



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Winter Is Coming:
Wizards, Prophets, & Climate Change**
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Tonight the television series *Game of Thrones* returns for an eighth and final season. The title refers to the political machinations (the “game”) between various noble houses in a medieval-like world competing to sit on the fabled iron throne and rule the continent of Westeros. But in the world of the show, as important as the game of thrones can seem, it turns out there are much larger concerns.

Each of these fictional noble houses have “house words,” a motto that describes their core commitments. Many of the series’s central characters come from House Stark, whose “house words” point to the larger concerns beyond the iron throne —embodied in what is perhaps the show’s most famous line: **“Winter Is Coming.”**

Without getting into more nerdy details or any spoilers for the uninitiated, in the world of *Game of Thrones*, the coming winter will not be ordinary: it will be a “long night,” an existential threat to all of humanity no matter who sits on the iron throne. So one lesson from this blockbuster television show is that winning the “game of thrones” (or should we say the presidency and control of Congress) in the short term can be an exercise in missing the larger point. You and your house (your “tribe”) may be in power for now, but “Winter is Coming” (or should we say *climate change is coming*) whether you like it or not. As Philip K. Dick used to say, **“Reality is what doesn’t go away when you stop believing in it.”** The overwhelming scientific consensus is that climate

change is coming—and has already started—whether climate change deniers believe in it or not.

For anyone wondering if I am reading too much into the parallels between our current political situation and a fictional series, consider that less than a year ago in an interview with *The New York Times*, the series author **George R. R. Martin explicitly affirmed that his series can be read in a broad sense as a parable about climate change.** In his words:

The people in Westeros are fighting their individual battles over power and status and wealth. And those are so distracting them that they're ignoring the threat of "winter is coming," which has the potential to destroy all of them and to destroy their world. And there is a great parallel there to, I think, what I see this planet doing here, where we're fighting our own battles.... All of these things are important issues. But none of them are important if, like, we're dead and our cities are under the ocean. So really, climate change should be the number one priority for any politician who is capable of looking past the next election.

Martin is right in many ways, although I'm glad to stipulate that part of what holds us back from passing sane climate legislation is white supremacy, male supremacy, classism, and more. So dismantling those systems of oppression is part of the work that must be done.

Indeed, the interconnectedness of systems of oppression is precisely the focus of our Congregational Conversation next Sunday here in the sanctuary during the Middle Hour between the two services. We'll be discussing this year's UUA Common Read, the one book selected year you that all UUs are encouraged to read, discuss, and act on. The current Common Read is titled **Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment**. If you have time to read some or all of the book before next Sunday, great! But you are welcome to join us whether or not you have had time to read the book.

For now, to continue our focus on climate change, the moving compelling book I've read recently is The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming, published two months ago by David Wallace-Wells. It's a quick read, but powerful. It's arresting from the first

sentence, which says: **“It is worse, much worse, than you think”** (3). Now, I know some of you are deeply immersed in climate science, but we can adjust that sentence to say, “It is worse, much worse, than most people think.” And the core of Wallace-Wells’s book is a two chapter middle section on the “Elements of Chaos” that climate change will cause around heat death, hunger, drowning, wildfire, enhanced natural disasters, freshwater drain, dying oceans, unbreathable air, plagues of warming, economic collapse, climate conflict, and systemic shifts.

At the conclusion of that section he says, “If you have made it this far, you are a brave reader. Any one of these twelve chapters contains, by rights, enough horror to induce a panic attack in even the most optimistic of those considering it. But you are not merely considering it; you are about to embark on living it. In many cases, in many places, we already are” (139).

I do not enjoy being the harbinger of bad news, but as a species we are not listening to the warnings of our best scientists. The sad truth is the opposite:

More than half of the carbon exhaled into the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in just the past three decades. Which means **we have done as much damage to the fate of the planet and its ability to sustain human life and civilization since Al Gore published his first book on climate than in all the centuries—all the millennia—that came before.** (4)

That is an even more “inconvenient truth” than what Vice President Gore initially presented. What I have personally found most frightening to date is the extent to which we are witnessing so-called “500-year storms” and “500-year floods” with shocking frequency (17).

