The following sermon took place during a 5 day, 50 mile peaceful protest march from Ripton, VT to Burlington, VT – August 31st to September 4th 2006. Inspired by Bill McKibben, this walk aimed to be a catalyst for meaningful political action on the federal level in response to the potentially catastrophic dangers that human caused climate change poses to the earth and our civilization. It was the largest protest march nationally to date in response to global warming. ([www.vtwalc.org](http://www.vtwalc.org))

Good morning. That was some anthem, this is one happening church, I tell you. (applause) I am so pleased to be here today, probably more pleased than you will be by the time I’m done. (laughter)

I’ll say right at the beginning, I’m the furthest thing from a minister or a trained theologian, my service has mostly been teaching Sunday school back in the sort of backwoods Methodist churches where I’ve spent my life – and Sunday school teacher means you’re downstairs in the basement with the felt board, you know, putting the Apostles in order and things. And most Sunday school teachers have a severe case of pulpit envy, so I may be here a while today. (laughter)

It’s been so much fun for the last 24 hours or so to be in Charlotte. To have been welcomed yesterday afternoon at the senior center – music and food – to spend the night at Martha Perkins’ house with people from the community bringing in all kinds of sustenance for weary walkers – to go to bed last night and see the moon across the silver path across the lake – to get up this morning and see the rain coming down outside the tent. (laughter) And then to come here to what is clearly a beautiful, thriving church community. You are so good to welcome us here. I know there’s nothing worse than coming to church and finding someone else in your pew. (laughter) And that you all are willing to put up with everybody for a day is really a great act of charity and love.

This question of why we’re walking – why we’ve been walking now 35 miles or so from Ripton over 3 days down the road, and a couple more to go – this question of why – well for me the answer is sort of in the question posed by the sermon title I chose this morning: How Big Should People Be?

For most of human history that was hardly a question because the answer was clear – people were going to be pretty small in the general scheme of things. And the most beautiful evocation of that is in the incredible poetry that John Elder, my colleague at Middlebury and one of the great writers and poets of this state, read for us a little a while ago from the Hebrew Bible from the book of Job.

Now, I know that all you Congregationalists are people of the Book and know the Bible backwards and forwards – so don’t be insulted when I just remind people – there’s a few – I think I saw a few Lutherans sneaking in (laughter) mostly they just concentrate on singing the hymns – so don’t be insulted when I go over just a little bit the story of Job just to remind them – it’s not you that I’m talking to. (laughter)

You’ll remember that Job was first, all his flocks died, most of his children died, he found himself living on a dung heap at the edge of town covered with oozing sores. And far from the patient Job of legend, he was actually quite impatient and demanded over and over and over again through thirty five chapters of the book of Job that God come and explain Himself – why had this happened? His friends kept saying you must have sinned, your children must have… No that’s not good enough, I was a pretty good guy – certainly nothing to qualify for this. I want God to come explain what’s going on.

And this sort of falls into the category of “be careful what you wish for” – because God does arrive – and delivers – Pastor Burhans you correct me… I think delivers the longest soliloquy that God delivers any place in the Bible – Old Testament or New. A beautiful, beautiful long speech, the first piece of nature writing in the Western tradition and maybe the greatest. And the message has very little to do with all these questions that Job has been asking about justice and how this could be right and how this could be happening. The response is entirely in the form of a kind of sarcastic taunt. Now John is such a nice guy that he only read it with kind of half the, you know, scorn that it really reads. “Who are you to be troubling me – if you’re so smart you tell me where do I keep the rain – can you whistle up a storm – can you set the boundaries of the ocean” on and on and on.

Job, after many, many verses of this Job finally basically just says, “sorry I asked” and sits down. (laughter) That’s been the human posture through almost all the human experience. We were one small species among many – eking out our own way – our own survival on this planet – until very recently – when our stature began to change – and began to change in kind of remarkable ways. I mean, within the lifetimes of the people in this room. And the first maybe inkling we got was with the invention of nuclear weapons. What was it that Oppenheimer said watching the first bomb explode over the New Mexico desert – quoted from the Bhavagad Gita, the Hindu scripture and said, “We have become as Gods, destroyers of worlds.”

Well that was theoretical danger, the thought that we would wipe ourselves out with nuclear weapons. And so far, thanks be to God, we have avoided that, we’ve kept that in the category of the theoretical. But in the last 15 or 20 years as we’ve come to understand what we’re doing to the climate around us we understand that we’re now embarking on a course of destruction that is in no way theoretical – that’s happening every moment of every day – that comes not from a few grand explosions of nuclear weapons but from a billion explosions every minute of pistons inside cylinders, you know, around the world spewing carbon into the atmosphere. As I say, this is a pretty new threat.

