Praise for *Cathedral on Fire!*

"*Brooks Berndt speaks convincingly with informed ethical expertise to awaken sleeping Christians and apathetic citizens to address posthaste the climate crisis. This is a book that touches the head and the heart while moving the feet to action. It should be required reading for preachers in the pulpit, people in the pews, and professors in the seminaries.*"

—Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Sr., Pastor Emeritus,
Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, California

"*I'm grateful to Brooks Berndt for writing such an inspiring and faith-filled handbook for congregations on climate justice. With each chapter, people of faith are steeped in how our spiritual traditions are a springboard for action. Especially impactful are the discussion questions that deepen our own understanding of the issues raised, along with actions that move us from* thinking *about justice to* living out *justice in our communities and our world.*"

—Rev. Susan Hendershot, President,
Interfaith Power & Light

"*For years, Brooks has been raising awareness, making connections, and accelerating the UCC's response to the climate crisis in a way that's inspiring and a model for the rest of us. This short book represents a clear, engaging and strong call to action, and will continue to make the UCC an important force in the religious-environmental movement.*"

—Rev. Fletcher Harper,
Executive Director, GreenFaith

CATHEDRAL ON FIRE

a church handbook for the climate crisis

With a New Preface

Contents

Preface to the Second Edition

Cathedral on Fire was written just before three events that fundamentally changed our society: the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the election of Joseph Biden as President. In some ways, these events made parts of this book more relevant than ever. For example, the pandemic only heightened the need for the kind of crisis theology espoused in chapter 6. At the same time, I cannot let the second printing of this book pass exactly one year after its initial publication without setting aside space to reflect on these three world-altering events.

Ash Wednesday of 2020 occurred on February 26, as Covid-19 seemed a distant news story to many in the United States, and yet, we were only weeks away from entering a national period of lockdown and the World Health Organization declaring a global pandemic. As the Minister of Environmental Justice for the United Church of Christ (UCC), Ash Wednesday last year held a special significance, because it was the day the UCC released a new environmental justice report in our nation's capital. For that event, one of the speakers was the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Jr., who had been a central leader in the watershed events of the environmental justice movement discussed in chapter 7. On this occasion, of particular note was his role in spearheading the 1987 release of the landmark report issued by the UCC's Commission for Racial Justice entitled "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States." It was the first report to document and demonstrate the pervasiveness of environmental racism throughout the United States in the dumping of toxic waste. The UCC would later publish a 20th anniversary report that underscored the enduring persistence of the original findings, while adding new dimensions of analysis. For example, when toxic waste sites are clustered together, the surrounding communities are even more likely to

be populated by people of color and have higher poverty rates. Where the danger is greater, inequality is greater as well.

Our 2020 report built upon the legacy of our earlier reports, but it was also different in ways that had particular relevance to a pandemic that we never had anticipated. In response to the massive rollback of environmental protections under the Trump administration, we had decided to focus on those whose health and well-being would be most threatened. We focused on the toxic air pollution of 100 super polluters in the United States, as we identified where they were clustered and the composition of the surrounding communities in terms of race and income along with age. In particular, we focused on children under age five and adults over the age of sixty-four. These are the populations that are particularly vulnerable to the health threats of toxic air pollution. In releasing the report, little did we know that air pollution would become closely correlated with increased rates of death from Covid-19.

One of the areas highlighted in our study was Cancer Alley, a heavily polluted part of Louisiana that stretches from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. Cancer Alley had 142 facilities that reported toxic emissions to the EPA. Eleven were in our list of 100 super polluters, and four were in the top ten. Cancer Alley has been a reoccurring presence in environmental news for decades because of its chronic, unchecked industrial pollution. During the pandemic, it was again making the headlines. One of the counties in Cancer Alley is St. John the Baptist Parish, and at times, it suffered a higher death rate from Covid-19 than any other county in the country with a population over 5,000.

The leading polluter in St. John the Baptist Parish—number 7 in the country—has been emitting toxic pollution into the air for fifty years. As a result, nearly everyone in the community has some type of respiratory problem. Due to the accumulation of environmental injustices, Covid-19—with its particularly devastating attack on the lungs—arrived with a staggering force. Notably, the community surrounding the leading polluter in St. John the Baptist is comprised of 80% people of color and 45% people with low incomes. The parish is ultimately a microcosm of inequality in the United States. Like a doctor gathering the

medical history of a patient, inequality in our nation cannot be understood without understanding the widespread symptoms and chronic problems that preceded it.

