

The Human Element

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 2, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Jeremiah 4:9-12, 22-28](#)

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Back in the spring, when we were getting ready for my sabbatical, Pastor Brenda told me she had an energizing idea for a sermon series during the season of creation. She planned to preach on the classical four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. Then, on the fifth and last Sunday of the season, when I was back from my sabbatical, I could preach on ... well, I could figure out how to wrap it all up.

As I understand it, the four elements were an early attempt to explain the complexity of nature. They were seen as the basic building blocks of everything else. I had assumed that they were a uniquely ancient Greek explanation. It turns out that Tibetan and Indian cultures developed similar explanations, identifying the same four elements (though sometimes with different names – for example, using “wind” instead of “air”).¹

I quickly decided, at least a month before my sabbatical began, that today’s sermon would be on the fifth element: human beings. I picked this theme in part because we are made of the four elements. We are more than half (and young people as much as three-quarters) water.² The first sign of life is breathing, and the last sign of life is the cessation of breathing, for we are of air. We are of the earth – from dust we are and to dust we shall return. And we are of fire, for the atoms that make up the molecules that make up the cells that make up us were forged in the fires of ancient stars.

Knowing that the first sermon I would preach upon my return would be about us as the fifth element opened me to an awareness during my sabbatical that surprised me. And pleased me. It made we aware of the elements in my daily life.

I’ve had the experience, while staying at the family cabin in New Hampshire, of waking up in the middle of the night so cold that I could only warm up by getting a fire going in the wood burning stove. I didn’t need a fire this year. The time I spent in New Hampshire was mostly during a heat wave. My point is, I’ve known the comfort of fire.

And when I went for a day hike on Mount Lassen, I also saw the destructive power of fire. Last year’s Dixie fire burned 70% of the National



¹ “Classical element,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_element (accessed 30 September 2022).

² Water Science School, “The Water in You: Water and the Human Body,” *United States Geological Survey*, <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school/science/water-you-water-and-human-body> (posted 22 May 2019; accessed 30 September 2022).

Park. The hike I took at Lassen and was along Kings Creek, down toward the Kings Creek Falls. The trail all the way to the falls still wasn't open because of fire damage and debris dangers.

I hiked the section that was open, and I was awestruck by the contrast between the burned areas away from and the burned areas next to the Creek. As I contemplated the difference, I thought, "that slogan from the Dakota access pipeline protests six years ago is so accurate: water *is* life."

And yet, the photos of the monsoon flooding in Pakistan the end of August, and the hurricane Ian flooding in Florida and South Carolina these past few days remind us that water can also bring destruction and death.

This reflecting on fire and water made me think about the other elements. I thought about New Hampshire famous "old man of the mountain." As a child, I assumed it would be there forever. And then, in May 2003, it wasn't there anymore. The element of the earth is in motion.

This reflecting also made me think about the element air. I experienced of some exquisitely beautiful blue skies while on sabbatical, and some incredibly smoky skies.

During the course of my sabbatical I have looked at all these classical elements of the earth and it has been a delight. And during my sabbatical, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "I looked on the earth, and low, it was waste and void."

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann refers to this text as Jeremiah's "dangerous poem." Diana Butler Bass explains: "The poem is dangerous because of the conventional way many Christians have interpreted it as threat – Israel has sinned, God is angry, the people have not repented, and now God will destroy the land. The stress has been on God's wrath against human wickedness and how He wants his holiness avenged."³

Brueggemann says it's important to remember that it's a poem. "It is not a blueprint for the future. It is not a prediction. It is not an act of theology that seeks to scare into repentance. It is, rather, a rhetorical attempt to engage this numbed, unaware community in an imaginative embrace of what is happening. The world is becoming unglued. The poet has the awesome burden of helping his people sense that their presumed world is in jeopardy."⁴

In other words, Bass says, "Jeremiah *does* want to scare his listeners – not to fear some eternal punishment in Hell, but to understand what is happening around them and see the peril in the world.

"In the book of Jeremiah, the poetic apocalypse is the result of a war. There were no climate crisis or nuclear bombs to end the world. Thus, the poet sees an invading army as the instrument of divine judgement. Jeremiah warns the people that they should not be complacent – and their leaders had deluded them into believing that they were safe. Their

³ Diana Butler Bass, "Sunday Musings," *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-266> (posted and accessed 11 September 2022).

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *ibid*.

peace and prosperity were an illusion. Danger was at hand, both from injustice in their own society and enemies at their gates....

“The people can’t prepare for or avert the coming disaster because they are being lied to by their political and religious leaders.

“The specific sins behind the poem aren’t named, but ... the poem alludes to what the failure might be – the neglect of God’s original directive in Genesis to tend and care for the earth. In effect, Jeremiah runs the creation account *backward* toward chaos. The earth once again becomes a ‘formless void,’ light fades and stars go dark, the mountains give way, plants and animals die, and human beings and our cities disappear. *It is terrifying: we humans – through ignorance and injustice – can de-create the world.*

“However vague the particular sins, the outcome is undeniable: *Human failures result in the utter destruction of the land.* There is an absolute link between human action and the environment in which we live.”⁵

I don’t remember when I first heard (or maybe it was read) the term “Anthropocene.” It was almost certainly in the past 20 years because the term has only had any popularity this century (though it may date back to the 1980s). Whoever it was who used it was saying that we are no longer in the geologic epoch called the Holocene, that a new epoch had begun. And the thing that made this epoch unique in earth’s history is that for the first time, one biological species is able to influence or even dictate what happens geologically to the planet. That species is, of course, human beings.



At the time I first heard the term, I thought it was a bit arrogant – to think that human beings can change the course of the earth’s evolving. I no longer think it is arrogant. Just look at our ability to change the classical elements. Human behavior has the power to change water – whether or not icesheets and glaciers melt, and how much water there is in the hydrologic cycle. Human behavior has the power to change air – by changing its chemical makeup. Human behavior has

the power to change fire – by changing when and how wildly wildfires burn. And human behavior has the power to change the earth – by literally removing the tops of mountains.

Having the power to change geologic history means we also have the power not to. Human beings are the only element that can bring a balance to the other elements – and that means we *can* bring that balance.

And there are signs that more and more humans are making that choice. Here are three examples that I became aware of in the past month: According to the International Energy Agency, Worldwide, the number of people working in clean energy jobs surpassed

⁵ Bass, *ibid* (emphasis hers).

those working in the fossil fuel sector for the first time ever.⁶ The owner of the clothing company Patagonia, valued at \$3 billion, decided to give the company away to a non-profit dedicated to fighting climate change.⁷ For the last two years, solar energy has been [the cheapest](#) form of electricity the world has ever seen, and that means more and more of it is being installed around the world.⁸

And if you want to know what happens when we work together, just look to the decision by Senator Joe Manchin to withdraw his pet project, the Mountain Valley Pipeline, from the Continuing Resolution bill that passed both houses on Friday and will keep the federal government functioning through mid-December.

“If we defang this text as being about personal salvation or eternal judgement,” Dr. Bass concludes, “Jeremiah’s poem speaks directly to this moment. He *saw* what we don’t often see – that everything is connected, that the whole of the cosmos is of a piece, and that all we human beings do has the capacity to either participate in God’s ongoing creation or destroy it. What we do matters.”⁹

Amen.

⁶ See <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-employment/overview#abstract>.

⁷ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/climate/patagonia-climate-philanthropy-chouinard.html>.

⁸ See <https://www.carbonbrief.org/solar-is-now-cheapest-electricity-in-history-confirms-iea/>.

⁹ Diana Butler Bass, *op. cit.*