

Reviving the Climate, Restoring our Souls

by the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

At the end of last summer, when a friend invited me to help organize a “Climate Revival” in downtown Boston, I immediately said yes. To me the word “revival” conjured up the image of an open tent, a crowd of people singing with fervor, and a breeze of hope blowing through the air. Such a scene appealed to me, though in fact it was fairly imaginary. I had never been to a revival before, much less helped to lead one. But what really caught my attention was the idea of a “climate” revival. What if we created an event that inspired Christians of every denomination to roll up their sleeves and begin some serious climate healing? What if we assembled top leaders of many branches of the faith and mobilized a religious, moral, and spiritual movement to protect life on this planet?

Eight months later, on Saturday, April 27, 2013, hundreds of Christians from across New England converged on downtown Boston to participate in a morning and afternoon worship service in two historic churches – Old South Church and Trinity Church. Billed as “an ecumenical festival to embolden the renewal of Creation,” the Climate Revival traced the arc of the story of Lazarus as we listened for God’s consoling, chastening, and encouraging Word in relation to the climate crisis. Bill McKibben and Archbishop Desmond Tutu joined us by recorded video. Not willing to waste a minute, between the services we scheduled a round-table conversation with writer and activist Wen Stephenson and four panelists, including our Presiding Bishop. We also released an ecumenical climate statement, “Lazarus, come out: A shared statement of hope in the face of climate change,” which was signed by high-level Christian leaders that included the national leaders of two communions (the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ); a Baptist pastor signing on behalf of the national leader of American Baptist Churches USA; the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Boston, signing on behalf of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; a Lutheran bishop of New England; and Episcopal bishops and UCC Conference Ministers from across New England. Meanwhile we held an educational fair, in which local churches and environmental groups networked and shared their work on addressing climate change.

Those who attend a revival bring home their favorite memories. Some of mine include: walking the aisles, plunging a hemlock branch into a bowl, and sprinkling the congregation with blessed water, as we raised the roof and

sang the spiritual, “Wade in the Water,” accompanied by wild riffs from Willie Sordillo on sax. Watching a rainbow of ribbons rise and fall in the air as we held banners aloft and marked our covenant by the rainbow and by the pledge “never again to destroy creation through our greed, our negligence, our selfishness, and our sins.” Listening to Bishop Doug read A Litany of Hope side by side with His Eminence Metropolitan Methodius. Hearing the congregation fall silent as each of us reflected on what kind of stone blocks us from rising up to tackle climate change (the stone of inertia, or of helplessness? the stone of despair, of uncertainty about what to do, or of fear that it’s too late?). Listening to our Presiding Bishop deliver one of the most creative and compelling sermons on climate change that I’ve ever heard. Sharing in a lively and chaotic ritual of mutual commissioning, in which people in the pews marked each other’s hands with dirt in the sign of the cross, saying “May God bless you as a healer of the earth.”

We offered our witness to the urgent need to heal Creation only 12 days after the bombings on Boylston Street at the end of the Marathon. The confluence of events presented Revival planners with our most difficult decision: should we cancel the climate justice rally in Copley Square that we had planned to hold after the second service? On the one hand, we were acutely aware of the deathly level of violence and trauma that the Earth is undergoing. As Bill McKibben pointed out in a recent article,¹ “...the Arctic – from Greenland to its seas – essentially melted last summer in a way [never before seen](#). The frozen Arctic is like a large physical feature. It’s as if you woke up one morning and your left arm was missing.” Could we not hold a climate justice rally that lifted up the urgent need to heal violence against the Earth, along with violence of every kind? But in the end we decided that holding a climate rally on the first weekend that Copley Square reopened, with an impromptu memorial site in place and the sight of blood in the streets so very recent, would be a disservice to the movement. Like it or not, we were liable to being perceived as insensitive and opportunistic, as a “special interest” group taking advantage of the tragedy to push our own agenda. With regret, we decided to cancel the rally.

¹ <http://billmoyers.com/2013/04/08/is-the-keystone-xl-pipeline-the-%E2%80%9Cstonewall%E2%80%9D-of-the-climate-movement/> “Is the Keystone XL Pipeline the “Stonewall” of the Climate Movement?,” by Bill McKibben, April 8, 2013 (This piece was first published on [TomDispatch](#))

Still, the essential unity of our longing to heal violence of every kind was symbolized by our solemn mid-day procession, led by bagpipes, from Old South Church to Trinity Church, across Copley Square. One by one we bent down to place a daffodil at the memorial to those who died, and one by one we stood up to resume our walk with Christ.

For this historic ecumenical revival, we didn't have an open tent, but rather two big churches at either end of a public square – and, as in every good revival, we had a crowd of people singing with fervor, and a breeze of hope blowing through the air. It seems to me that working to revive the climate also revives our souls. We feel the Spirit's presence as we join hands to protect the conditions that support life on this planet. And we have only begun to learn what we can do through the power of the Risen Christ. As Denise Levertov writes in the closing lines of "Beginners," a poem that was read aloud at the Climate Revival,

*We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes to the communion of struggle.*

*So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,*

so much is in bud.

The Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas of Grace Church, Amherst, was part of the team that planned the Climate Revival, along with Rev. Dr. Jim Antal (Minister and President of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ), Rt. Rev. Bud Cedarholm (retired Suffragan Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts), and Rev. Stephanie Johnson (Province One Energy Stewardship Minister).

For photographs, and for links to the climate statement, the sermons, and other parts of the service, please keep checking the Climate Revival

*Facebook page and the Province One Website (<http://www.province1.org/>).
We also plan to post some videos on YouTube.*