheets stir:
Seas may rise faster. |
| 8 | Models of climate
improve with time and details,
capture big patterns. | 18 | Warming land, sour sea,
melting frozen Earth may spew
carbon back to air. |
| 9 | We burn more carbon,
air warms for decades—but seas...
for millennia. | 19 | Fast strong action will
reduce future warming, but...
rising seas certain. |

4. Hymn #163 — *For the Earth Forever Turning* by Kim Oler

The “changing currents that flow ‘round the world” also carry music that supports our values, such as Hymn #163, *For the Earth Forever Turning*, the words of which were inspired, aptly enough, by Robert Heinlein’s science fiction classic, *The Green Hills of Earth...*

For the earth, forever turning; for the skies, for every sea;
For our lives, for all we cherish, sing we our joyful song of peace.
 For the mountains, hills, and pastures in their silent majesty;
 For the stars, for all the heavens, sing we our joyful song of peace.
For the sun, for rain and thunder, for the seasons’ harmony,
For our lives, for all creation, sing we our joyful praise to Thee.
 For the world we raise our voices, for the home that gives us birth;
 In our joy, we sing, returning home to our blue-green hills of earth.

SERMON: *Noah and Klaatu Walk Into a Bar...* Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove

Yes, we believe the Earth is likely to be “forever turning” with its mountains, hills, rain and thunder. As to “our lives and all we cherish”—well, the jury may still be out on our human experiment, especially given the ways we have been impacting this “home that gives us birth.”

A “big fast carbon surge” is souring oceans and causing mass extinction of plants and animals at a rate that might get our attention—or not. Certainly a goodly chunk of our population is ambivalent or ignorant about the issue of climate disruption caused by our human presence. But it is also rather curious to read—or hear—articulations that actively deny the crisis that so many others seem to believe is already upon us and almost certain to get worse.

But since I generally try to be fair and don’t want to fall into a Chicken Little mode of overreacting—“The sky is falling! The sky is falling!”—I try to imagine how this climate disruption issue could possibly *be* a grand hoax or just so much alarmist blather. And I can’t get very far down that path. Common sense combined with clear evidence is way too compelling, whether expressed in straight facts, news reports or haiku, even. “Forty years from now children *will* live in a world shaped by our choices.” I am way too invested in our 7th Unitarian Universalist Principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

Unfortunately, one effect (perhaps intended) of the climate deniers is to paralyze our culture, especially political leaders, so that their inaction endorses the wasteful status quo that has led us into this mess (and continues to benefit corporate pockets, not coincidentally). At least we are starting to see some state and local governments step more boldly forward on their own, the dithering feds be damned.

But, being as fair as possible again, climate disruption *is* an extremely daunting issue to tackle systemically, and one suspects that any real “solutions” of scale that are actually going to make any kind of a dent in the harsh momentum are also going to be awesomely unpopular with the voting electorate. So, lacking enough true, courageous visionaries—who can sustain their own political careers—it may sadly be no wonder we are collectively dragging feet in addressing such an ominous future.

Way back in his day, Old Noah picked up some advance warning of the rather sudden climate change coming his way, so he could make arrangements to preserve key aspects of his world. We might consider our generation a collective Noah, getting advance warning of a new climate action coming our way—more slowly than a single global flood, perhaps, but nonetheless inexorably. (“Rising seas certain.”)

The consequences may appear sudden to some people in their blinkered microcosms, as weather extremes wreak havoc beyond all previous experience, as more and more critters large and small fail to thrive, as dead zones in oceans—and in the Puget Sound—spread. But the signals have been broadcast loud and clear for years now, even as some voices invoke, ridicule and neutralize Chicken Little alarmists who are allegedly manufacturing trouble where there is none.

The net result: complacency abounds and paralysis confounds. After all, who among us wouldn’t prefer to avoid thinking about the legacy of pollution, waste and imbalance that our generation is leaving to the youngsters of tomorrow? But meanwhile, who will argue that weather extremes are likely to *abate* in the years ahead or that the seas will actually *cease* rising or that pine beetles will suddenly *quit* devastating forests? No, better to just dodge that complex topic and enjoy life with all its juicy escape options.

