

AT HOME ON EARTH—Christian Spirituality in a Time of Climate Change

On becoming an apocalyptic evangelical prophetic church

Part 1: Apocalyptic: owning the anguish that is ours (STILL IN DRAFT FORM)

March 5, 2017 – David R. Weiss

I want to begin today with a bit about my personal journey toward concern for climate change. I come with as many questions as answers, but company is always welcome, especially when the journey leads into uncertain territory. So it seems helpful to say something about how I found myself on *this* path.

My journey begins on the southernmost shores of Lake Michigan, home to the singing sands of the Dunes National Lakeshore and the Indiana Dunes State Park. Yes, there was the small woods right across the street from my home where I frequently went exploring, but it was in the dunes where I met Nature as vast and expansive, as mystery and beauty, as peril and power. Nature as creation, worthy of awe.

Although I had plenty of childhood of curiosity about the natural world, my real love has *always* been words; I spent as much time in books as in my backyard, and for most of my life, from childhood to present, nature has been a welcome backdrop to my more immediate passions of writing, teaching, and theology. Today nature collides with those passions—and I can only hope the collision is coming soon enough.

Through high school and college I took my required courses in science, but I steeped myself in social sciences and the humanities. I attended Wartburg Seminary for three years, departing with an M.A. rather than an M.Div. Despite my family's hopes, my own discernment was that the Holy Spirit seemed less interested a collar around my neck that putting a burr up my butt. Which is to say, I was led to a vocation characterized more by the gift of holy agitation than that of pastoral care. During my seminary years I worked with others on anti-apartheid issues, and I played a central role in Wartburg Seminary declaring itself a nuclear free zone, pledging hospitality and aid in any event of emergency, but no longer pretending it could promise shelter against nuclear fallout.

My singular—but significant—encounter with ecology in seminary was a course I took on “Theology of the Land.” We read three texts in the class, and they all left their mark on me, but without question it was Wendell Berry's *Unsettling of America* that marked me most. Not least because I envied the poetic beauty of his prose, but just as much because in his prose Nature *came alive*. Those sand dunes of my youth, the farm fields that quilt the Midwest landscape, the great forests, the mountains, the only seemingly barren deserts: each habitat became its own Other, with whom we live *in relationship*—justly or unjustly. The seeds planted in that class, in 1986, took nearly a decade to germinate—and nearly three decades to mature—but in the writings of the poet-farmer Wendell Berry I first heard the invitation to listen for the holy within the wild places of Earth.

I left seminary intentionally un-ordained and but optimistic that my education in theology, my love of words, and my

passion for justice were the perfect set of skills to position me for rewarding work changing the world.

Instead, I spent the next six years working in a hotel kitchen making banquet salads, mailing out educational filmstrips to schools, managing shipping-receiving-and-inventory for a recycled paper company, and (please forgive me) running machines that stuffed and stamped junk mail. I might call this my second graduate degree, this one in humility. I certainly learned in each job I held, not least about the lives—the anxieties and aspirations—of the people I worked with. Many of them less educated, all of them just as human as me. They become the audience for whom I aimed my work as a *public* theologian a few years later.

In 1992 I began a graduate program in Christian Ethics at the University of Notre Dame, and in 1995, during a year-long independent study on Christian Theology and the Environment, the seeds planted back in seminary broke ground. The following year, spring 1996, I taught my first course at Notre Dame: Contemporary Christian Thinking on the Environment.

That fall, drawing on insights from my study and teaching, I delivered my first academic paper at a conference in Wisconsin. It was titled: “Beyond Ecological Security: Intimacy and Risk. *Imago Dei* as a Theological Resource for a More Creative Encounter with the Earth.”

Although neither the phrase “climate change” nor “global warming” appear in that paper, I was addressing the ecological crisis and trying to articulate Christian theological insights to help us live in a more harmonious relationship with Earth. In particular I argued that, especially as we look at the ministry of Jesus, but really throughout the arc of the biblical narrative, we see God's willingness to *be intimate* and to *risk*. And I suggested that these qualities are *central* to what it means to be in the image of God—and that developing them more intentionally would set us in a much better relationship with creation. I think that wisdom is worth revisiting twenty years later—and I'll do so next week.

