It is sort of strange to watch or read the news reports of wildfires in California as we struggle to keep ourselves dry during another day of soaking rains in Syracuse. Fires are an increasing threat in California due to rising temperatures. Rising temperatures have led to lower snowfall totals and quicker drying of the forest each year. 2018 was a record year for wildfires in California, with nearly 2,000,000 acres burned.

With these news reports in mind, I was surprised to come across these verses from the prophet Joel while preparing for this week’s sermon. *For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flames have burned all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals cry to you because the watercourses are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.*

The Book of Joel seems like a book written for people who are in the middle of a climate crisis. We don’t hear much of the Prophet Joel in our lectionary. Today is the only Sunday in our three year cycle where we read portions of Joel. The first chapter of Joel tells of a time when the people of Judah faced an environmental crisis.

Joel tells of an invasion of insects that has devastated the land. *For a nation of insects has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white.* These verses might seem a bit dramatic or exaggerated to us, but they are the current reality for people who live near forested areas in the Western United States.

In much of the Western United States the forests are no longer green in the summer. Entire mountains are grey and white, covered with forests of dead spruce and pine trees. In the past 20 years warmer winter temperatures have allowed pine and spruce beetles to invade over 120 million acres of forest. Bark beetles have decimated forests with a combined acreage larger than the state of California.

Here in Central New York our farmers have almost finished gathering in a bountiful harvest of crops. That is not the case in parts of South Dakota, Kansas, Iowa, Mississippi and Illinois. 2019 was one of the worst years on record for farmers in much of the center of the country. Flooding began along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers in March and continued for several months, even into the summer. This was the result of the highest recorded rainfall totals for the United States for the first six months of the year. As our climate is becoming warmer, higher rainfall events are becoming more common. In many farm communities farmers were unable to plant any crops at all this year; their fields were underwater for weeks or even months.

Joel’s people faced a similar, devastating event, except in their case the event was a multi-year drought: *The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; Be dismayed, you farmers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. How the animals groan! The herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them.*

Joel describes a period of ecological ruin in chapter 1. In chapter 2 Joel describes the deliverance of the people from the drought. *You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.*

For Joel’s people in his time, there was an essential role for the young people. The same is true for us as we begin to come to terms with the greatest challenge of our time. For me, one of the most important events of 2019 was the coordinated action of young people from around the world to demand action from leaders of the nations to reduce human activities that are contributing to climate change. At the United Nation Climate Action Conference on September 23rd, Greta Thunberg and fifteen other young adults filed a formal complaint against five nations.

These young people have spoken powerfully to the threat of climate change. I listened to an interview with Greta Thunberg and heard her articulate three main ideas:
1. Climate change is a dire threat to human life and to ecosystems all around the globe.
2. The response of most nations to the crisis is inadequate to the challenge we face.
3. In failing to act to avert a crisis our leaders have shown that their primary motivation is greed.

Greta and her friends are showing much more wisdom, more courage and more strength than most of the leaders of the nations. The clarity of their message and the power of their testimony could rightly be compared to the Hebrew prophets. For me, these young men and women represent the hope of the future.

They have dedicated their lives to making a change that is desperately needed. As many of our adult leaders are failing us in tragic ways, Greta and her friends are acting as true leaders. These young adults are using the gifts God has given them for the most important purpose: taking care of God’s creation.

Just as in Joel’s time we need to listen to the prophetic voices of our young leaders. This presents a particular challenge for us in the church, because many of our young adults do not have any connection to any church. How should we respond to our current reality, which is that among Millennials, the most common religious affiliation is ‘none’?

Jesus’ parable in the Gospel of Luke seems directly relevant to our situation. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Sometimes it seems like people in the church act and talk like the Pharisee in the parable. The Pharisee is sure that he is right. It is strange to me that some of the people who act most like the Pharisee are leaders in the churches that claim to be following Jesus. We need to be humble about who we are and about what we have to offer.

Beyond being humble we need to keep on learning from what Jesus said and did. In Matthew chapter 21 Jesus asks a question that is relevant for our situation today: ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; The father went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” The first son answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second son and said the same; and the second son replied, “I go, sir”; but the second son did not work in his father’s vineyard. Then Jesus asked: which of the two did the will of his father?’

Many adults in positions of power and authority in government and the church behave like the second son. We talk a good line when it comes to caring for God’s creation, or taking care of the poor, or caring for the children. The way adults spend money, the way adults spend their time and the way many leaders rely on the rules of the game to enforce their own power show their true priorities.

Greta Thunberg and other young adults are offering prophetic leadership to the world. This is exactly what we need right now. They are like the Hebrew Prophets in the fact that they are dedicating their lives, they are giving all of their energies, to responding to the urgent crisis we are facing.

As we face the greatest threat of our time, we need real leaders. Jesus’ parable makes clear it makes no difference where this leadership comes from. The only important thing is to get into the vineyard and to get the work done.

Especially for those of us who are older, we can be discouraged about the challenges we face. We pray that the Holy Spirit would be upon us, that the fire of the Spirit of God would give us vision. We give thanks for the prophetic voices of our young women and men. We pray to listen to their visions and to the dreams of our old women and old men. Then, as in earlier times, we will know that God is in the midst of us, that the Lord is our God, and there is no other.