One interesting angle of Wallace-Well’s book is that he does not write about climate change from the common perspective of an environmentalist, nature lover, or scientist. Personally, as a nature-lover who grew up spending hours in the woods—and as a vegetarian for more than two decades—I’m pretty easily persuadable to calls to simplify our lifestyle and reconnect with nature. In contrast, Wallace-Wells freely admits:

I've lived my whole life in cities, enjoying gadgets built by industrial supply chains I hardly think twice about. I've never gone camping...and while I always thought it was basically a good idea to keep streams clean and air clear, I also always accepted the proposition that there was a trade-off between economic growth and the cost of nature—and figured, well, in most cases, I'd probably go for growth. I'm not about to personally slaughter a cow to eat a hamburger, but I'm also not about to go vegan. (6)

Nevertheless, the more he learned about climate change, the more he became convinced that more change was needed—and fast.

And I want to use the example of Wallace-Wells—this city-and-technology-loving journalist who has become a fierce advocate for climate justice—as a bridge for reflecting on the various ways we might move forward as a species.

Two of the archetypal options in the U.S. are sometimes seen as symbolized in Jefferson and Hamilton. “Jeffersonian views celebrate the *rural* over the urban, *husbandry* over industry, *intense local connection* over mobile liberty, *thrifty independence* over opulence and commerce.” Considered in isolation, this Agrarian Ideal, championed by Jefferson and embodied today in figures like Wendell Berry, can be seen as the best answer.

I understand the appeal, but I invite you to consider that this option was much more viable at the time of our nation's founding (when there were ~1 billion humans on this planet) in contrast to today when the world population has grown to more than 7 billion people.

So let us also get on the table the Hamiltonian worldview, which favored “big cities (which are said to use less resources than spread-out local communities), increasing productivity (because fewer people directly work the land, maximizing output per person), and growing more prosperous (because affluence makes societies better able to clean up environmental mishaps)” (93).

To update this typology for modern times, I have found helpful Charles Mann's book [The Wizard and the Prophet](#). Some of you may know Mann from his previous bestseller *1491*. In his latest book, he uses the twentieth-century scientists, Norman

Borlaug (the titular Wizard) and William Vogt (the titular Prophet) as representative examples of how to confront the environmental crisis we are facing.

Vogt is a classic **prophet** warning that our current prosperity as a species is finite because it is based on taking more from the Earth than is sustainable long term. His basic message is “**Cut back! Cut back! Otherwise, everyone will lose.**”

Borlaug, in contrast, is a **wizard**, who trusts that currently unforeseen technological innovations will save us. His mantra is “**Innovate! Innovate! Only in that way can everyone win!**”

At least in the short-term Borlaug’s techno-optimist worldview has prevailed. Twentieth-century environmental prophets predicted that the world population was growing so fast that it would soon exceed the capacity of food production, causing mass famine. But Borlaug was a major contributor to the “Green Revolution” in agriculture which helped to prevent that crisis (4).

But before we too quickly award any permanent victories to the techno-wizards, environmental prophets like Vogt warn that Borlaug (and we humans along with him) achieved at most a pyrrhic victory: winning at such a high cost to render it equivalent to defeat. From the prophet’s perspective, yes, the technological revolution in agriculture has prevented mass starvation (for now), but in so doing it has allowed the world population to skyrocket—currently at 7.6+ billion and climbing almost by the second on its way toward an estimated 10 billion. These increased numbers make it all the more difficult to reach a sustainable future on this planet. From the prophetic perspective, **technological innovations that further exploit the land and further increase the human population are like “fighting arson with gasoline”** (19).

Personally, I find value in both perspectives. To respond to climate change, I suspect we will need both to heed the prophetic call to cut back and to invest in technological wizardry to curb some of climate change’s effects (7).

