

WITHOUT US

A Sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove
Paint Branch UU Church –Jan. 6, 2007

Part 1: Without Us—*The Bad News*

As a teenager and young adult, I used to dream about the end of the world, or at least the end of life-as-we-know-it. Perhaps this sprang from a childhood spent too much afraid in the 1960s, when violence and the threat of nuclear bombs were very present. Whatever it was, I remember these dreams vividly. They were not of the bombs and death, per se; rather they put me in the world *that came after*. In my dreams I stood in long lines for water, saw children crying and starving, and felt the incredible fatigue that comes from desperation and lack of hope. They were not happy dreams, and I was glad when I stopped having them.

The end of these nightmares did not, however, lessen my interest in and concern for our human future. I come by that naturally. I remember my father saying, in response to his real belief that another nuclear bomb would likely fall in his lifetime, that it would be “very interesting to live at the end of history.” I am grateful that he died before the end of history, and I hope to do the same. But a recent book and movie have got me thinking again about the end of the world. And today’s sermon is my attempt at a thoughtful and hopeful approach to a very difficult topic.

The end of the world is addressed by many religions. For some within the fundamentalist Christian community, it is something to look forward to. According to some of these believers, only those people who are saved (in a very particular way) will be “saved”—i.e., spared hardships of the End Times by being immediately brought up to heaven in the “rapture.” All the rest of us will have to fend for ourselves. And, of course, other religions have their own ideas about the end of the world.

As interesting as these ideas are, they are not, to me, terribly important. I don't believe in the kind of God that saves some and forces others to suffer. I am a Universalist, after all.

But I do think humans have a natural tendency to wonder about what will ultimately happen to us. Perhaps this is because the very nature of our mortality forces us to live within one, quite limited time frame. We can hear about the past from those who have lived it but we can't ever know about the future. We just can't. And so we imagine it.

Some of these imaginings are quite fanciful. Jaco and I, in preparation for this sermon, went to see the interesting Will Smith movie called *I Am Legend*. This film is a modern end-of-life-as-we-know-it fable that tells the story of how a virus created to cure cancer mutates in such a way that 90% of humans are killed. Of the 10% left, only 1% are immune. The rest devolve into vampire-like creatures that prey on the living.

Will Smith's character, Robert Neville, is a doctor who works to cure the disease while holding off the "dark seekers" (as they are poetically called) and trying to find other humans who are disease-free. It was a terrifying and only slightly uplifting movie. It shows humans at our best and our worst as it imagines what the world will look like with far fewer of us. And it is to that world I now turn.

Time Magazine named Alan Weisman's excellent work, *The World Without Us* [St Martin's Press, NY], as the best non-fiction book of 2007. I might agree. It is a fascinating "thought experiment" done by a journalist with a deep and broad interest in and knowledge of science. Weisman—through the lens of a journalist, humanist and scientist—explores, with the help of many talented people, what earth would be like if humans disappeared. He is understandably reluctant to suggest any particular causes for such a condition, except to acknowledge the role of modern medicine and technology in both expanding human life and threatening it at the same time. Instead, he mostly deals with the effect human life has had on the planet and how our absence would—and wouldn't—change the world.

Humans have had an enormous impact on our planet. Though relative youngsters by evolutionary standards, everywhere humans go we change the landscape and its

inhabitants in extraordinary ways. Just look at cities. In the book, Weisman talks with experts about Manhattan, the heart of New York City.

To look at Manhattan and imagine what it would be like *without* humans, Weisman needed to understand what it was like *before* humans. Essentially, Manhattan is a hilly, rocky island with water everywhere. After centuries of building and re-shaping the landscape to fit human needs, Weisman suggests that it would take far less time for the buildings and bridges and roads we have built to fall apart than it took to build them. Without the powerful pumps that push the water off the island back into the river each hour of every day, soon the rivers and streams that once flowed freely would do so again. Water would win, and the beautiful buildings of glass, wood and concrete would quickly rot or wear away, leaving only the hard stone of earlier buildings to stand as testament to human ingenuity.

In *I Am Legend*, also set in NYC, we see a bit of what Weisman imagines in a wonderfully visual way. As the only resident human who can live in daylight, Will Smith drives around an abandoned New York where weeds, flowers and trees have grown up through sidewalks. Deer run freely down the streets, chased by lions that must have escaped from the Bronx Zoo. Though Smith's character has a generator, the world is now very dark at night. All of this rings true with what Weisman and his scientific companions imagine might happen if we disappeared. Nature would take over, and take over quite quickly.

