

Coming Down from the Peak

Our Saviors Lutheran Church

Hibbing, MN - April 30, 2006

I am honored to present this sermon in this church on the Sunday after Earth Week 2006.

Until two years ago, the concept of “Peak Oil”, which describes the turning point when production enters an irreversible decline, was not a specific component of my general concern for the rapid depletion of non-renewable resources and the associated global environmental damage. Through the internet, I came upon a growing public discourse on energy depletion and its consequences. I confess that I became a “peak freak”.

I recognized that roots for my personal concerns about energy resources trace all the way back to my teen years in a Congregational Church in suburban Boston. Now, in looking for assurance of positive outcomes for the future, I was surprised at how relevant the teachings of the great religions were to our situation, yet how little has been said or done to address this gargantuan problem for our future. Talking incessantly about Peak Oil surely is annoying to less focused people, but at my church, rather than tuning me out at Just Peace Committee meetings, they just asked me to give a sermon.

The sermon “Coming Down from the Peak” was written for a service at Peace United Church of Christ in Duluth on February 13 last year. For me being asked to give that sermon again at Pilgrim Congregational and First Unitarian Churches in Duluth last year and now here today at Our Saviors **on the iron range** is a positive sign. People of faith are becoming more concerned about our relationship with the earth and in particular our history of behavior predicated on the perception that energy is an infinite resource to be exploited without regard for future generations and responsibility for damage to the web of life.

In response to the sermon, Reverend Kathryn Nelson at Peace Church suggested that a resolution, calling for actions to address anticipated societal and environmental problems associated with declining fossil fuel resources, be submitted to the United Church of Christ 26th General Synod in Atlanta last July. This was done and the UCC approved the resolution for action. Now I find myself responsible for organizing a task force on energy for the national church. I’m not sure if I’m the right person for the job but it appears that for the moment that I’m the one expected to lead us into this issue. Your prayers for our success will be appreciated.

In the United Church of Christ the current theme is “God is still speaking”. It didn’t occur to me until after I wrote the sermon that the process I went through was my best attempt, as a progressive Christian, to listen without concern for the discomfort of the message. And I realized how often Christians may be expecting God to listen without listening to God first.

I was struck by the power of Christ's words in Matthew which are paralleled by commandments from other religions. Consider the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist poet and Zen master: "Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need." Couple this with the seven generations philosophy of native Americans, and we have a good prescription for what ails us.

Coming Down from the Peak

When one scales a mountain it is reasonable to expect that the descent will be easier than the ascent. Often we anticipate a beautiful vista of the other side of the peak. Returning from a peak may bring new perspectives, new directions, important events.

According to the bible, Moses carried two large rock tablets up Mt. Sinai and returned with the ten commandments recorded on them. Jesus advanced the commandments and laid the foundation for Christianity in his Sermon on the Mount. The Disciples enthusiastically brought Christ's words down the mountain and eventually carried them to distant places and times. Two millennia later we ponder his message and our successes and failures to live by his words.

Would that we always follow the Golden Rule (*Matthew 7:12*): "***In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law***". And there were

warnings of consequences for not doing so (*Matthew 7:26-27*): “*And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall.*”

A different kind of peak experience is looming for all humanity. This is a peak that people of the world have climbed unequally to different levels, yet all are bound to participate in the descent in one way or the other. Ominously, the view from the peak does not appear to be what most expected on the way up. This peak is described by a relatively unknown concept called “peak oil”.

What is this concept and why is it so important? First, we must appreciate the connections between energy and life. Through God’s creation, energy has powered life; sustained life; driven evolution; and thus is a fundamental gift of God.

The earth is our home. It is finite and essentially a closed system with the exception of solar energy input and heat loss to space. The only sustainable energy source for earth is the sun. Thus, solar radiation provides the energetic limit for what we ultimately have to sustain ourselves: the food and water that we can gather and share; the shelters which protect us from the elements; the medicines that maintain our health; the ability to communicate with each other across great distances; and the preservation of knowledge for future generations.

Much less understood are the thermodynamically predictable negative consequences, such as water and air pollution and soil depletion, which result from our present attempts to exceed the energy balance between earth and outer space.

Over millions of years, long before humans arrived, living matter died, decayed in sediments and was transformed into fossil fuels to be stored in rock formations until recently resurrected and exploited by man. Fossil fuels which include petroleum, natural gas, and coal became an amazing resource for humanity - a one time gift to be used for good or bad.

Coal fueled the beginning of the industrial revolution and provides most of our abundant electric power today, as well as much of the carbon dioxide that contributes to global climate change.

Petroleum, or oil, is the most concentrated, adaptable, and transportable energy carrier. Look at the material things around you for something that does not contain chemicals made from oil, that does not depend on oil for its production, or is not powered by oil. Imagine your world without these things.