In spring 1998, my last year at Notre Dame, I was the keynote speaker for the campus Earth Day celebration. In that talk, titled “Consuming the Earth in Search of Our Worth,” the phrase “global warming” entered my vocabulary for the first time. And I declared that our unbridled patterns of consumption were largely to blame for the threat we posed, both to the earth beneath our feet and to the atmosphere above our heads.

I proposed that our consumption—all out of proportion with our actual need—could be seen as an attempt to assert our worth over against the seeming indifference of the world around us. Our primal insecurity, mostly unacknowledged, was driving us to consume the planet to death because we'd been convinced—largely under the tutelage of modern advertising

—that if anything bestows worth, *stuff* does. Then I added theological insight that, as Christian, *we do indeed consume our worth—but we do so at the altar in the bread and wine*. And that wisdom may be the greatest gift that Lutherans bring to the climate crisis. I’ll talk more about that in two weeks.

After that talk in 1998 I went largely silent on ecological issues. For seventeen years.

You see, during my years at Notre Dame I was also developing a strong theological voice around welcoming LGBTQ persons. When I joined the faculty of Luther College for four years, from 1998-2002, that was the driving issue in our Church and on our campus. So my vocational path veered off almost exclusively into public theology seeking to create welcoming and affirming space in faith communities, both Lutheran and beyond. For seventeen years, I wrote essays, taught classes, preached sermons, led workshops, wrote hymns, and gave public lectures. In general—alongside the multitude of odd jobs I’ve held since moving to the Cities in 2002—I made working for LGBTQ affirmation and welcome my own personal cottage industry.

That work continues to be central to my vocation. But *something has changed*.

During those years, I also recycled—religiously. I went largely vegetarian (technically pescatarian as I still eat responsibly-sourced fish). I shopped at co-ops when possible. I opted to buy only cage-free eggs. I began to participate in community supported agriculture, buying a share in produce delivered right from farm to my neighborhood each week over the summer. So in a variety of ways I cultivated a closer, more responsible relationship with Earth, but that was not the focus of my work as a public theologian. So what changed?

I suppose, in some very real way, *the weather did*. Not simply the evidence for climate change, but the mounting evidence of *impending climate change now upon us*. I am not a scientist myself, but as an educated layperson, the best science available to me, the type found in UN reports covered by the New York Times, that science is alarming to say the least. I will claim in a few minutes that it’s actually *apocalyptic*, and it’s our task as the church to say *that*.

But something else changed, too. I started to grow old. I know, most of you look at me and want to say, “Why, you’re just a young’un yet.” Well, I do hope I have plenty of years left to me. And age is all about perspective. But this also brings perspective: *I’m a grandpa now—nine times over*. And while “feeling old” may be subjective, damn near running out of fingers to count up grandkids is a pretty objective sign that I’m on the far side of ripe, however you wish to measure it.

And what being a grandpa has done for me, is not so much make me see my own mortality as it has *pressed me to imagine their future*. That’s why, beginning with Advent 2015, I’ve spent the past fifteen months redirecting my primary energy to asking this question: *What does “Christian Spirituality in a Time of Climate Change” look like?* And that’s the question I want to explore with you over the next three weeks.

It may well be the *defining question of Christian faith* for the generation to come. And because it’s an eminently *human* question—it is *entirely tangled up in our lives*—it seems useful to have sketched out for you some of the tangles in my life that led me here today.

So this is where we *begin*.

I’m a theologian. It’s “in my blood,” I like to say. The same heart that pushes and pulls this life-force through my body seems, and with equal regularity, to push and pull an awareness of God through my life.

I’m also—and no less—son, husband, father, grandfather. Add to that planetary citizen and child of God, both since my conception, the latter being publically confirmed by water a few weeks after my own arrival in the wee hours of a Christmas morning some five decades ago.