Weisman has many such images in his book, based on hard scientific fact and convincing, if creative conjecture. What I found most compelling about his work (and yet hard to hear) was how much better off the planet would be without us. Humans—certainly the *most* conscious, if not the *only* conscious animal on earth—have given to the world incredible gifts, not the least of which are art and music. But if you look at our legacy with unblinkered eyes, you must also recognize that much of what we have brought to this earth (which we claim to love) is destruction and extinction.

Weisman makes a very strong case for humans as the extinction bringer. Just about everywhere humans went, after emerging from Africa, we brought death. And we

continue to wreak havoc on our beautiful world. In the last 200 years in particular, as our species has grown in numbers and technological power, we have wiped out almost all the large predators and caused countless smaller animals (the passenger pigeon being one outrageous example) to go extinct. How? Initially, it mostly came about through the simple act of killing them—either for food, decoration or sport. In more recent times, we have done so through continued killing but also through increased pollution, climate change and loss of habitat.

Humans continue to survive, some might even say thrive (our population keeps growing) in spite of these real losses. But how long can it last? Most scientists willing to look hard at the data suggest that if the human population continues to grow exponentially, and if we don't make changes in how we treat the animals, plants and the earth itself, we show every sign of a species that could go kaput. I did not know that there are such things as "extinction experts" but one of them, Doug Erwin from the Smithsonian, is quoted in Weisman's book saying, "Humans are going extinct eventually. Everything has, so far. It's like death: there's no reason to think we're any different" [p. 231].

I decided to do today's service in two parts because I urge us to reflect on both the good and the bad news of humanity's situation. The bad news should be pretty obvious. As humans, we have done more to injure our planet than anything with the possible exception of asteroids and ice ages. No thinking person doubts the human influence on climate change any more and unless we stop spewing poisons into the atmosphere it is not only possible but likely that seriously bad things will happen, like the melting of the polar ice caps and the spread of desert-like conditions to places where more and more people need to live. We also are tinkering with genetics and human health in ways that we can only hope don't create more hurt than harm. One of the interesting elements of the *I Am Legend* film was the virus that killed more than 90% of humans on earth was originally touted as a final cure for cancer. Such a thing is not really so far-fetched as we might hope.

And of course, in our attempts to create more and better widgets, we are developing such things as nano-technology, which may look helpful on the surface but could instead cause even more trouble. I was distressed to read in Weisman's book, for example, about the

tiny plastic beads that are now being used in such things as facial cleansers. These lovely little scrubbing surfaces that I assumed were natural and harmless, are actually tiny plastic pieces so small that birds and fish and even smaller animals eat them, thinking they are food. And no one can deny that bags, containers and other forms of plastic are taking over the earth. Where do they go? Nowhere, and everywhere. Plastic doesn't biodegrade. It hangs around and that's the problem.

[After preaching this sermon, I heard from a number of people about new technology for plastic that does biodegrade. Good news, but it still doesn't deal with what's already out there.]

And we can't talk about bad news without mentioning the great gift of the 20th century—nuclear weapons and waste. This poisonous waste is buried in places all around the world and will stay radioactive for thousands of years. What kind of legacy is that for our children?!

Religion has had a hard time catching up with the scientific progress that some blame for the situation we're in. But religion must answer to this, too. Far too many people think it's their God-given right to do whatever they want to the earth because humans are supposed to have "dominion" over all plants and animals. Some figure this is God's way of punishing us. And others, frankly, don't care.

We have to ask ourselves, what is our religious response to the planet's peril? I do think Unitarian Universalism has some positive and hopeful approaches to our times. But we must also acknowledge the part our religious perspective has done to negatively impact our troubled world.

Throughout the 20th century, but particularly in the years leading up to the Second World War, Unitarians and Universalists developed a theology that some call "onward and upward forever." Based on the emerging scientific humanism of its day, many in our faith community believed that science and technology would save us. There was a feeling within certain humanist communities that humans were capable of solving all problems and that "heaven" would be reached (on earth, of course) when we got smart enough.

“Man” was the be-all and end-all within this theological system, and though some recognized the wider world of nature and spirit, plenty others did not.