In Minnesota 80% of heating fuel is natural gas, yet natural gas production appears to have already peaked in North America.

Have we used these fossil fuel gifts wisely? In the latter half of the 20th century, oil, gas, and coal were consumed, particularly in America, at ever increasing rates to spur economic growth and create untold riches for the fortunate minority. Today millions more in developing countries want to join the petroleum based growth model. China and India's present development strategies are greatly increasing the world demand for more energy and particularly for oil.

So world energy production must increase to meet the growing rate of consumption. With greater consumption both depleted resources and greater

environmental debts will be passed on to future generations. What are the limits to this accelerating human consumption of earth's natural capital?

In recent times many have warned of the consequences of exceeding sustainable living conditions on earth. The peak oil concept rose out of the prediction in 1956 by a geophysicist, Dr. M. King Hubbert, that oil production in the U.S. would peak in about 1970 and decline thereafter. His model proved to be remarkably accurate and has since been applied to other countries and the whole world.

Now few doubt that a world peak in production followed by declining oil availability will occur. Basically only the timing of the peak is debated with estimates ranging from now to 2040. The annual amount of new oil discovered actually peaked in the 1960s and presently world oil reserves are being depleted three times faster than new reserves are discovered.

Although a significant amount of oil will remain to be extracted in the post peak period, more energy will be required to obtain it. This is because, consistent with Hubbert's model, the sweetest and most available oil was extracted first in the quest for maximum profit and economic growth. This is a highly predictable consequence of human behavior, consistent with classical economic theory but inconsistent with Christ's sermon on the mount

(Matthew 6:20 -21): "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".

To fully understand the injustice of accumulating material treasures on earth while many suffer in poverty, we need to recognize the context of this short period in history when fossil fuels are temporarily available to support growth of our presence on the planet. The poor have been denied a chance to contribute to the discovery of sustainable conditions for all, while the rich have not seen the need because they are focused on accumulating wealth in order to assure themselves that they will not become poor.

Growth in justice, peace, love, compassion, wisdom, and responsibility for future generations has not followed stock market advances. And the poor quality of our stewardship of other species and ecosystems has contradicted our need to be a full partner in the web of life.

The coming peak in oil production not only defines the climax of a historic material treasure gathering spree, it is a critical event because it coincides with rapidly increasing demand that is unlikely to be suppressed by increasing costs in response to insufficient energy supplies. Lacking any world view or plans that address the post peak period, people have started to speculate on what conditions will occur when we come down from the peak.

While we clearly need better guidance for our actions than individual's speculations, we should recognize that this is potentially an evolutionary event for homo sapiens. We have already chosen to try to pass beyond a fate based on natural selection as experienced by other species. Now the much more difficult choice is between continuing to act as selfish individuals or rather as a global community. The later choice would require a conscious decision to modify our behavior, presumably make sacrifices for the common good, and thus would be the

ultimate test of faith. Does anyone question where Jesus stands on this choice?

Many people when faced with the inevitability of peak oil and natural gas simply put their faith in technology to find a new energy gift to replace these fossil fuels, a second chance to reach for sustainable life. Most scientists do not see that happening; at least not in this century. It would seem unwise to expect such when planning for the future.

Others have already concluded that humanity's descent from peak oil will lead to Armageddon and this is inevitable because it is God's will. Interestingly, Harmagedon in Hebrew refers to the plain at the foot of a mountain; a place where decisive battles are fought. But perhaps the great battle between good and evil is now and on the descent to come. If the descent from peak oil leads to Armageddon, it will be our plan and our doing, not God's. We still have a short time in history to correct our course; to follow Christ's teachings.

Through God, the future of humanity is in all our hands. We are the generations that must change. Unique among the species, we have been given understanding of the physical and natural laws. Through Christ we have been given the rules and the way. We have been given unlimited freedom to acquire knowledge and wisdom. We have the ability and privilege to plan our future in accordance with these conditions. We know that we are responsible for using natural resources wisely for the sustainable benefit of all; both now and in the future.

What will we do? Alone we are surely lost. We can not afford to continue to bury our heads in the sand upon which we have built our house. At a time when we in this country have finally dared to at least begin discussion of the future of our

social security and health care systems, shouldn't we be concerned with the future of the world's energy supplies and how wisely we use what remains?

For too long Christianity has been silent on this important matter. Despite the huge resistance to change, the ridicule, and the censorship awaiting those who publically espouse limits to material growth, we must together put aside our fears and move metaphorical mountains, even eventually without oil and other fossil fuels. Let us this day begin to build a new awareness of the long term consequences of our actions. With a new vision of where we can and want to go, let us help find the best path down from the peak, for all of God's creation.

AMEN