Or, if you’re looking to add an edge to social settings, but maybe you consider the traditionally untouchable subjects of religion and politics too old hat or dull, now you need only bring up: the weather! Then sit back and watch people squirm—or notice who baits a nasty hook for any nearby Chicken Little.

Perhaps we await some even larger cataclysmic event to galvanize our will toward needed wholesale change in behavior. It might be a really monstrous disaster that dwarfs even the worst we’ve known so far. Or it might be a vicious war of redistribution, as huge swarms of hungry, angry people overwhelm artificial borders rather than passively sit and die off. Or it might be... maybe...an alien visitation? We can speculate, at least.

Writers have for years relied on the effective device of an outside entity, an otherworldly presence, to force at least fictional human society to take more notice of their own internal dynamics. Science fiction can be a worthy, even prophetic vehicle to express ideas that are unpopular or hard to hear.

As much science *fact* as there is in the climate change field, let's turn for a moment to a venerable film for an object lesson or two. *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in its original 1951 version, captured the fresh anxiety of the dramatically emerging nuclear age by employing a powerful external judge. In this story an advanced alien visitor named Klaatu arrives with a mandate (from presumably more civilized and/or peaceful planetary cultures) to convince humans to stop nuclear proliferation or face immediate elimination by him and his giant, indestructible warrior robot.

The alien demonstrates his ability to follow through on the threat by stopping all the planet's activity in its tracks for a half hour. It was indeed *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. But he also comes with a gift device that will enable communication with other species elsewhere. This, of course, is misperceived as a weapon and he is immediately attacked.

As Klaatu goes on the lam and avoids capture by American military agents, a scientist named Helen befriends him and ultimately convinces Klaatu that humans can indeed change their destructive ways. But just then police finally succeed in killing him, which automatically launches the warrior robot into planetary destruct mode.

However, before his demise, Klaatu had given Helen a code phrase to speak to the robot to call him off. She hurries to the robot and utters the phrase, "Klaatu barada nikto," effectively averting global destruction. And those three made-up words enter the science fiction lexicon as a cult beacon that has ever since reappeared in various pop settings and formats, often humorously. It was never precisely translated, which gives it even greater cache and applicable latitude. The Robot Hall of Fame calls it "one of the most famous commands in science fiction."

The phrase is directly referenced in such later entities as *The Twilight Zone*, *Star Wars*, *Farscape*, *Tron*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, not to mention *The Rockford Files* and *Two and a Half Men*. "Klaatu barada nikto" becomes, then, a kind of magical safe phrase that prevents destruction. Hmm, this could come in handy for us, as climate disruption becomes an increasing threat to our civilization, not so much from without as from within. Perhaps we should practice it more often. Say it after me now, word by word: "Klaatu... barada... nikto." Now all together... Don't you feel more secure already?

Of course it seems a mite humorous to us today, but in its time *The Day the Earth Stood Still* won a Golden Globe Award for "promoting international understanding" and at the turn of the millennium it placed near the middle on a list of America's 100 Most Inspiring Films [[AFI](#): "100 Years...100 Cheers"]. And the film's producer was a strong supporter of the nascent United Nations.

Some believe the film even contributed to President Ronald Reagan's willingness to discuss with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 how they might unite against an alien invasion. Reagan also brought this idea to the United Nations, saying, "I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world."

Then, in 2008, a remake with the same title, although less critically acclaimed, added an intriguingly pertinent angle. Instead of nuclear proliferation as humanity's potent misstep, this version has Keanu Reeves as Klaatu coming with his robot for a somewhat different reason: to save the Earth yes, as he explains to the same Helen character who again helps him escape capture by the still nervous authorities.

But she eventually realizes that when he says he means to save the Earth, he doesn't include humans in that prescription. He will save the Earth *from* the humans who are clearly unable to steward the planet's environment appropriately (presumably including the unsolved dilemma of nearly eternal nuclear waste), so they deserve to be eliminated. Again, the human race had become too destructive for the continued health of the planet.

Note that the *planet* was worth saving; the human species was judged to now be more dangerous than worthy. But two other aspects of this remake really drew my attention for this sermon's purpose.

First, at one point Helen discovers Klaatu directing a fleet of small spheres to *collect and preserve* specimens of flora and fauna, which she realizes what "saving the Earth" implies for humans who have been doing the opposite. Bright shades of Noah's Ark! This would be something Noah and Klaatu could compare notes about after they walk into the proverbial bar together. "Oh yeah, well, I saved more species than you did, and my climate disruption was bigger than yours." Joke. No joke.