As this book underscores, the climate crisis is also a crisis of inequality. I have long believed that the significance of the environmental justice movement would only increase with time, as these twin crises deepened and our society became more aware of environmental racism. In 2020, the movement and its history received increased attention as racial consciousness arose amid the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. On the heals of the protests following Floyd's murder, a number of environmental journalists wrote about the movement's history. In covering environmental racism with renewed focus, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NBC News, and other media outlets ran stories that cited the UCC's Toxic Wastes and Race report.

Along with the burst of revived awareness and new reporting, one particular area of reexamined history compelled me to edit a couple of references in this book to John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, who has been called the "father of our national parks." Before assuming my present position, I had served as a church pastor while also leading the local chapter of a Sierra Club campaign to transition the state of Washington away from its only coal plant. In that capacity, I would occasionally quote John Muir's deeply religious views of the natural world around him as I sought to bridge the gap between my church world and the relatively secular world of the Sierra Club on the west coast. In doing so, I was unaware of John Muir's racism which came to public attention following the murder of Floyd when the Sierra Club denounced and apologized for the racism of its founder. Muir had espoused racial slurs, associated with advocates for the forced sterilization of people of color, and believed that a pristine wilderness required that there not be Indigenous people inhabiting that land. The response to revelations of racism, regardless of how surprising or unsurprising they may be, is not to sweep them away but to reckon with them. Muir's views of the natural world that he sought to preserve still influence contemporary conservationist thought. The recognition of Indigenous ancestral homelands is

too often erased. Wittingly or unwittingly, concerns of justice are silenced from conversations about the environment.

For the second printing of this book, the discussion of Muir provoked a reassessment. In an email, a reader of my book, who was aware of Muir's racism, noted that my citing of him was a distraction from the point I was trying to make about how a love of creation can be a powerful motivator for action. I realized immediately that while a second printing of this book would need to address Muir's racism, it would also need to reflect the fact that Muir was no longer the right messenger for what I endeavored to convey. At the same time, it dawned on me that leaders from a new movement of outdoor churches were far more fitting for this role, and I decided to add their story.

This second printing should address the transition from the Trump administration to the Biden Administration. This has not changed the sense of urgency that the climate crisis demands, but it has compelled a fresh reassessment of what is needed and what is possible. In contrast to the previous four years, it is now possible, but not inevitable, that the federal government can enact substantial, desperately needed climate legislation. In the United States, only Congress can act on the scale that the crisis requires. As much as ever, everyday citizens—especially people of faith and strong moral conviction—are needed in the effort to compel action from their elected officials. The difficulty for many churches is a long-standing allergic reaction to anything that smells of politics and government.

As much as this makes me want to climb upon my soapbox to marshal a series of moral and theological arguments to justify why people of faith can and should call for government policies that reflect deeply cherished values such as loving one's neighbor and caring for God creation, I have come to believe that it is better to dig into the Jesus-toolkit and tell a parable in the hope that a story can sometimes be more effective than "carefully reasoned exhortations."

I call the story that follows the Parable of the Fire Department. I began telling the parable in churches shortly after Biden's election. The parable corresponds to the stages of development through

which a congregation might progress in moving toward climate advocacy directed at the government. In the beginning stage, one comes into awareness of our first calling in Genesis which is to care for creation—what Pope Francis calls "our common home." The next stage is to realize that this ministry ultimately necessitates going beyond the walls of the church. As important as it is to recycle and change light bulbs, that will not get us to where we need to go. The crux of the parable addresses why we are called to step out the door into the broader world in which we then realize the actions that need to be taken. I invite you now to enter into this story and to visualize it as your own story—regardless of how oddly different or surreally similar it might initially seem.

