

Necessity

SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 27:1-4 (NRSV):

[1] The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? [2] When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh— my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall. [3] Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. [4] **One thing I asked of the LORD**, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable unto you O Lord; our strength, and our Redeemer. Amen

Grace and peace to you in the name of our still speaking God who loves us just the way we are, and loves us too much to let us stay that way!

It is my great pleasure to bring you greetings from the 360 churches that make up the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ – and I am particularly honored to do so amidst this year’s Convocation!

The theme of this morning’s sermon is leadership and vocation in a time of climate disruption --- and its title is, “**Necessity.**”

Returning to this beautiful campus yesterday prompted me to recall my arrival here 44 years ago. There was so much to take in. But one of the things that grabbed my attention was that even though it was September, **people were still talking** about how Dean Michael Allenⁱ had come back alive from a Christmas peace mission to Hanoi. He and Joan Baez – along with several others – violated our country’s State Department’s orders by traveling to our enemy’s capital in the middle of a war to deliver letters from loved ones to the American POWs who were being held there. (Senator John McCain may have been among them - although

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I'm not sure of that.) Not long after they arrived, American B-52 bombers initiated a relentless bombing campaign on Hanoi, forcing Dean Allen and the others to retreat to the underground shelters. There, our enemies made room and provided hospitality for the Americans visitors... not for a few hours, but for the full length of the 11-day-long bombing campaign. The destruction to North Viet Nam's capital was unimaginable. But the shelters had kept the American peace delegation safe. And once the bombs had finally stopped falling, Dean Allen and the others went on to visit the American POWs, and deliver to them letters of hope from their loved ones back home.

Throughout his life, Dean Michael Allen was a tireless crusader for peace and justice. As part of his final Cathedral sermon, he proclaimed what he had shared from many pulpits: "God has only one vision: to send you and me forth to bring into God's world a vision of justice and peace. Anything else is blasphemy." I never got to know Dean Allen personally – but I admired how a leader in his position embraced the **necessity** of social action.

I was relieved that YDS seemed to be a place where I could deepen my radical spirit. And soon after arriving, the place I felt most at home was in the basement down below this chapel. Henri Nouwen had just arrived at Yale, and he began hosting a daily Eucharist in a small crypt-like space for any who wanted to come. Of the many friendships born from bread broken and wine poured, I want to lift up Dean Hammer and Art Laffin. Ten years later, Dean would serve as Best Man at my wedding. But our time together with Henri deepened our discernment, harnessed our fervor and amplified our courage.

Dean and Art and I – and perhaps some of you as well – would protest at the New London Trident Nuclear Submarine base – risking arrest, talking with workers, and asking God to transform these horrific death machines. A few years later, Dean joined with Dan and Phil Berrigan and five others and walked into the General Electric plant where the MX missile nuclear warheads for those Trident submarines were assembled. There were no security guards. They walked up to an unarmed nosecone, fell to their knees and prayed, poured a few vials of their own blood onto the nosecone, and then wacked the nosecone a few times with hammers they had brought in – all while reading from the prophet Isaiah, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not

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lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4)
They came to be known as the Plowshares 8.

When they were brought to trial, they invoked **the necessity defense**. They argued that the risk posed by nuclear weapons constituted a greater harm than the criminal non-violent action they undertook in the public interest. They pleaded **not guilty by reason of necessity**, and thus sought to draw attention to the failure of the law to protect the citizenry. Since 1980, there have been over 70 Plowshares actions. And while the necessity defense failed for the Plowshares 8, several courts have in fact acquitted these prophetic activists on the grounds of necessity.

As a pacifist, activist and ethicist, I’ve always been drawn to the necessity defense. In 2013 two friends of mine piloted a lobster boat out near the Brayton Point power plant in Fall River Massachusetts. The boat was named the “Henry David T.” They dropped anchor and for a day or so blocked a gigantic freighter carrying 40,000 tons of coal. They were arrested and charged with conspiracy, disturbing the peace, and a few other violations. Sixteen months later their trial was to begin. They were insisting on a jury trial, and **they had prepared a necessity defense**. Along with dozens of other supporters, I squeezed into the courtroom to hear opening testimony from climate expert Jim Hansen.