[Responses to my sermon remind me to note that many scientists do understand the bigger picture and do not assume that technology can answer all human problems. It is often the scientists who are ahead of others in this process. Many modern humans make assumptions about science and technology that are far behind the progressive stands of many scientists. I thank all the folks in the congregation, particularly Lowell Owens, who critiqued me appropriately for not making this plain in the sermon.]

For us to claim some good news in the face of planetary crisis, we can't afford to be smug. Some in our recent past used this theological stance in ways that border on complacency. Listen to this poem from one of the great humanist writers of the 20th century, Kenneth Patton. While there is much to approve in his words, listen for the hidden subtext, which suggests that humans are the answer and not a part of the problem.

Man is the earth upright and proud; in him the earth is knowing. Its winds are music in his mouth; in him its river flowing. The sun is man's hearth-fire, warm with the earth's desire, and with its purpose strong he sings earth's pilgrim song; in him the earth is growing.

Come lift your voices, fill the skies with your exultant singing. Now dedicate your minds and hearts, beauty and order bringing. Your labor is your strength, your love will win at length, your minds will form a plan to draw man unto man. His day is just beginning.

Let us sing an updated version of these words together now. Hymn #303: “We Are the Earth Upright and Proud”...

Part 2: Without Us—*The Good News*

Ken Patton's hymn quite nicely represents the bad news and the good news of humanity in the 21st century. It is profoundly human-centered. *We* are the earth; in *us* the earth is knowing and growing. Man brings order and beauty and men will form a plan to draw man unto man. The adapted words are different, speaking of peace and praise. But the

underlying sentiment is one that, in my opinion, we must question if we are to move with grace toward a better planet.

We, wonderful and terrible human beings, have got to get over feeling like we are supposed to be at the top of the planetary heap. For the generations that we have believed this, we have gone into place after place, killing the animals and changing the landscape for our benefit. When other humans were there, we either converted them to our way of thinking or decided they were animals beneath our dignity and we exterminated them. This has got to stop!

But I did say that this part of the sermon would be the good news. So here it is.

First, the good news is that humans are discovering and believing more and more in our interdependence with all creation. This has been our 7th UU principle for over 20 years, but people around the world, from tree planters in Kenya, to naturalists in the Korean DMZ, to Polish forest keepers to American children are learning that nothing can truly be “thrown away” and that animals and plants share a bio-system with us that makes us all powerfully interdependent on one another.

I realize that there are lots of people who don't believe or live this way but I find hope in the many that do.

I also find hope in evolution. Humans are a very new species, evolutionarily speaking. We are still capable of evolving. Crisis is often the spark that causes evolutionary changes and I can't help but believe that there is potential for humans to evolve in ways that allow us to continue in some fashion on this planet even if things go belly up.

And, in a strange way, I find hope in the reality that the earth is much older and complex and, yes, capable than we know. If humans don't survive, or even evolve into something human-like, the planet will find some way to live on. The earth is a living being. It does not depend on humans for its life. We may have done much to make the earth sick, and for that we are paying a high price. But I have no doubt the earth will recover, with or without us. And that gives me a lot of hope.

We live in perilous times, I know. Our way of life is unsustainable, and most of us don't even know what to do to change that, except in very small ways. Well, change often begins in the smallest ways. The wonderful theory of the tipping point says that if enough change starts to happen, at some point the whole thing tips, and change becomes fully realized.

I believe that our UU faith communities are places where such change is already happening. We are people who do more than most to clean up after ourselves, to walk lightly on the earth, and to work for peace and justice. We do this because our faith teaches us that all of creation, not just humanity, is important. And our faith teaches us that within the human species, we are all created equal. We know that unless we can find ways to work together to create a peaceful world where sustainable prosperity is available to all, it's not enough. And so we are called to *be* the change we seek (as Gandhi suggested).

Each of us, in this New Year, can resolve to make changes that will create a cleaner and healthier world. It really is possible if we make a serious commitment and follow through.

So I end this sermon hopeful, even as Alan Weisman's book shows the sober reality of how much we have done to damage our planet and how little the earth would miss us if we left. Because I do believe that humans have played and must continue to play an important role in the evolution of life on our planet.

For the world would be a lesser place without our eyes to see its beauty, our ears to hear its music, our feet to walk its land, and our mouths to praise its glory. For who else but humans could see the earth from space, recognize its incredible fragility and preciousness, and then write a song for us to sing about it? Let us celebrate this powerful human gift, and sing together one of the most beautiful hymns to the earth ever written. Hymn #163: "For the Earth Forever Turning."

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