Consider that, “If the average American were confined by the carbon footprint of their European counterpart, U.S. carbon emissions would fall by more than half. If the world’s richest 10 percent were limited to that same footprint, global emissions would fall by a third” (Wallace-Wells 33). But we’ll never achieve that level of results through

individual choice. We will need collective action along the lines of a #GreenNewDeal (180). We need to “invest in renewable energy, public services, public education, and green jobs” (Ervine 185). And we need to stop building pipelines—and to stop throwing fuel on the fire by globally subsidizing the fossil fuel industry “to the tune of \$5 trillion each year” (33).

It is also important to name that some changes matter more than others:

- One of the easiest changes to make (that also has one of the smallest impacts) is upgrading your light bulbs to a more environmentally friendly model, a change many of us have done. It’s a good thing to do, but it barely scratches the surface of what needs to be done.
- To level up, changes that have a medium-level impact are replacing a gasoline-fueled car with a hybrid, washing clothes in cold water (instead of hot), recycling, and drying your clothes on a clothesline or hanger (instead of an electric dryer).
- The lifestyle choices that make the biggest different (in ascending order of environmental friendliness) are switching to a plant-based diet, buying green energy, avoiding one transatlantic flight, living car free, and having one fewer child. (Ervine 171)

If you are interested in how you could get more involved locally, options include the Climate Change Working Group here at UUCF, the Multi-faith Alliance of Climate Stewards of Frederick County (which is a network between this and other regional? congregations), the UU Legislative Ministry at the state level, UUs for Social Justice at the federal level, as well as other organizations such as the Sierra Club. There is also talk of renewed focus on ways that we—here at UUCF—can further strengthen our Green Sanctuary commitments. If you are interested in further information about any of those efforts, please do let me know. I am glad to help connect you.

For now, as we reflect on how we feel called—both individually and collectively—to be part of the global movement for climate justice, I would like to invite us to continue that reflection as we prepare to practice an annual UU ritual known as Flower Communion. It is most appropriate that our Flower Communion this year intersects with Earth Month because, as climate activist Bill McKibben has said,

I don't think it's appropriate for little kids to be freaking out about climate change...It always struck me as a parent that my first job in this context was to help her fall in love with the natural world. If you do, then I'm absolutely confident that you'll do what's necessary to defend it.

The beauty of spring can be a powerful reminder of how vital our Environmental Justice work is because this planet is so astonishingly beautiful in its diversity.

The practice of Flower Communion also reminds us of the importance and risk of working for justice. Flower Communion originated in 1921 in a Unitarian congregation in Prague, which at that time was the capital city of Czechoslovakia (now called the Czech Republic):

Under the leadership of its minister, Norbert Capek [*Chah-Peck*], it grew into the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with a membership in 1932 of [more than 3,000]. In 1941, Capek was arrested by the Nazis on charges of treason; a year later he was executed at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

Capek was martyred for supporting individual liberty in the face of fascism. And the continuation of Flower Communion today affirms the heart of the original ritual, that as no two flowers are alike, so too no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with the Beloved Community of this congregation: it would be lessened if any one of us were absent.

In a few moments, we will sing together our Flower Communion hymn #305, "De Colores." As we sing, you may remain seated. But once we start singing, I invite you to begin coming forward row-by-row — starting at the front and moving toward the back. Don't be shy. There's a lot of you, so once the singing starts, go ahead and start coming forward.

Each individual is invited to take a flower that is different from the one you brought. Select a flower that particularly appeals to you. And as you take your chosen flower, note its particular shape and beauty. (If you didn't bring a flower, feel free to

come forward and take a flower anyway. Some folks brought a bouquet so we would have extras.)

We'll continue singing "*De Colores*" until everyone has come forward, including the Spanish verse, which we will sing as the equivalent of "verse 4."

And on this Sunday of focus on Climate Justice, I invite you, as we practice Flower Communion, to continue discerning what part you individually or we collectively are called to play in ensuring the continued blooming of abundant, diverse life on this planet.