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Texts: Psalm 24:1-2, 9-10; Job (selected verses from 38-42); Revelation 21:1-5

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### In Praise of the Lowly Hummingbird

About two weeks ago, the Pacific Northwest lay nearly paralyzed under what scientists called a **heat dome**. When weather models first began to take shape, leading meteorologists assumed the predictions they were seeing could not possibly be accurate. But temperatures never before seen in that region did materialize—temperatures well more than 20 degrees hotter than what would normally be the hottest weather of the year in places like Spokane and Seattle. And it lasted for days. Weathermen categorized this event as a “once in a thousand years phenomenon.” And then promptly added that, given recent trends, weather like this might well strike this region again within the next few years.

Some of the best berry crops of the continental United States are grown in eastern Washington. Many farmers there sacrificed their yield to the birds. It could not be saved.

Five months earlier, though our winter here in the Northeast seemed typical, southern Texas was hit with the most severe cold weather they had ever experienced – temperatures so low that it crippled their infrastructure, causing extensive damage. And now, in late June and July, as temperatures soared to record highs, their damaged electric and water systems could not respond to the record heat.

The jet stream is in a wavering pattern- pushing extremes of heat and cold into regions that are ill equipped to respond. The jet stream is affected by climate change – change that is happening at an alarming rate.

About ten days ago, here in Connecticut, we were nearing the end of our second heat wave of the summer. And after four consecutive days of unrelenting heat and high humidity, the weather forecast was for a “cold front” to move aggressively through our region – bringing thunder, lightning, rain and cooler temperatures. As is our custom, we went out onto our porch to watch the weather front as it approached from the northwest. To say it was dramatic would be an understatement. Dark clouds raced across the sky – their thunderheads roiling over the hills around us. Wind whipped the tall oak trees that surround our house- their tops swaying to and fro like giant paint brushes swung from side to side by an angry artist. Cold rain fell in sheets – overflowing the catch basins set beneath the valleys of our roof. Within twenty minutes the temperature dropped 16 degrees. And it continued to fall. And then, suddenly, the rain simply ceased. The woods lay stilled – leaves shedding water in droplets like gentle percussion. The storm had passed. The heat wave – for us- was over.

The next morning the temperature was 32 degrees cooler than it had been just 12 hours earlier.

I had just that day been reading the nature write Barry Lopez, best known for his love of the wilds of the Arctic. And I remembered this sentence – “Just because you have *seen* something, doesn’t mean you can explain it.”

The natural world fascinates me. It restores and nurtures me in ways that I cannot adequately describe. But I stand in awe of it. How can it possibly be that in every 12-hour cycle 100 billion tons of water flows in and out of the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick, Canada- more than the combined flow of all the world's fresh water rivers? Why is it that the full moon rises on the horizon in front of me at precisely the moment the sun sets on the opposing horizon? And the same is true the next morning as moon set and sun rise coincide. And that is true on every full moon, everywhere in the world No matter where I am standing. How can that be? And how does an osprey know when winter has passed in the Northeast, and it is safe to return to our waters? These are staggeringly magnificent and mysterious, awe-inspiring phenomena.

The Book of Job has generated tomes of wisdom from countless theologians. But for now, I'd like to offer my own simplistic reading of the great poetic proclamation God offers to Job at the book's conclusion. Job and his friends have been engaged in a long dialogue with God about the reasons for the forces of destruction that have plagued poor Job's life. And finally – God thunders forth, saying, “Job – you don't understand creation. You can't explain it. Where were you when the foundations of the world were laid? Have you comprehended the vast expanse of the world? Which is the way to the home of light? And where does the darkness go?”

In the long poem, God goes on to describe the wonders of the armored construction of the crocodile, and the wily guiles of the hawk and the eagle.

Job stands in awe – stunned. And finally, he responds to God, “I have spoken of things which I have not understood; things too wonderful for me to know. I yield; repenting in dust and ashes.”

Job is humbled by the majesty and mystery and power of creation. That's how I felt that stormy evening on our porch. Nature is a force we cannot fully explain. And surely, we cannot control or own it.