As is often the case, the start time was delayed. Then we began to hear rumors. When the judge entered, the Assistant District Attorney asked to speak with him. And then the Judge announced:

- that the conspiracy charge had been dropped,
- the other criminal charges had been downgraded to civil charges
- and the defendants had agreed to pay some reasonable court and police fees.

As the thunderous applause began to fade, word spread that the District Attorney was going to hold an impromptu press conference out in front of the court in five minutes. No one knew what he would say.

DA Sam Sutter looked like the District Attorney he was. But he spoke like a father. He spoke like an activist. And under his arm he had a copy of the current issue of Rolling Stone Magazine featuring Bill McKibben’s cover article.

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After assuring the citizens of Bristol County that the costs of the police would be covered, he continued. He said his decision was made with “the children of Bristol County and beyond in mind. Climate change is one of the gravest crises our planet has ever faced,” he continued. “In my humble opinion, the political leadership on this issue has been gravely lacking.”

As the cheers erupted, he said one thing more. “I am also extremely pleased that we were able to reach an agreement that symbolizes **our commitment** at the Bristol County District Attorney’s Office **to take a leadership role on this issue....** Climate change is one of the gravest crises the planet has ever faced. The evidence is overwhelming and it keeps getting worse. So we took a stand here today, the Bristol County District Attorney’s Office.”ⁱⁱ

As the crowd applauded and shouted, I wept. And then I waited until I could have a moment to speak with DA Sutter. I said to him that it seemed to me that he had invoked the necessity defense for himself – that the horror of climate change was so immanent, it necessitated new action and innovation on his part as a District Attorney. He said, “Yes; exactly.” And then I said that it seemed to me that he was declaring that in the context of a climate crisis world District Attorneys must embrace a new vocation – and again, he thoroughly agreed.

As he walked away, I thought of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521 invoking his understanding of necessity: “**Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.**”

I will only mention briefly the fearless courage and uncompromising hope evidenced by the group **Our Children’s Trust**. After teaming up with some attorneys and film makers, this group of teenagers made a case to protect the climate based on the Public Trust Doctrine. The Public Trust Doctrine, which stretches all the way back to Roman times, is well-established in American law and in many other legal traditions throughout the world. It states that it is the duty of the government to protect the natural resources that are essential for our collective survival and prosperity. Rivers, groundwater, the seashore - and in this case, the atmosphere - cannot be privatized or substantially impaired because these natural resources belong to everyone equally - including those not yet born.

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I said “they made a case.” In fact, these teenagers have taken legal action in almost all 50 states, and currently have pending cases in several states. This year (2016) a Federal District Court judge in Oregon and a Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court both ruled in their favor. Even the law is beginning to recognize that protecting the climate is no longer optional. **It’s a necessity.**

One final story. Less than two weeks ago five climate activists cut some chain-link fence and turned off a few giant valves, thus shutting down the flow of Canadian tar sands oil through pipes in Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana and Washington.ⁱⁱⁱ They had done months of research to be sure it was safe, and they phoned the pipeline companies to give them a 15 minute warning. When they go to court, they will plead “**not guilty**” by reason of necessity.

After their action, one of their support people was interviewed by the media. The question: what difference do you expect this action to make when there is so much climate denial in our country? His answer speaks to **our understanding of necessity**. First, he said that the climate change deniers are only 25% of the population. They aren’t the problem. The problem is a different kind of denial. People “have not internalized the severity and magnitude of climate change It’s eerily reminiscent of what Dr. King talks about in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” when he says that the biggest hindrance to civil rights might not be the Ku Klux Klan or the White councilman, but the White moderate who says they agree with the goals, but says “slow down, calm down, you’re not being reasonable.”^{iv}

What’s going on when the Psalmist invokes the expression “**One thing** I will ask of the Lord...”? Or those few times in the Gospels when Jesus says “**one thing is necessary**” or “you lack **one thing**” or he responds to the Pharisees’ question: which commandment in the law is **the greatest**?^v My takeaway is that there are times not only in our personal lives – but historic times in our life-together – when God will claim our attention and **faithfulness will necessitate our response**.