Imagine that you are locked in a house that you never leave. Furthermore, imagine that for your entire life you have never even realized that you have been locked in your own house. It is all that you have ever known. You thought the entire world was your house. Every now and then, packages were pushed through your mail slot. The packages were apparently sent by a divine messenger called Amazon. Beyond these mysterious deliveries, however, you are not aware of what is going on beyond your door. Consequently, your energies are naturally focused on making your house a better place to live. You do one home improvement project after another, as if you were starring in your own do-it-yourself reality TV show. Then, one day you receive a phone call from a church member who says, "Hey, I know lately we have seen a lot of each other on Zoom for Sunday morning worship. I want to pass along to you a secret that I recently discovered: Life gets even better when you go outside." You don't want to believe her at first, because life is pretty good inside, and this other-side-of-the-door-world is unknown and a little scary. But eventually, your friend encourages and prods you into stepping outside, and it is indeed wonderful. As soon as you step beyond the threshold of your front door, your senses are overwhelmed by the tremendous beauty all around you when you see the green trees before you and the blue sky above. You literally breathe in this beauty as you inhale the fresh air of the outdoors for the first time.

Over the coming weeks, you meet with your Zoom buddy and others from church to talk about this incredible new world that has been found beyond the walls of your home. While there is consternated debate and utter bewilderment over how exactly all of you came to be locked in your homes without any awareness of the outside world, your conversations do lead to a common sense of purpose for how to move forward as a community. With the help of your church friends, you begin to see this other world beyond

your door as something that is also like a home and that needs some tender loving care to make it everything that it could and should be. In thinking about your former life indoors, in contrast to your new more expansive life, you realize that your friends from church have almost turned your life upside down, but in a good way. The disruption to your former life has in fact made your life richer and more meaningful.

There are some challenges, however. One of your church friends has spotted fire and smoke in the distance. Right now, some houses are more threatened than others, but eventually everyone will be threatened by this fire. After some trips to see firsthand the destruction of the fire, your church realizes this fire is more than any one individual can confront with a garden hose and some buckets. It is a fire that requires more than even an entire church can handle. Now, regardless of whether one strongly believes in the importance of individual hard work and regardless of whether one strongly opposes "big government," almost everyone realizes the value of a fire department. While it may not have always been fully recognized in the past, you and your church friends have a collective moment of clarity. Despite the differences among you, there is common agreement that government institutions at their best are servants of the people. They serve the common good in ways that no other person or entity can.

This realization impacts you and your church buddies. It leads to a recalibration of your sense of calling as a community, and it leads to a recalibration of how your church can use its power to make a difference in the world. As your pastor says, "We might not be able to put out the fire all by ourselves, but we know who can, and that gives us a moral obligation. Sometimes the moral thing to do is to pick up the phone and call and to keep calling until someone answers and then does what needs to be done."

As you read this second printing of Cathedral on Fire, may you and the members of your church find the stories and the seeds for the kind of ministry that meets the dire needs of our time.

—Rev. Dr. Brooks Berndt
March 12, 2021

Introduction

God's Cathedral Aflame

A day after fire struck the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, a 16-year-old Greta Thunberg addressed the European Parliament. The timing added a new dimension to one of the central metaphors used by the Swedish activist to urge government authorities to action in addressing the climate crisis. Thunberg wanted the brokers of power before her to act as if their "house was on fire." On that day, this compelling image not only came to evoke the house in which one lives but also the house of God.

For me, the cathedral had an additional metaphorical meaning that was perfectly fitting. As a pastor, I had once led an outdoor excursion group for my church under the banner "Hiking in God's Cathedral." One can think of the natural world around us as one gigantic, grand cathedral evoking awe and wonder. Thunberg was telling us that this cathedral was now on fire.

Thunberg urged her audience "to switch to cathedral mode" and "do what is necessary" to address the emergency faced by the world. In a similar vein, the noted Canadian scientist, author, and activist David Suzuki soon extended the analogy between the Notre Dame Cathedral and the world. He noted how within one day wealthy donors pledged a billion dollars to help restore the historic building. He then noted that while he would not wish to diminish the emotional impact of the fire, it did give him pause. He wondered, "if we had a similar response of shock and horror at the death throes of the Great Barrier Reef, the toxic state of the Ganges River, the degradation of the Amazon rainforest or the rising levels of carbon in the atmosphere that gives us air, weather, climate and seasons, think of the responses we could develop."

