

House on Fire
The Reverend Cyndi Simpson
A Sermon Given to the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, NE, on Sept. 15, 2019

Our worship theme this month is EXPECTATION. With our climate crisis, there are many ways to go with this word. What do we expect the future to be like, based on science? What can we expect from world leaders regarding climate change? What I want to focus on today is: ***What can we expect from ourselves, regarding the climate crisis, as Unitarian Universalists? And how can we support efforts to live up to those expectations?***

But before I speak about what our faith calls us to do for our climate crisis, I do want to take a moment and give the simplest possible definition of what the problem is.

Our survival depends on something named the Greenhouse Effect. In a greenhouse, which is a shed made of glass or similar clear material. Used to grow plants when outside is too cool. Sunlight comes in through the clear glass and warms the air inside. Then the glass holds that warmed air in, creating a good place for plants to grow, even when it's cold outside.

The Earth operates the same way. *[Refer to image.]*

And the overall warming of the Earth, even by just a few degrees, can have a huge impact.

What are some of these impacts?

- Loss of ice at the North and South Poles and in glaciers. Melting = sea level rise.
- Longer and more intense heat waves, during the summer and at other times.
- What plants grow and where animals live is changing. Plants that like heat are growing in places they did not before. Animals on land and sea that prefer warmth are living in places they did not before.
- Other animals and plants that depend on cooler temperatures are struggling to survive.
- Some places where humans have lived, such as ocean islands, are becoming hard to live in because of sea level rise. The land is disappearing.
- In other places, the warming means that some crops no longer survive. And water is becoming scarce. So humans and animals are struggling to live in those places.
- All of these effects are being felt in the United States. Not somewhere else.

This is truly a crisis, an emergency on an enormous scale. I know that almost every time I've tried to think of this, for the last decade, my mind skitters away. I understand the problem, and at the same time, I feel very hopeless and helpless, by myself. I look at the leaders of our country, and many leaders around the world – and they are not taking the steps that need to be taken. I have thought:

What can I do, as only one person? I can change my own habits, how I live on the Earth, but that is not enough. People with far more power than I have need to be doing many things, and doing them soon.

Part of my message here regarding what we can expect of one another as people of faith, is about hope. We are called, as Unitarian Universalists, by our First and Seventh Principles, to believe and to act as if every being on the planet is important, and to care for our Earth and everything upon it. Those are key commitments we have made, both grownups and children. Hope means believing that we can live up to these Principles and to

hold others accountable for living up to them, even if they are not Unitarian Universalists. If we believe that these Principles are worth living, then we must believe that we **CAN** live them. In that belief lies our hope.

There are other reasons to have hope. Scientists tell us that if we act soon and do more, we can SLOW, then STOP, then REVERSE the effects of climate change. It will take years, but it can be done.

There are many other signs of hope around the world:

- On July 29th of this year, the people of Ethiopia, a nation on the eastern side of the African continent, planted over 353 million trees in 12 hours. Trees and other plants absorb carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. So, planting more trees will have an effect on reducing greenhouse gases.
[Slide of Ethiopians planting trees]
- Major cities like New York, London and Sydney have declared climate emergencies allowing them to make big changes sooner in how they manage the creation of greenhouse gases.
- The United Kingdom has declared its intention to be carbon neutral by 2050 and all estimations say they'll hit that target before that.
- Costa Rica will be fossil fuel free by 2021 – just two years from now.
- Over 100 US cities and counties are committed to be 100% free of fossil fuels in the next 30-35 years.

One of the most important people speaking up for making the big changes needed against our climate crisis is Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. She is 16 years old and has been a climate activist for years. She began the school strikes for climate change – students walking out of school to march and protest – that have spread around the world and are now becoming general strikes.

She is in the US and will be for some weeks – for next Friday's Global Climate Strike and many other events. I have a quote from her on the cover of the Order of Service, from a recent speech. Let's read it together:

I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.

Greta was speaking to world leaders when she said this. She is trying to get them to take the climate crisis more seriously. I want to play a brief speech of hers from last year, when she was 15. She was speaking at a United Nations conference. Let's listen:

[View Greta Thunberg's speech at the UN Climate Change COP24 Conference in Poland in 2018](#)

Greta's message is clear – **WE** are the ones who have to mobilize. **WE** are the ones who have to convince our leaders that they must work in the interests of all the people and of the Earth. **WE** have to show them our power, together. When it comes to People Power, Greta is VERY hopeful!

WE have to throw a tantrum that will save the world!

Three of the greatest tools of the 20th century are solar panels, wind turbines and civil disobedience. This is not out of our hands, or out of our control.

So, I'm calling you – every person that can hear my voice – to join in the Global Climate Strike this Friday. Walk out of your schools, walk out of your jobs. That's what a strike IS. You don't ask permission.

There are 2 climate strike actions within our reach:

- In Omaha. 8 a.m. at City Hall. 1819 Farnum Street. Omaha Students Union. They are promising food, petitions, and lots of climate action.
- In Lincoln. 2:30 at the State Capitol. Sponsored by the University of Nebraska Lincoln Sustain – a student organization.

Please bring your bodies to one or both of these events, as I will be bringing mine. Let's shut everything down as much as we can to get the attention of those leaders who need to be taking responsibility for this.

Greta and all of our children and youth are leading us now. It is shameful that they cannot depend on us older ones. But they are stepping up to do what must be done. Because **they** are the ones who will inherit this Earth.

Our only redemption as adults will be in supporting them in every way that we can.

So may it be!