Born into a thick web of relationships both more complex in their promise and more complicated in their “baggage” than I have ever been able to fully grasp, I dwell at the ecological intersection of faith, creation, and chaos. The iron in the blood that gives me life was seeded in the stars. The water that christened me was distilled on a planet billions of years in the making.

And I worry.

About the world my kids, and especially my grandkids (and yours) are going to inherit. The world they’re going have to *weather*, if you will.

There are, of course, real reasons why we have been so slow to address climate change. Though “real” is not the same as “good”—and claiming uncertainty about its factual basis counts as neither a real nor a good reason today. The enormity of the threat, the inertia of lifestyles now thoroughly embedded in systems beyond any individual control, the impulse to preserve what is familiar, the short term addictive rush of stuff, and the sheer corporate and political power of those who profit from plundering the planet—these are among the real reasons. But none of them come close to being *good* reasons.

So when I imagine my grandchildren fifty years out, and they face the world we’ve bequeathed to them, none of those real reasons offer much comfort. I want to do better than merely excuse my failure to act. I want the tools necessary to fashion a legacy of *unconditional (and sometimes costly) care* for the planet and *resolute (and sometimes risky) resistance* to the forces that threaten Earth’s otherwise eager desire to host life.

I’m busily trying to find—or fashion—those tools. But there’s something else I want. Something else I *need: company*. This challenge is so all-encompassing that even our best aspirations, our most principled actions will be ineffective (although not thereby worthless)—unless we learn to act in concert. So I’m looking for communities willing to say *with me*, from our star-seeded blood to our water-crossed brows, “*This is our crisis to face, our moment to be church, our season to journey together in holy conversation with one another.*”

What *does* “Christian Spirituality in a Time of Climate Change” look like? I think it’s going to need to be *apocalyptic* ... *evangelical* ... and *prophetic*. Ironically, few mainstream Christian churches wear *any* of those phrases very comfortably. But the world needs us to be each of these things today.

And, really, this is *one* response with *multiple* dimensions to it. An *apocalyptic(dash)evangelical(dash)prophetic* spirituality all-at-once. It’s a bit like origami, the Japanese art of paper-folding. We need to discuss the folds individually, but only as they move together does the spirituality truly take shape.

There’s also fourth dimension: a matter of “scope.” Christian spirituality in a time of climate change will also be *individual, communal, and public*. It will engage us *individually* (speaking to each of our minds, moving each of our hearts, affecting our personal choices), and *communally* (as people of faith gathered together for worship, prayer, fellowship, or action), and *publically* (as participants in politics, as shapers of public policy, as citizens willing to speak truth to those who place profits before the planet’s wellbeing).

So, APOCALYPTIC.

It’s not my parents’ world anymore. They’re still alive. Dad turned 80 last fall; Mom’s two years ahead of him. But this is *no longer* the world they grew up in. It’s barely my world anymore, for that matter. People my age and older, we live *on a different planet today than the one we were born on*.

My daughter, Susanna, for instance, was *born* into a world altogether different than the one my parents knew. She turns 21 this month, and within Susanna’s lifetime—in fact, just since she was a toddler in 1998, she’s lived through *all seventeen* of the hottest years on this planet since 1880.

Why “since 1880”? Because that’s the year we finally had enough accurate temperature reports from around the world to calculate a true “average global temperature.” Since then we’ve kept *very precise* records.

And according to those records, out of the past 137 years, *every one of the hottest seventeen years has happened during Susanna’s lifetime*. I’ll read them off, so you can FEEL the weight of this heat. Susanna was born in 1996. The hottest 17 years since we began measuring them in 1880 have been 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016.

It’s possible, in fact, it’s *likely* that for the rest of her life, she’ll *only ever add* to that collection, year by year. You see, all told, it’s been 385 months—32 years—since we had a single month where the global temperature was cooler than average in that 137-year span.