Thunberg asserts that the reason so many people fail to respond in a manner that corresponds to the magnitude of the climate crisis is because people simply lack the requisite knowledge, saying:

> If people knew that the scientists say that we have a 5 percent chance of meeting the Paris target, and if people knew what a nightmare scenario we will face if we don't keep global warming below 2°C, they wouldn't need to ask me why I'm on school strike outside parliament. Because if everyone knew how serious the situation is and how little is actually being done, everyone would come and sit down beside us. (1)

While those who speak publicly about the need to aggressively act in addressing the climate crisis are often viewed as prophets of doom and gloom, it is worth noting that Thunberg's remarks point to an inherent hope in her perspective: if people knew the situation faced today, then their best nature would arise and become manifest in precisely the kind of actions needed. Thunberg and the millions of youth inspired to strike with her in the streets embody this active hope.

For churches to adequately address the climate crisis, a basic level of awareness is a prerequisite along with the kind of embodied hope found through taking action. Such embodied hope may not at first feel like hope. When one is rushing to put out a fire, one does not stop to ask, "Am I feeling hopeful right now?" Instead, survival instinct kicks in. An urgent concern for those in danger kicks in. A desperate desire to preserve a place we love kicks in. It is only later, watching the video footage of those putting out the fire and those risking their own lives to carry out those trapped inside, that we are able to reflectively observe a remarkable heroism that inspires us all.

The Church is potentially the largest of the sleeping giants who need to be awakened to the fire that surrounds us. Once awake, this giant needs direction. It needs to know what must be done to put out the fire and rescue those threatened by its flames. In short, it needs a call to action.

1

Our First Calling

Seeing Our Faith Anew

When my oldest daughter was five years old, she came to my wife and me in a fit of tears and extreme anger. She was upset over "the horrible picture" she had seen a few days earlier in her children's Bible. We asked her to show us which picture it was. When we then pulled the book from the shelf, we soon found her pointing to a rendering of the crucifixion. It was a tough moment. At her age and with those emotions, there was no explanation that was going to reach her. All we could do was comfort her.

I have since reflected on that moment in countless ways, and one realization that struck me was how my daughter forced me to reconsider a central image of my faith in a new light. Despite all the sophisticated Bible study I have given to the crucifixion over the years as first a student and then a pastor, none of it had put me in touch with the visceral horror of it in the same way that my daughter's reaction had. As I reflected further on this, I came to realize that sometimes—as challenging and as agonizing as it might be—we need to consider our faith with a fresh perspective, as if seeing our faith for the first time.

This can be especially true when a congregation considers the fundamental nature of its calling as Christians in relation to how we engage the climate crisis from a place of faith. There can be a tendency to think of the climate crisis or any environmental concern as just another issue that deserves the occasional sermon or perhaps an entire service devoted to Earth care. But might we orient ourselves in a different way?

From Occasional Issue to Continual Calling

While focusing on the climate crisis and our responsibility to God's creation for one Sunday a year is better than no Sundays, let us consider the calling of your church with fresh eyes. Imagine that you and every member of your congregation arrives at church on Sunday morning as if all of you are there for the first time. Further imagine that everyone present has arrived asking, "Why are we here? What are we doing? Why do this?" Everyone looks around at each other scratching their heads and saying, "What exactly is our purpose for coming together here?"

A welcome pamphlet in a reading rack by the front entrance suggests some familiar thoughts on what it means to be a church. It talks about how a-church-is-not-a-steeple, it speaks of its members as forming the Body of Christ, and it discusses what following Jesus entails. Various Bible passages are quoted in the pamphlet. For those assembled at your church, it generates some thoughtful discussion, and just when it seems like the conversation has run its course, one among your group says, "Since we are embarking on a new beginning, why not start at the beginning? Why not look at the book of Genesis in this Bible over here?"

Thus, you start reading the Genesis story of our planet's birth and the beginning of human life. You keep on reading, and soon your group gets to the second chapter of Genesis. You arrive at a part that encapsulates the very first purpose that humans are said to have had in Genesis. This immediately seems incredibly relevant to those gathered.

At this point, however, it is important to pause. In order to fully appreciate what comes next, it helps to take a step back and consider the context of what is being said. If you are truly reading the Bible with beginner eyes, then you would be reading about God for the first time, and it would seem that this God character in the book of Genesis is essentially a very powerful gardener. Genesis literally says that "the Lord God planted a garden" (Genesis 2:8).