In 1989 when I wrote the book called The End of Nature, it was the first book about global warming for a general audience. And at the time we thought of this as a hypothesis. I thought it was a strong hypothesis – this idea that human beings were burning enough coal and gas and oil to put enough carbon into the atmosphere to materially alter the climate. But it was very much in the nature of a hypothesis – and it seemed emotionally counterintuitive; even if scientifically accurate, how could one species grow big enough to effect the vast play of climate? When you change the amount of the sun’s energy that’s trapped in this narrow envelope of atmosphere – you basically change everything that happens on the surface of the earth. Except for tectonic and volcanic forces, everything else, precipitation, melt, freezing, everything else runs off wind speed – off that solar energy.

From 1989 to sort of 1995 or so, the world’s scientists with more money and talent pointed at this one problem than at any problem before or since – set to work with such a vengeance. They sent up weather balloons and satellites – they cored ponds – did tree rings – refined over and over again these very powerful computer models that allow us to understand what happens as we add more carbon to the atmosphere. And by about 1995 those scientists were willing to say – out loud and with a remarkable unanimity – that human beings were heating up the planet and it was going to be a serious problem. They were giving a kind of wake up call to us saying in essence – our species has grown incredibly big in a very short period of time. We’re now casting a shadow as it were over the entire planet. That every cubic foot of air on earth holds the imprint of our habits and our economies and our conveniences.

Since 1995 it’s been as if the planet itself had been conducting a rigorous peer review of this research to make sure it was correct. We’ve had 9 of the 10 warmest years on record. Last year was the warmest year that we know – this year so far has been the warmest year in the United States that we have on record. And we’ve begun to understand having raised the temperature of the planet through our actions about 1 degree Fahrenheit – we’ve begun to understand just how finely balanced this system was. Twenty years ago we were unable to – we didn’t understand the system well enough to predict just how dramatic a change of even 1 degree was going to be, but it’s enormous. Everything frozen on the face of the earth is now melting for instance and melting very, very rapidly. Pack ice didn’t fully reform in the Arctic ocean the last two winters in a row. We see the dramatic increase in intensity and frequency of severe storms.

We can even begin to sense some of these things very close to home. You all remember what last winter was like, it was like really no winter that Vermont had ever seen, short and soggy – more mud than snow. You all recall what this spring was like when it rained and rained and rained. We’ve been walking past cornfields which on September 1st have corn knee high, you know. And that’s because – it’s precisely the kind of thing we can expect more of as we go on because warm air holds more water vapor than cold air does. So you get more evaporation and more drought in dry areas and more precipitation – more deluge in wet areas.

The dominant reality of our moment is this fast and brutal change in the most basic physical forces on the surface of the earth, and it’s only just begun. So far we have raised the temperature 1 degree Fahrenheit. The computer models make it very clear that unless we do very dramatic things in the very near future then the temperature will rise another 5 degrees Fahrenheit. That’s not the worst case scenario; that’s the middle case guess, in the lifetime of the youngest people in this room. That’ll make the world warmer than it’s been for hundreds of millions of years. It’ll result in what the NASA climatologist, James Hansen, a few weeks ago called a totally different planet. That’s the challenge that we face.

And we need to face it. We need to face it if we care about creation, because everything around us is at risk. The best guesses are that the extinction consequences of that kind of temperature warming would be at least as great as the last time a great asteroid hit the earth, except this time the asteroid is us. And name your ecosystem. Probably some of you have been off to the tropics and dived on reefs and things – snorkeled around and seen that incredible, fantastic profusion of life, just the most enchanted corner of God’s brain, you know, and that system the coral reef specialists say is gonna be gone in 50 years around the world if we keep raising the temperature because the animal that builds those coral reefs can’t survive that kind of bleaching. Already we see wide scale die off.

If you care about social justice. If you care about the injunctions that Jesus over and over again tells us to love our neighbor. If that matters to you then this is the issue that matters most of all because we’ve never figured out any way to impoverish and wreck the lives of marginal people around the world more effectively than to destroy the basic physical stability on which those lives depend. This really hit home to me a few years ago when I was spending a lot of time in Bangladesh. Beautiful country, fertile country, feeds itself, a spectacular place. It’s biggest problem is that it’s barely above sea level, it’s the delta of the great sacred rivers of Asia, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. If the bay of Bengal rises a little bit, and one of the things that happens as you warm the temperature is of course that sea level begins to rise and rise quite quickly, then that water pouring down out of the Himalayas has no place to go and it backs up across those deltas.