So, it IS a *different planet* that we dwell on today. Same Earth, but now seemingly governed by a whole new set of temperature dynamics, a whole new range of weather extremes, a whole new series of changes in ecosystems and economies moving toward us with increasing speed. And before the worst of it hits, we’ll be handing the keys over to Susanna’s generation.

I’m going to be almost mercilessly blunt because climate change needs your full attention. *Starting yesterday*. (Actually, starting last century.) And the wellbeing of those who come after us hinges—*perhaps more than at any point in this planet’s four billion years*—on the choices made by those of us alive today.

We’re facing *an apocalypse*, not the once-and-for-all “end of the world,” but, true to its *biblical meaning*, the ending of *one* world—and the beginning of another. The world that we will bequeath to our children is *not* the world we were born into. *That world ... is no more*.

Climate scientists reference global temperatures against a standard baseline, which is the average global temperature over a 30-year period from 1961-1990 (about 14°C, 57°F.). After coming out of the last ice age, around 12-14,000 years ago, global surface temperatures have leveled off and been quite stable. *In fact, for the past 10,000 years we’ve been within half-a-degree Celsius on either side of that baseline*. And even when it *has* fluctuated a bit, it’s always taken at least 500 years to move even half a degree cooler or warmer. Except over the last century. In just the past 100 years, we’ve warmed the planet by 1 whole degree Celsius, with most of that increase coming in the last 50 years.

Did you catch that? *Primarily because of the cumulative impact of industrialized human society, in just the last 50 years, we’ve moved the temperature needle more than in any 1000-year period since the end of the last ice age*.

By most scientific accounts, an increase over that baseline of more than 2 degrees Celsius would begin to pose significant challenges to human society. So the Paris Agreement, reached by 195 nations in December 2015 and put in force in November 2016, aims to reduce greenhouse gasses to a level that will *stop* global warming at that 2-degree mark. But ... there are some problems even with this.

First, the 2-degree limit is often referred to as a “guardrail,” because *were* we to move past it, the consequences *could* be catastrophic. As one climate scientist puts it, if we approach a 3-degree (Celsius) increase we enter a realm of global warming that is likely “incompatible with an organized global community.” So we *want* a guardrail. Now, I’ve driven on some winding mountain highways with pretty sheer drop-offs. I was very grateful to see a guardrail—but the last thing I wanted to do was bump up against it.

So virtually every climate scientist agrees that limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius is a far safer bet—like the rumble strips at the edge of a highway, to jerk you wide awake before you even bump the guardrail.

But here’s the *real* problem. If we stopped burning coal tomorrow—I mean *literally: tomorrow*—And if we stopped any further oil or gas exploration— If we didn’t even tap into the oil fields we know are there, but haven’t drilled in yet— If we *only* used the oil and gas coming from *currently operating* oil and gas fields—and *NO MORE COAL at all*—well, that oil and gas alone—in the fields where we *already* have wells operating—will push us right the past 1.5 degree rumble strip. Add in

burning the coal coming out of mines *already operating*, and we'll plow right through that 2-degree guardrail.

This is with no new drilling. No new coal mines. And it isn't based on idle speculation. It uses the type of numbers that come from nonpartisan sources. Like math.

But it's actually *even bleaker* than this. Not only are all the pledged reductions under the Paris Agreement *voluntary*, but right now, even if *every one* of the 195 nations ratifies their commitment *and* meets their respective pledge, the simple math still works out to an increase of about 2.7 degrees by the end of this century. We'll bang into the 2-degree guardrail right after mid-century, just as Susanna reaches my age. And by 2100 we'll have banged it hard enough and long enough that we'll quite possibly be careening over the cliff.

We measure the threat in degrees, but it isn't just the temperature. It's the whole set of cascading consequences. This is just a small sampling:

As polar ice melts, sea levels rise, permanently flooding many coastlines, displacing tens of millions of people, as well as the industries and economies that are there.

Increasing carbon dioxide in the air drives ocean acidification, which, in turn, harms coral, shellfish, and plankton—the very infrastructure of the ocean ecosystem.