The changing climate is a force we cannot afford to ignore. And I would guess there is not a person sitting in the pews this morning who hasn't already contemplated that. I am not telling you anything new. But I do want to tell you that both urgency and hope are appropriate responses.

First, hope. First, hope.

Recently, Ford motor company announced the design of a new, large pickup called the F-150 which is an electric vehicle- the first of its kind. The reason this is such a cause for celebration is that more pick-up trucks are sold here in our country than any other single kind of vehicle. And greenhouse gas emissions from transportation account for almost 30 percent of the nation's climate-changing carbon output. Electric school buses and delivery trucks have hit the market, and are competitive. Tesla – an all-electric car- has grown so much in popularity that it's commonly seen on our local roadways. All the major car companies have joined with the early producers of hybrid vehicles and announced promising design changes to increase efficiency. The current administration is working to install readily accessible vehicle charging stations on our roadways. We are weaning ourselves from fossil fuels. Not quickly enough – but we're getting there.

Exciting new technology is being designed to enhance power through wind turbines. And the cost of wind-driven energy has been coming down dramatically. Ten million homes in Spain are powered by wind – probably far more now since that statistic is a few years old. A single rotation of the giant blade of a wind turbine outside Liverpool, England will provide a home in that city with all the electricity it uses in a day. The electricity for Block Island is entirely – or almost entirely – generated by the giant wind turbines off its shore. Does wind power have its opponents? Yes. Does wind power have some challenges to be faced? Yes. But the changing climate is a force we cannot ignore.

Solar energy has made incredible strides, especially in the past few years. The cost of solar panels has decreased dramatically, and their efficiency has risen so that they do not need ideal orientation to the sun to be cost effective. The solar panels we have here at our church – on the roof of the Fellowship Auditorium – are already producing a significantly larger percentage our electricity than was first estimated. Why? Because we've installed LED light bulbs, and made other efficiency improvements, that have cut our electric usage dramatically. There are significant issues in the supply chain right now for the production of solar panels, and production challenges that need to be seriously addressed. But Solar Energy is on the growing edge of the fight to slow climate change. It's going to play an increasingly large part in reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.

Community Supported Agriculture – or CSA's – are growing in number here and around the country – decreasing the high carbon footprint of transporting our food over large distances. More people are planting gardens to grow at least a portion of their own food. And restoring the nutrients in our soil through old fashioned, time-proven, non-chemical practices – called regenerative farming – is gaining more and more attention.

Investment management firms are now documenting that a wave of young investors – those mostly under the age of 50 – have a new criterion that they employ when deciding which stocks to purchase. Is the company being considered one that employs **good governance practices**? By which they mean: is the company using good environmental practices? Are they reducing their use of fossil fuels? Are they committed to diversity in employment? Do they pay a living wage? What is the ratio of executive pay to the pay of workers on the production line? Do they offer their employees profit sharing?

These are huge changes that speak to a new consciousness about the way people understand their relationship to the world. It speaks of a greater understanding of our mutual dependence. And it speaks of humility. Like Job. Like Job, maybe we're learning to stand in awe of the intricacy and mystery of the way the natural world and we as individuals are interconnected and inter-dependent. Maybe we're beginning to see that we, as individuals, are but a tiny part of an entire biosphere of connectivity.

There are still a great many dangers about which we have not spoken. Industry is too reliant on plastics for containing and packaging – and plastics are causing tremendous danger in our soils, in our oceans, in our bodies. We need to protect our environment from harmful chemicals – some of which are marketed as ways to promote agriculture – like fertilizers and pesticides that are in

fact causing irreparable harm to our ecologically sensitive plants and animals. And to us. We need better information about the health of our oceans so that we can be more careful about the way we fish for commercial gain. We need to be much smarter consumers. And we need to consume far, far less.