A few years ago that’s just what happened, there was an unusually strong melt up in the Himalayas, the bay of Bengal was all higher than usual – the country of Bangladesh about two thirds of it was under waist deep water for months at a time. People coped, better than we would cope with that experience. But they weren’t food self sufficient that year and they can’t keep doing that and to stand there in those places and to reflect that they have nothing to do with this problem. That you can’t even measure the amount of carbon that comes out a country like Bangladesh and its 140 million people is a rounded error in the whole total. They don’t burn enough anything to even register, whereas the 4% of us who live in this country produce 25% of the world’s carbon dioxide. If people are walking around in waist deep water then up to about the calf is our responsibility – that’s our contribution.

Maybe in a sense most of all the reason we should care is this complete overturning of this sense of who we are, this sense that’s always been part of the human experience expressed so beautifully in those words from Job. Because all of a sudden, we don’t need to sit down and shut up, we can taunt God right back, we can spit in God’s face. You set the boundaries of the ocean -not really, we’re starting to get in that game, you know. Simply by raising the temperature of the water there’s a thermal expansion coefficient – warm water takes up more space than cold – even before we melt anything we’ll raise the levels of the seas 2 and 3 feet. “Do you know where I store the rain and the wind?” Yeah actually now that’s kind of our thing too – severe storms that drop more than 2 inches of rain in a 24 hour period, they’ve increased about 20% at this latitude in the last 20 years.

We saw what happened last year across the Gulf coast. You can’t call anymore hurricane Katrina an act of God, you know, as an insurance policy would put it. That’s in large measure now an act of people and more so with each passing year and with each new part per million of CO2 in the earth’s atmosphere. We’re at the moment when the imperative to figure out how to get smaller is suddenly the dominant thing that we must cope with. How to make ourselves fit in again on this planet. How do we do it?

Some of the answer is technological and we’ve got technologies that are coming that are helping us. And some of them are right here in Vermont and made by people in Vermont and we’re beginning to see in action. Wind power and solar power, people driving hybrid cars. I saw a bunch of em’ out in the parking lot – on and on and on. These things will help, but by themselves they are not going to turn the tide. The climatologists estimate we need an immediate, worldwide 70% reduction in the use of fossil fuels just to stabilize climate at its current levels of sort of anarchy and upheaval. And it’s extremely difficult to imagine that happening because one of the other things that’s going on at this moment is that poor people around the world, most particularly in China and India, are finally starting to burn small amounts of fossil fuel to make their lives a little more sustainable.

Nothing compared to us, the average Chinese burns about one ninth as much energy in the course of the year as any of us do, but still that increase makes it all the harder to get that reduction. So technology won’t do the whole trick. Politics will help, that’s why we’re on this walk at the moment, we’re gonna be in Burlington tomorrow afternoon at 3:00 on the Battery Park, trying to hold all our candidates for federal office of every party to account, trying to get them to sign on to a pledge to support the strong legislation that our Independent Senator, Jim Jeffords, has introduced this summer. It’s the strongest piece of climate legislation we’ve yet seen. It’s already been co-sponsored by Senator Leahy. We hope and think that by the end of tomorrow it’ll be the new standard for what you have to do if you want to run for office in this state.

Those kind of policies will help. They’ll begin the work in Washington of reintegrating us into the world community and the discussion of these things, and they’ll start slowly the wheels turning to change the mix of subsidies and tax policies and things that at the moment underwrite our overuse of fossil fuels and make it more difficult to make progress. But what will really help, in the end? What will really help is the technology that we’ve really lost track of most and that’s the technology of community. The ability to do things with each other, to work together in profound ways. What do I mean? That sounds kind of airy and ephemeral. Well take this statistic. Most of you have been to Western Europe at one time or another. You’ve been to France or Germany or Italy or someplace. You know that people there live lives just as dignified as ours. In fact, one can argue something if you really want to take a vacation and visit the good life, you’re more likely to head for, I don’t know, Milan than Phoenix or something. (laughter)

The average Western European uses half as much energy as the average American. Half as much. And it has largely to do with the fact that they situate themselves a little differently on the spectrum between individual and community. They’ve been willing to pay the freight to make really good cities that attract people in instead of spinning them out into suburbs. They’re willing not only to subsidize with their tax money mass transit trains and buses, they’re willing to get on them and ride them, you know. (laughter) To understand that there are moments that you don’t always have to go exactly where you want to go at exactly the moment you want to go there – that you can rearrange your life by 10 minutes here and there to be part of something larger.