Warming oceans feed the volatility in weather playing out in stronger hurricanes, but evident as well in greater storm intensity and flooding in some areas and increased drought and wildfires elsewhere.

The ripple effects will run further through human societies and biotic communities. Some regions will see gains in agriculture, but overall crop yields will drop—even as population continues to rise. Whole ecosystems will shift ... and sometimes shatter. By the time my grandchildren reach my age *up to one third of all plant and animals species alive today will face extinction*.

It's like the whole planet is running a fever, complete with body aches and vomiting. And nearly all the consequences of climate change will fall first and hardest on those least able to adapt: the poor. Well, animals, plants, ecosystems—and the poor.

The more I venture into this, the more I want to say to my own daughter, to all six children and nine grandchildren, *I AM SO SORRY*.

Because *we did this*. Not me, personally. And not this generation by itself. But *we humans*, mostly in the West (although Russia, China and the rest of the developing world are trying to emulate us ... with a vengeance)—we humans, *addicted to material stuff, indifferent to the needs of a finite planet, and burning fossil fuels at an obscene rate—we did this. And we're going to leave this simmering planet to our children and grandchildren*.

So, "What now?" How *do* we think—feel—act—as individuals and as communities of faith—in a time of climate change ... *in a time of apocalypse?*

This is *tough*: because first, **WE NEED TO JUST STOP AND WEEP**. We'd rather *do* something. When we finally realize the extent to which climate change is going to *rewrite the options* for our grandchildren's future on this planet, we want to *do something*. And we want to do it right now.

Even the science experts who speak with sobering clarity about the crisis we face are often quick to add, "*But there's hope, there's technology just around the corner that can help us ...*" There *may* be technological breakthroughs that can aid us in the decades ahead, but if we do not *first* come to terms with the insatiable and idolatrous pursuit of stuff that has crept into the entirety of our lives—that has irreparably ... *apocalyptically* ... altered our planet—then no amount of technology can safeguard for the planet ... or our souls for very long.

What the world does least well these days is repent: admit the folly of its ways and the damage caused, and then change course. The church isn't much better at this, if we're honest. But we *do* have language for it. We *do* have rituals for it. We have psalms and songs and prayers and liturgies for it. We have the capacity to do for ourselves and to model for the world the first things that need to be done today: *See. Grieve. Repent*.

I *will* talk about how we find hope and what we might do—*over the next two weeks*. Not today. Because I'm convinced—*absolutely*—that what the church brings to the challenge, *the crisis* of climate change, *begins* with *repentance and tears*. We can only *act*, only *do*, *after* that grief, that *soul deep* lament, has washed over us. Indeed, sustained lament may be the only thing that can truly stir us to repentance. We'll need to be creative, determined, frantic, and persistent, in how we lament. *But we cannot despair*. Not for ourselves. Not for our children or grandchildren. Not for the companion creatures on this planet whose fate is now thoroughly bound up with our own. As a church, both for ourselves and for our world, we must help midwife the largest act of communal repentance the world has ever seen.

But how do we *endure* such anguish without being swallowed by the grief itself? Honestly, *I can't promise* that we're up to this. A century ago, even a few decades ago, we still were. But today, having inflicted *such* wounds on this planet—on God's creation—*can we now bear the grief that is ours to own?* I don't know. It is unquestionably **OUR** grief. The result of **OUR** sin. But the sobering depth of this climate crisis is such that we dare not assume we can endure this grief. Until we feel *that* level of trepidation we have not sensed the peril we're in.

This will take ... *years*. It is not all that we can or should do. There *is* evangelical hope to announce. There *is* prophetic resistance to embrace. And we'll need to start those works right away as well. But the great temptation is to hurry past anguish, to rush through repentance, but **THIS is where our work begins**. In a bitter, but *absolutely essential first step* of grief and repentance.

That's where we pause today. Thank you.

Part 2 – Evangelical Hope / Part 3 – Prophetic Resistance
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