Secondly, Helen and a friendly Nobel Prize-winning professor employ a telling argument to finally convince Klaatu that humanity is also worth saving. They go all psychological on the alien, describing how it is often the nature of our species, when facing obviously negative consequences, to wait until the last possible moment before changing for the better. We seem to require that view from the precipice to finally get us to alter our self-defeating behavior, they explain to the alien.

Well, he buys it, and Helen again gets to say "Klaatu barada nikto" to call off the human-devouring swarm of alien locusts just in time. But before departing with his robot, Klaatu improves the odds for humanity's compliance by disabling all electrical energy, apparently forever. That'll get their attention. The *Earth Stood Still* for more than a day, one suspects. And the film leaves viewers with some sort of hope, I guess.

It also begs the question: what do *you* think it will take for us to experience ourselves at the very brink—the "eve of destruction"—before we make changes on the scale required to reverse the negative effects of our growing presence on this glorious planet of blue-green hills? Might it actually be true that we require that edge, that ultimately dangerous precipice to be glaringly in our face before we can garner the collective will to change behavior appropriately? One has to wonder if the growing stock of evidence just hasn't yet reached critical mass, so to speak.

Maybe this has the same root as that familiar adage: “Necessity is the Mother of Invention.” We *do* see a lot of creative response to the glaring need for lowering our carbon footprint. Our friend and neighbor *YES! Magazine* is regularly loaded with examples of how thoughtful and dedicated human beings are altering their lifestyles and building excellent, hopeful pathways toward a more balanced, sustainable future. YES! We desperately need such models and inspiration to convince us that it is possible. We *have* the know-how to do what we need to do, at least at local levels.

But is it enough? Or too little too late? Things are bad as they already are. We need only look out our windows, below the still very beautiful surface, at the already nonetheless declining natural world around us, like the poor health of the Puget Sound. But can we gear up fast enough at a scale large enough to actually impact the distressing trends that point to an even worse future?

Barring a catastrophic die-off of our kind, the problematic human presence is apparently only going to get geometrically greater as we crowd ever more of us onto the planet’s surface. Concrete development continues apace. Recently there was a [piece in the Seattle Times](#) about a developer trying very hard to drain a popular wetlands near Woodinville to build five houses. Nearby residents were standing against it, but likely to lose, because the developer owns the property and our legal system generally allows owners to do what they want, especially to “useless” swamps. The article ends with a summation quote from a disheartened neighbor: “My generation is leaving a worse place than we inherited.”

Thanks to that kind of momentum writ large, some fatalists suggest we have already passed the threshold of no return, given that the harsh effects of climate disruption are on a slow whiplash arc that will snap our descendants in the face (and heart) regardless of any changes we might make now. It is also probably appropriate, if rather painful, to look into the generational mirror and ask how our era will be judged by those inheriting the planet from us in later years.

We know the experience of looking back harshly on various phenomena of earlier times as we judge—cluck cluck, tsk tsk: *How could they cut down all those magnificent old growth trees? How could they build an entire economy on human slavery? What were they thinking?* And in our heart of hearts, we probably know that cultural values will continue to shift over time, so it will soon be our turn, in one realm or another, to roll over uncomfortably in our graves, our moldy ears burning at all the judgmental talk aimed at us: *What were they thinking back at the turn of the millennium, those carbon gluttons?*

In Noah’s time, the “outside” force of God apparently swept away most of wicked humanity. I can well imagine those in proximity to the Ark swimming up to its hull, begging for passage alongside the pairs of animals, as a sudden climate disruption washed over clean the surface of the Earth. For them, there was no warning, no reminders. Meanwhile, film alien Klaatu withholds ultimate punishment, accepting the plaintive cries of his human friends, who have, despite steady warnings, passively participated in the slower but steady fouling of their planetary nest: “We can change! We can change! We know now that it’s the last minute! Klaatu barada nikto!”

Allegory and Science Fiction on the one hand; Reality and Morality on the other. Stories are often said to have a “moral” because they help teach us what is right, morally, ethically. They have a way of getting into our hearts the way facts and information cannot. Yet ethics can differ and clash, certainly. So whose morality carries the day? Whose do you think is carrying *our* day? Which stories dominate and teach what lessons?