Community is something that we’ve been thinking about a lot in the last 3 days as we walked. And it’s been, I must say to try and entice you to come a little bit, it’s been incredibly much fun. And one of the things that keeps going through my mind, when we’ve been walking we’ve had these great conversations because we know we have 4 or 5 hours to just talk to each other. And one of the things it made me understand in a way I hadn’t before, cause I’ve done a lot of solo backpacking but never really walked in a group like this, it made me understand much more many of those scenes from the gospel, where the Apostles are all just walking places together from town to town, you know, more than enough time to sort of get inside each other’s heads and have all kinds of deep and interesting conversation.

Now we’ve not had any sort of Saul on the Damascus road sort of experiences, although we were almost hit by a milk truck near Vergennes, (laughter) but it’s been fantastic. The community that we’ve created for an instant as we’re walking is pretty neat too. It’s fun to watch people whizzing down Route 7 and see them see this thing – and you can sort of see them try to figure out what it is and then just burst into smile and start honking the horn or putting their thumb up out the window or whatever it is. And that’s what happens with 80-85% of the cars that go by. It’s really exciting to see how much it cheers people up to see that people are at work on some of these things.

And of course the communities that welcome us along the way. And this is the greatest example. It’s particularly important, and rest assured I’m winding down, (laughter) It’s particularly important that those communities include communities of faith. One of our problems in our society and our economy is that we can’t imagine anything other than more anymore. As President Clinton infamously said during his election campaign, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Well communities of faith, churches and synagogues and mosques are the last institutions in our society that can really posit some reason other than accumulation for existence. That have some idea about why it isn’t just more that’s the place where we’re headed. And that gives them potentially enormous power to do what the work of the church is, which is to be subversive – to be countercultural – to run contrary to the dominant currents of the world in which we live. And that’s beginning to happen, you can sense its power in a lot of ways.

Fifteen years ago there really was no religious environmental movement at all, but that’s changing fast. I remember 5 or 6 years ago I was spending a year in Boston as a Fellow at one of the colleges and I didn’t have enough to do and so I was doing sort of organizing, kind of like this. And we were doing these demonstrations, very polite and pleasant, outside SUV dealerships. (laughter) And we’d let them test drive our hybrids, we’ve give them directions to the Toyota dealership, whatever it was. But the best one, the day that really worked was the day I got all sorts of clergy friends from around Boston to come. And with the associate Pastor of the UCC church where I’d grown up in the suburbs of Boston we were drawing up all these signs the night before. And we took a big banner and taking the sort of fundamentalist motto, WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? and twisting it a little bit we made a big banner that said – What Would Jesus Drive?

We knew it would get some publicity and in fact it was on the cover of the Christian Science Monitor and the Globe and things the next day. And within about six months the Evangelical Environmental Network, a completely different community than the one I’d been involved in, had picked it up and turned it into a 17 state television ad campaign that really got the attention of Detroit – really made them worry a little bit. I mean everybody in Vermont drives Subarus anyway so Detroit, what do they care about us. But the sort of thought that large parts of America were really beginning to understand this was important and powerful, and that has now spread in so many ways.

The evangelical community released a really powerful statement about climate about 6 months ago, which was an enormous stretch for many of those leaders. The first time that they’d broken with President Bush and the first time that they’d gone way outside their comfort zone to do something really hard, you know, and really scary for them. And in fact they’ve gone way further outside their comfort zone so far, than the liberal mainline Protestant church has gone outside its comfort zone. And that’s one of the reasons we’re walking today, to try to be a little uncomfortable some of the time, you know. To try to be out there making that kind of witness. Because the deepest power that we can summon to deal with this crisis is precisely the kind of power that comes from the solidarity in this room.

The greatest problem of the fossil fuel era on this planet is not that it’s destroying everything around us, that’s a problem. But the greatest problem is that that cheap coal and gas and oil has allowed us to live in such independence of each other that we’ve largely forgotten what community means, what neighbor means, we don’t depend on each other for anything real anymore. And that’s why it’s so spectacular to see the return of such things like local food, relationships with farmers, and so on and so forth. The erosion of that community is a tragedy because it’s that community that we were called to by God. That is the hallmark of our species from the start, this need to be with each other in community. It’s the greatest gift that we’ve been given and the one we’ve spurned in our culture most completely. We were built to cling to each other and remembering that is our salvation in every way.