Friends in Christ: this is one of those times, when each of us, as leaders, in whatever context God has called us, must forge a new path and reshape our vocation. A decade ago, I was in final conversation with the Board of Mass. Conference UCC to become Conference Minister of that 220 year old institution. After thanking them for trusting me with the enormous responsibility of overseeing

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400 churches and 850 clergy, I said, “There’s one more thing. For me to be faithful to God’s call, I’ll need to spend at least 10% of my time on climate change.” We talked briefly, and they offered their full support. And now I spend 20-30% of my time working nationally throughout the UCC on climate change with the blessing of my Board.

Just as DA Sutter declared that the climate crisis necessitated a new understanding of his vocation, I believe that each us, wherever God has placed us, is called to do likewise.

I want to congratulate the YDS Board and Dean Greg Sterling for leading a process that resulted in YDS’s current strategic plan.^{vi} All five of its goals are important, but I’m especially grateful for the Living-Building Residential Complex which some of us heard about yesterday afternoon. This goal includes a commitment to “support the joint program with the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies”^{vii} – the first of its kind in North America. The founder of that program, former Dean of the School of Forestry Gus Speth, became a close friend when we spent three days and nights together in a Washington DC jail for protesting the KXL pipeline! The joint program is part of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, the largest international multi-religious project of its kind.

It’s a program driven by necessity as the continuity of creation itself is in jeopardy. Its graduates understand the necessary link between the climate crisis and their vocation. Should that program be reinforced? Of course it should – as part of a larger vision seeking to prepare religious leaders for the societal transformations we must shape and initiate.

And that’s my message for all of us. It now falls to our generation to reorient what we prize. And as established or aspiring faith leaders, it is up to us lead a moral revolution that succeeds in instilling:

- Resilience in place of growth;
- Collaboration in place of consumption;
- Wisdom in place of progress;
- Balance in place of addiction.
- Moderation in place of excess;
- Vision in place of convenience;

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- Accountability in place of disregard; and
- Self-giving love in place of self-centered fear.

The greatest mass movement in history was fueled by Jesus' most frequent admonition: "Fear not!" Not surprisingly, Henri Nouwen's life and witness was a testimony to the journey from the house of fear to the house of love. Let us make that journey as we help lead a movement. Let us recognize the essential role faith communities must play in re-shaping many of modernity's most fundamental values. And let us give thanks that God is calling us to take these initiatives in a time when our leadership is critically important.

May each of us rejoice in the reality that God has given us everything we need to fulfill our calling. Amen.

ⁱ Dean Allen's obit: https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/32645/obituary_dean_allen_090613

ⁱⁱ <https://lobsterboatblockade.org/2014/09/08/informal-transcript-of-district-attorney-sam-sutters-statement/> ; <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/09/08/activists-drops-charges-case-blocked-coal-shipment-power-plant/sUpBpGxxAz3E2Vr5RFQQM/story.html?event=event12> ; <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2014/09/09/time-for-civil-disobedience-upon/ubSQdFw5KJs09D6EpfiZI/story.html> ; <http://revivingcreation.org/the-law-of-the-land/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thinkprogress.org/activists-shut-tar-sands-pipeline-into-the-us-f07079ef159b#.79ho2dwfh> and http://www.shutitdown.today/pr_oct13th16

^{iv} Jay O'Hara being interviewed by YES! Magazine <http://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/calling-all-climate-activists-go-out-and-get-yourself-in-some-holy-trouble-20161014>

^v Mark 10:21; Luke 10:41-42; Luke 18:22; Matt. 22:34-40.

^{vi} <http://divinity.yale.edu/about-yds/strategic-plan>

^{vii} <http://divinity.yale.edu/about-yds/strategic-plan/cultivating-community-living-building-residential-complex>