Do we acknowledge a moral obligation to take action to protect the future of a planet in peril? Are we moved or are we numb? And even if we do want to act, what else *can* we do? How can we find realistic hope in the face of such monumental trends? Since we generally don’t want to go numb in our bodies, let me use that most human of containers to express a quartet of suggestions for how we *can* move forward without undue paralysis or passivity.

In your living, you will—by default if not intention—*embody* your values. We can embody *hope* in at least these four ways, all depicted here by C words [inspired by an Amazon book [review](#) by Nathan McClure]:

First: embody **Coherence** — Identify and honor your deepest values; then peel away what feels counter to them. To the very best of your ability, live out your integrity.

Second: embody a **Calling** — Find the place where your special joy and the world’s need intersect; then serve that calling faithfully.

Third: embody a **Conscientious objection** — Vocally and actively stand against the parts of our culture that increase destruction and waste. Take principled stands that unite with and encourage others.

And fourth: embody **Celebration** — Lift up the web of life often, certainly collectively, as here in fulfilling religious community, but also at any moment you notice something worth celebrating. In fact, in the words of our hymn: “See divinity in every living thing.” [“We Celebrate the Web of Life”—#175, *Singing the Living Tradition*]

In your living, embody *coherence*, *calling*, *conscientious objection*, and *celebration*. And the future will unfold however it will, as we all become the best that we can be, taking good care of the Earth because it is our home [phrases from the Sunday Affirmation at Cedars UU Church].

I have drawn some inspiration from the 2010 book, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, a noble collection [by Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P. Nelson] of statements from over 80 visionaries from all over the globe. Essentially they all answer that same question put to them by the editors: *Do we have a moral obligation to take action to protect the future of a planet in peril?*

The many short responses are grouped in an intriguing fashion, and this helps me close my sermon, by naming just half of the umpteen headings that organize these many helpful and

hopeful, if hard-hitting statements. If you ever wonder about this yourself, let me and this book's overall message reassure you. *Do we have a moral obligation to take action to protect the future of a planet in peril?*

- Yes, for the sake of the children
- Yes, for the sake of all forms of life on the planet
- Yes, for the full expression of human virtue
- Yes, because all flourishing is mutual
- Yes, because compassion requires it
- Yes, because justice demands it
- Yes, because our moral integrity requires us to do what is right

Amen to that. One of our generation's leaders, who until just recently truly embodied *coherence, calling, conscientious objection, and celebration*, was musician and activist Pete Seeger. And Pete believed that, because of our collective effect on the planet, the human race really has only a 50/50 chance of being here in a hundred years.

The scales are evenly balanced, he felt, which means one grain might tip them in either direction. And each of us *is* one grain, a potential difference-maker! So he encouraged us all to be involved in some way that improves the odds for our collective survival. [Pete's song, "My Rainbow Race,"](#) is both a reality check and a heartening goad to action:

- SONG *CHORUS:* One blue sky above us, one ocean lapping all our shore
One earth so green and round, who could ask for more?
And because I love you I'll give it one more try
To show my rainbow race, it's too soon to die
Some folks want to be like an ostrich / Bury their heads in the sand
Some hope that plastic dreams / Can unclench all those greedy hands
Some hope to take the easy way / Poisons, bombs, they think we need 'em
Don't you know you can't kill all the unbelievers? / There's no shortcut to freedom
CHORUS
Go tell, go tell all the little children / Tell all the mothers and fathers too
Now's our last chance to learn to share / What's been given to me and you
CHORUS
One blue sky above us, one ocean lapping all our shore
One earth so green and round, who could ask for more?

• **CLOSING WORDS** —

We raise our rainbow voices, for the Earth forever turning—one blue sky above us all. We can see divinity in every living thing, and our choices matter. Let us indeed treat the world as we treat each other. Go in peace, my friends. BE peace. Return in **embodied** love.

©2014. This sermon is the sole intellectual property of [Rev. Jaco ten Hove](#), except for portions otherwise noted as the intellectual property of others. It may be copied or forwarded for individual use only, unless explicit permission is granted. If quoted in part, appropriate attribution to Rev. ten Hove is expected.