

# “Blasphemous De-creation”

Sermon by Reverend James Brassard

Biblical Texts: Genesis 1 “The Creation Story” and Luke 10:25-37 “The Good Samaritan”

Christian Community Presbyterian Church

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<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

There is no doubt about it, reports the London based magazine *The Economist*. “**It's Hotting up.**” A special report highlighted the fact that observations about what is happening to the climate have tended to run ahead of what the models predicted would happen. Arctic sea ice is melting unexpectedly fast—an increase of 9% each decade. Glaciers are melting—a whole section of a West Antarctica ice mass—the size of Rhode Island-- broke off in 2002. Once mighty glaciers on Mt Kilimanjaro have almost disappeared.

Those who doubt the scientific evidence have dwindled to an insignificant minority who are reduced to lobbying increasingly erratic volleys from their Exxon-funded bunkers. Powerful Senate leaders like James Inhoff, chairman of the US Senate's Environment and Public Works committee, who a few years ago described the threat of global warming as the “*greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people,*” have shown signs of changing their tune.

Americans are by far the world's greatest producer of the emissions that produce global warming. Although our incomes are similar to people living in Western Europe, Americans use twice as much energy per capita. *The Economist* concluded, “**America is the key.** If America does nothing, then the developing world's big polluters will do nothing. If America decides independently to constrain emissions, then China and India might come to accept some caps and work toward reduction.”

Economics is the dismal science. We live under a cascade of uncertainties. It is hard to predict the rate of change or to fully comprehend the full extent of the damages that will be caused by climatic change. We know there will be some winners. An extra couple degrees wouldn't necessarily harm northern Europe or Russia's vast interior. The people in Buffalo, New York could probably do without the heavy snowstorm that shut down the city this past week. The 25% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves that are reckoned to be in the Arctic, much of them in Russia, would become easier to retrieve.

Our sins would have **far more negative consequences for the rest of the world.** Africa and India would be particularly hard hit. What makes this tragic is that India and Africa are **already hot and poor**, and they are also more dependent on agriculture than the rest of the world. Agricultural societies are more vulnerable to climate change than those involved in manufacturing or investment banking. It is estimated that as many as 380 million people in those regions might die in this century if climatic change is not addressed. *The Economist* laments how easily westerners accept the premise that the life of a Brit or an American is worth more than the life of an Indian, an Iraqi or a Sudanese.

**There is now an agreed upon bottom line:** Global warming poses a serious risk, and the cost of mitigating is not so large as to be politically unthinkable. Mitigation is better done gradually and started immediately. California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger commented, “*I say the debate is over. We know the science. We see the threat. And we know the time for action is now.*”

In his bestseller, “The World is Flat: How technology is making the world smaller and more

Interdependent,” Tom Friedman writes, “*In areas of oil use—and environmental effects of that consumption—America has lost the ability to lecture anyone else. But if we do nothing, several things will likely result. First, gasoline prices will continue to trend higher. Second, we strengthen the very worst political systems in the world—like Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Russia. Third, the environmental damages that threaten us all will only get worse.*”

*The Economist* says the **problem is politics**. They note the lack of political will and cite the unwillingness of leaders to ask for sacrifices. Winston Churchill, who loved America, said it well, “*Americans are very adaptive—they change when they have no other option.*”

The lack of political will is fostered by a widely held belief that all changes have to be market based. It has become accepted fact that the only change that works is one that people decide they have to make because it costs them too much to not change. In other words—if gas got to \$5 a gallon and stayed there, we would all drive smaller cars and take the train to work. But is that really true?

Remember the **story of the Frog and boiling water**? If you toss a frog into a pot of boiling water he will jump out immediately. If you place him in tepid water and slowly heat the water up—the frog will stay there until he is cooked; for example, only two years ago gas prices hit \$2 a gallon. People panicked but adapted. This year it hit \$3.25 and people were outraged. SUV sales slumped. Metro ridership soared. Now at \$2.20 we think it is cheap. SUV sales have gone back up.

If **consumers are resistant to changing . . . companies have been very lax**. Alex Farrell, Energy and Resources Group at the University of Cal at Berkeley, “*Nobody ever became vice-president by cutting the energy bill.*” The Department of Energy just released the efficiency rates required for furnace manufacturers. The old rate, in 1979, was 79%. The new rate is only 80% although most states have set the rate at 90% and the cost differential between the 80% and 90% units is only \$500 and can be recovered (at current energy rates) in only 4 years. Why are we discouraging energy conservation?

President Calvin Coolidge said, “The business of America is business.” Not long ago students went to college and if you were not a particularly good student you took business classes. If you excelled in math you studied to become an engineer. Now we produce only 60,000 engineers a year while China produces 360,000. We no longer design and make good products but we are great at selling things. Our best and brightest buy and sell companies—manipulating the world's capital markets to produce huge gains for a very few people. We are told we cannot tinker with the free market.

What has changed is the mindset. I grew up not knowing or even believing it made any difference what the Fed did about short-term interest rates. People now pay close attention to business and market news because we are **much deeper in debt**.

Americans have five times the private credit card debt than they had only six years ago.

Today it seems like you are uninformed if you don't know your FICA, or credit, score. Is it in the 700's or the 500's? It doesn't matter unless you are deeply in debt. Then it could mean sudden dramatic spikes in the interest rates you pay on credit card debt or the interest rate on the new car or van you are eying.

The ironic thing is that Detroit has lobbied so hard against higher fuel efficiency standards claiming it would cost them profits and thus jobs. But by not making more fuel-efficient vehicles the whole industry may become bankrupt.