I'd like to conclude with a little fable which I learned from the work of a Kenyan woman named Wangari Maathai, who promoted what has become known as the Green Belt Movement in Kenya – more trees, more farms, better farming practices, more food, cleaner skies. She tells us this story:

Once upon a time there was an enormous fire which broke out and ravaged the forest. All the animals, both big and small, fled to the forest edge to watch the conflagration – all that is except a hummingbird. “I will do something about this fire!” says the tiny bird. So, it flies to the nearest stream and dives beneath the surface. Rising into the air, it carries a bead of water in its beak that it releases over the flames. The fire is huge, but over and over again, the hummingbird flies to the stream, and returns with a droplet in its beak and lets it fall. Each time the bird believes that this one drop just might make a difference. Other animals—some with long trunks and large mouths like the elephant and the hippo—mock the little bird. And at least at first, they do nothing to help. But the hummingbird keeps up his work, saying, “Well, I am doing what I can.”<sup>1</sup>

I thought of this little story recently when I read an article in a recent New York Times Magazine about the small investment firm called ENGINE 1 that deserves the credit for shaping the recent changes in the constitution of the board of directors of Exxon Mobile. Chris James, founder of the tiny, new start-up, ENGINE 1, is my version of the hummingbird in our little story. James is what one calls an activist investor, and as such, together with a few friends who have formed a tiny hedge-fund, he had purchased a few million dollars' worth of shares in Exxon Mobil in order to be able to put forward four nominees to the board of directors. These nominees, according to James and his coworkers, needed to be people who understood the importance of de-carbonizing society as a way, not only of appropriately influencing our climate, but also of ensuring Exxon's continued profitability. Exxon, he realized, needed to begin to shift its identity to align with the new paradigms of a changing climate.

You may know this already– but Exxon Mobil earned the largest annual profit in U.S. history in 2008 (in large part due to outsized subsidies from the government). But last year alone it LOST 22 billion dollars. Chris James reasoned that it would be smarter for Exxon Mobil to be part of an energy transition, rather than to let itself be outstripped by other companies. It would be smarter to be an innovator, seeking to meet demand for low-carbon and no-carbon power.<sup>2</sup>

James and his friends spent hours and days—weeks, in fact—on the phone trying to convince other shareholders to support their choice of candidates in the upcoming annual shareholder meeting and election; candidates they believed would help shape a new direction for Exxon. It was nail-biting work. But in the end, two of his candidates were in fact elected – swinging the board of directors of Exxon Mobil at least a little toward a whole different energy future. (Recent

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<sup>1</sup> Maathai 2010: p.185/186

<sup>2</sup> from NYTimes Magazine: June 27, 2021: p.49

new calculations after vote counting say that they may have actually succeeded in getting three of their four elected!!!)

ENGINE 1 – a company with assets of a few million dollars– reshaping Exxon Mobil – a company with hundreds of billions of dollars worth of assets worldwide. A hummingbird versus a forest fire. But in this case the hummingbird has tasted success.

That’s what I want you and I to focus on in these days of urgency and hope. We need to “Do what we can.” *Every bit of what we can.* We need to be proud to be hummingbirds. And we need to be persistent. We need to do the small things like resisting products packaged in plastic, and supporting local agriculture, and changing light bulbs. We need to do the bigger things – the things the animals with large trunks and large mouths in our story were reluctant to do. We need to purge our investments of companies that damage the environment for profit; and we need to support and promote businesses that have adopted good governance practices. We need to investigate whether solar power or wind power might work for our own homes. We need to talk to all our friends about changing the ways we consume and the ways we invest and the ways we make purchases (How we put our money to work). We need to look carefully at the institutions we serve and believe in, and ask what they could do- and do better – to change the path of the changing climate.

The promise of Revelation 21 is that God is always creating a new earth; making all things new. It is knowing that that gives me hope. You and I are not in this alone. There is mystery and majesty and power and inspiration from the highest of sources as we and the scientists try to stem the tide of a changing climate.

The other night, as we watched the storm unfold, there was a hummingbird that kept trying to perch at the sugar-water feeder right in front of where we sat. You probably think I am making this up – but Don will confirm it if you ask him. The gusting wind made the task of the tiny hummingbird exceedingly difficult – but he persisted. And though he couldn’t perch for long, he succeeded in getting a few good sips before he was carried away. Time and time again, he did the best he could. We can do the same. Amen.