All of this sets the stage for what happens with Adam, whose name is a pun on the Hebrew word for soil "Adamah." God breathes life into Adam, this creature of the soil. God then places Adam in the midst of the garden and tells him his purpose in life—the part your group is especially keen on knowing. You

then read about how God tells Adam that his purpose is to work and care for the garden. In other words, he is to work and care for God's creation. Ah-hah! Here is the light bulb moment for your new church family. Could a central purpose for your newly formed community be to work and care for God's creation? Could this be your first calling as people of faith? If so, then the severe threat to God's creation that the climate crisis represents has enormous ramifications for our first calling as people of faith.

A Few Secret Ingredients for Community

Our first calling entails immense responsibility, but it is also a stroke of divine genius. Stop and think for a moment about just how much sense it makes for a church to have caring for God's creation as a core purpose. Think about the wonderfully diverse persons who form your congregation. All of you have something in common in that you have decided to gather in one place on Sundays, but among you, there are likely lots of differences: different professions, different interests, different hobbies, different worldviews, maybe even different political party affiliations (as scary as that might be to contemplate!) Yet, despite these many differences, all of you share the initial gifts of creation: air, water, soil, sun, and the very plants that provide each of you with food. All of you share these things that you could not survive for one second without. It therefore makes a lot of sense that you would find a common purpose in caring for these gifts given to you by God, the Big Gardner.

Moreover, the fact that the Big Gardener has given you these gifts suggests that each of you in this newborn congregation also share a common spirit of gratitude. In this world in which there can be so much bad news, it is refreshing to think that everyone can come together each week to celebrate something that makes all of you grateful. After all, there is never a week in which you can't be grateful for the air you breathe. Every week you can give thanks for the gifts of creation. Every week you can celebrate these gifts and offer thanks to the Big Gardner.

At first blush, this focus on gratitude may seem a bit odd to include in a handbook for churches addressing the climate crisis, but let me assure you that it is not. The beloved French Catholic priest known as Abbé Pierre once said something that

revealed how he was able to sustain himself as a champion for the homeless. He declared that we must always see with both eyes: one focused on the world's suffering so that we might fight against it and the other focused on the world's wondrous beauty so that we might give thanks for it. In addressing the climate crisis as people of faith, it not only helps to see with new eyes, it also helps to see with two eyes: one focused on justice and the other focused on gratitude.

Hard Work Made Lighter

The Big Gardner wants us to not only care about the gifts of creation but to actually do some work tending to the garden. We can't be free-loading couch potatoes. We have to roll up our sleeves and do our part. Yet, we are not just doing work for the sake of work or because of some onerous sense of obligation. The work grows out of our relationship with the Big Gardner to whom we owe everything. Thus, we arrive in the garden with a grateful, committed heart, and that makes all the difference in the world.

Work in the garden is made lighter because we are not doing it alone. In coming together at church each week as co-laborers with the Big Gardner, our undertaking is like that of a community garden. Such a garden not only needs community to do the work, it also builds community in the doing. I have learned the truth of this from experience. In New Orleans, a group of churches joined together to care for a community garden in the Lower Ninth Ward. This low-income neighborhood was hit particularly hard by Hurricane Katrina, and the garden developed in its aftermath.

I happened to be in town one Saturday when the churches were having a workday, and I was invited to come. The truth is that my initial response was not one of enthusiasm. I have never been much into gardening. I have trouble keeping the succulents on my office windowsill alive, and those things are supposed to survive anything. Nevertheless, the plight of my succulents did not seem a sufficient excuse for declining the invitation.

Despite my reservations, however, I went to the workday and enjoyed myself immensely. It was not because I enjoyed picking weeds. It was because I enjoyed the company and the conversation. I had feared a morning of uncomfortable, dirty,

hard work—and it was those things—but the time flew by. Those of us gathered got to know each other on a personal level. We told stories. We laughed. We commiserated. It was great. My life does not normally make time for doing that with others, but I instantly knew that I should make that time. Even better, the morning culminated at noon with the most successful community-building activity of all time: food. If one is going to work in the garden, one certainly has to enjoy the fruits of the garden.