It is not just a lack of political will; it is also a **Learning Problem**. You remember story

problems in the fifth grade. The teacher gave you a couple of variables and you devised a simple equation to solve the problem. The auto industry gives us a very simple story problem to discourage us from buying hybrid cars. The logic goes that it does not make sense to drive a higher efficiency car if the numbers (actual cost savings to the car owner) don't make sense. The initial cost differential between a Ford Escape with conventional engine and one with hybrid is \$4500. If you compute the cost savings over five years, using 12,000 miles per year and 12 miles per gallon fuel savings, the numbers pretty well balance out unless gas costs more than \$2.50 per gallon. This in effect discourages people from buying hybrids.

But that story problem leaves out what we used to call “Social Costs” in Economics 101. You also need to factor in the costs of the environmental degradation. You also need to factor in the fiscal calamity of increasing trade deficits and the political ramifications of sending billions of dollars to ruthless dictators openly plotting to destroy us.

In short, using only a simple cost analysis results in an understatement of the real costs of wasting energy.

The classic environmental stewardship text is **Psalm 24:1** “**The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.**” This is a far cry from the American mantra, “The Earth is mine and I can get anything I want and can afford.”

I wanted to share OUR EFFORTS AT ENERGY CONSERVATION at CCPC.

A few years ago the Session became very concerned about steeply escalating energy costs for our CE building and Dodds Hall. The old heating system in the CE building was antiquated. If you used even one room you had to heat the whole 10,000 square feet. Even in the summer, the hot water boiler system was hot. Likewise in Dodds hall, it was an “all or nothing system.”

**Now we have replaced the windows in both buildings.** In Ajibade's office and in the pantry office we have installed individual heating and air conditioning units. Each has a sensor---if no one is in the room the unit goes into setback mode. This is the same technology used for hotel rooms, which are heated only when used. Each room in the CE building is individually heated and cooled. We think we will dramatically reduce energy costs. But it is also a larger stewardship issue. A dollar not spent on oil or electricity is one we can use for missions or youth programming or programming staff.

We talk a lot in the Western World about the **loss of values.** Communal values have given way to personal priorities or private impulse. Sister Joan Chittister writes in her book, “In Search of Belief,” “*We have no desire for sacrifice in our highly secular and individualistic culture. We do what pleases us in memory only of ourselves.*”

The Christian church in America is finally showing signs of waking up. Pastor Rick Warren, leader of a new movement titled, “Evangelical Climate Initiative,” says it bluntly, “*millions of people could die in this century because of global climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors.*”

The only way to truly address the challenge of climate change means taking on the central least Christian element of American culture---its **wild individualism.** Fossil fuels have allowed us to **stop being neighbors to each other,** both literally—we move ever further into ever emptier far flung suburbs—and **figuratively**—we depend less and less on each other for anything real. The SUV, sold as an important vehicle for the three family car pool, is almost invariably a single passenger fortress. This wild individualism is what makes the politics of real change so difficult.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was shocking because it broke the spell of the conventional religious understanding of personal faith. The Priest and the temple leaders saw a man near death on the side of the road and they crossed over to the other side. They didn't want to risk becoming ritually unclean. Since they didn't know the man, they felt justified in not stopping to provide care.

**John Muir was a famous explorer and naturalist. He** wrote a book about his travels in Alaska a century ago. In it he told of the way two Native American tribes in the area accepted the gospel of Christ. The Stickeen and Sitka tribes had been at war for some time before the missionaries visited, and their conflict was affecting their ability to gather food for the winter. The women were afraid to go fishing or go to pick berries for fear they'd be the next casualty. Finally with winter approaching, the Stickeen chief called for a meeting with the Sitka chief. They met in an open field between the armed camps. The Stickeen chief said, *"My people are hungry. They dare not go to catch salmon or pick berries. If this war goes on, we will all starve. Let us make peace; you go to your home, and we will go to ours and prepare for winter before it's too late."*

But the Sitka chief replied, *"You may want peace, but you have killed ten more of our men than we have of yours. First give us ten men to balance the blood account, then we can make peace."*

*"Very well,"* the Stickeen chief said. *"You know my rank, and that I'm worth ten or more of my common men. Take me and make peace."*

The offer was accepted. The Stickeen chief was shot down in the sight of both tribes. He gave his life for his tribe. Peace was established, and preparations began for winter.

When missionaries came to Alaska years later and told the tribes about the death of Jesus that had made peace between God and humanity, **they understood.** They said, *"The Son of God, Chief of all chiefs, the Maker of the world, must be worth more than all mankind put together; therefore, when his blood was shed, the salvation of the world was assured."* **They responded in faith.**

The gospel is about sacrifice done in love of another.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan; the most influential religious story ever told in any tradition, in response to the question . . . **Who is my neighbor?**

Is our neighbor the woman in Guatemala whose government must spend billions more for oil so they have far less money to provide education and basic medical care for their people?

Perhaps I have done too much business bashing. You might have heard of **Steve Ballmer**, CEO of Microsoft, and Bill Gates' hand picked successor. Last year Steve was seen crawling on the floors of the General Motors' executive conference room trying to fix a connection that would enable him to make a sales pitch to GM engineers.

The image of the CEO of one of the world's biggest corporations on his hands and knees to please some customers made such an impression on one reporter on the scene that he wrote a whole article: [Why High Tech has to stay humble.](#) (Business Week) The main point of the article was that in a competitive world even top executives need to **show their customers they care.**

Will we American Christians get on our hands and knees to show the rest of the Christian world how much we care?

Or, like the Levite and the Priest, will we just walk on by - caught up in our own concerns?