Purpose-centered food gatherings point to another ingenious aspect of church life that should be seen with fresh eyes. The sacrament of communion can be seen as a cause for multiple celebrations. It is a time to celebrate the presence of Christ. It is a time to celebrate our common life together. And, it is also a time during which the tangible elements of our sacred meal give us cause to celebrate the gifts of the Big Gardener.

Problems in Paradise

Let's return to that group that has gathered to discern its core purpose as a church. You might imagine that everyone leaves the first meeting in high spirits as they come to realize their immense potential as a community joined together by a common calling. The next week everyone returns to continue reading and reflecting on Genesis. It soon appears that all is not right in the garden. Every garden has pests, and here the pest isn't a slug. It is a snake. Moreover, it would be an understatement to say that those who tend to the garden don't always get along. There are problems in paradise.

Today, many of the problems in our garden are often concealed from view. Like myself, many in our society do not literally spend much time tending to a garden. As a result, it can become easy to forget from where our food comes—the farm conditions and practices. We can forget the persons who grow the food, how they might be laboring amid pesticides and amid increasingly hot temperatures that can threaten their health and even their lives. We can forget about how industrial agricultural practices and high-meat diets impact the climate crisis whether it is the destruction of rainforests for cattle ranching or the production of the greenhouse gas methane from cattle. In fact, a recent UN report estimates that 23 percent of human-generated

greenhouse gas emissions in recent years came from activities related to agriculture, forestry, and other forms of land use.

At the supermarket and the restaurant, these problems become hidden. When one becomes truly aware of what goes on in the garden, however, one inevitably becomes aware of the injustices and the inequalities within it. One becomes aware of who has access, power, and control over the fruits of the garden. Matters such as race, immigration, and class quickly come to the fore.

The Irish Become Irish Year-Round

Just as a native of Dublin is Irish on more than St. Patrick's Day, a Christian true to the origins of the faith is not an advocate for God's creation solely on Earth Day or the Feast of St. Francis. Caring for God's creation has never been just another issue or cause. It is a calling that is fundamental to our faith. In our generation, it is also a calling that has become defined by the dire urgency of the climate crisis.

This calling inevitably connects with multiple issues of justice. The climate crisis is an amplifier or exacerbator of inequality. Those who have contributed the least to the crisis frequently suffer the most. They suffer from severe weather, melting snow caps, and rising sea levels. They also suffer from the harms to human health generated by the fossil fuel industry, the agricultural industry, and the auto industry. These harms range from the coal ash contamination of drinking water to the increased asthma rates of children living near high traffic areas and major roadways. For such reasons, it is perhaps most accurate to describe our calling as Christians as not only about caring for creation but about seeking justice for all of creation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

❶ How can you see your faith anew with the eyes of a child? What seems different?

❷ When it comes to church priorities and ministries, what do you believe are the implications of our first calling to care for God's creation? How do you understand those implications in relation to the climate crisis?

❸ How does your congregation relate to the joys and challenges, blessings and injustices, found in our modern garden today?

SUGGESTED ACTION—CULTIVATE GARDENS

▶ Through adult education sessions learn about the work conditions and environmental practices surrounding the food you eat as it makes its way from farm to table. Learn about the injustices as well as just and sustainable agricultural practices. One can focus on alternative practices by promoting Community Supported Agriculture, visiting farms and ranches engaged in restorative agriculture, or bringing local practitioners to your church.

▶ Pull carbon out of the air through how you make use of your church's landscape. Seek out local experts who can help you discern ways to do this through the planting of native trees as well as climate-friendly gardening which encourages the absorption of carbon dioxide through soils and plants. One can additionally check out the Union of Concerned Scientists' resource entitled *The Climate Friendly Gardener: A Guide to Combating Global Warming from the Ground Up*.

▶ Cultivate healthy communal practices during potlucks and coffee hours. Celebrate the local gifts of creation and practice what you preach through your eating. Eat food that is grown locally and sustainably. Moreover, eat plant-rich foods that model healthy eating for not only the health of your body but also the health of the planet. As one researcher noted, when you look at the evidence for what is a healthy diet for the planet, it is very similar to diets such as the Mediterranean and Okinawa diets that are already known to be healthy for our bodies.