

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

On becoming an apocalyptic evangelical prophetic church

Part 2: Evangelical: good news and hope (STILL IN DRAFT FORM)

March 12, 2017 – David R. Weiss

I'm glad you came back. Last week I offered the first of three talks on “Christian Spirituality in a Time of Climate Change,” and I left you all in a pretty bleak place:

A planet warming faster than at any point since the last ice age. With the threat of rising oceans levels, combined with steep loss in ocean life. Coastlands being redrawn by rising waters, with people, cities, industries, and animals becoming refugees in the process. Driving rains, furious winds, and unrelenting droughts marking our lives unlike anything in recent memory. With only a very small window of opportunity to avert or lessen these consequences—and that window gets smaller with each passing day ... and each new environmental initiative of the current administration.

Indeed, to say I left you all “in a pretty bleak place” in an understatement. I welcomed you onboard a train, and proceeded to announce, “Next step, *the outer edges of hell.*” So, *I'm truly glad you came back.*

Here's my message again in a nutshell. What *does* “Christian Spirituality in a Time of Climate Change” look like? It's *apocalyptic ... evangelical ... and prophetic.*

By “apocalyptic” I don't mean announcing the end of the world. *Not quite.* I mean apocalyptic in a truer biblical sense—and in *two* distinct ways. First, we *do* need to announce the ending of *one world.* To recognize that the planet we were born on is NOT the one we'll leave to our children. Second, like biblical apocalyptic literature, we'll need to seek out powerful imagery and symbolism to capture the hearts and minds in our midst, to prepare them for the journey ahead.

By “evangelical,” I don't mean “saving souls for Jesus.” I mean something closer to what the ELCA meant when it reclaimed “evangelical” in its name in 1988: that the message we have, as a church, *is genuinely good news*—worth sharing. And in a time of climate change that will be especially important because news that is good will be harder and harder to come by.

And by “prophetic,” I don't mean we'll make predictions about the future. I mean (again, more biblically), we need to discern the stakes of the present moment and then speak truth boldly—even and especially to power. And we need to engage in action that dares to live toward a different world. That's the “resistance” and “renewal” dimension of this spirituality, and I'll say more about it next week.

Two other quick reminders. There's also fourth dimension to this spirituality: “scope.” It will be *individual, communal, and public,* playing out a bit differently in each realm. And,

although I'm describing each dimension separately for sake of clarity, we won't finish one dimension and then move on to the next. This is one *whole* spirituality, in which each theme reinforces the other and takes its turn at the forefront again and again. Climate Change may well be THE *defining question of Christian faith ...* for generations to come. So there's time to work out the rhythm of moving between these dimensions, but the urgency of the issue says we should start immediately and work out the rhythm as we go.

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Last week I made the case that the changes coming our way courtesy climate change—which itself is coming our way courtesy *human industrial activity*—merit the term *apocalyptic.* Scientifically, biologically, ecologically, the world we grew up knowing ... *is ending right now.* And just as Adam and Eve found no way back to Eden, neither will we nor our children find a way back to the planet we once knew.

But what does it mean, not simply to assert that *this moment in history* is apocalyptic, but that our *Christian spirituality should be apocalyptic, too?*

This is *tough,* because as much as we want to *do* something, the first piece of our witness to the world *as a church* in a time of climate change *begins with repentance and tears.*

In one sense, we don't “have” to do this just yet. The worst of climate change won't hit for a decade or more. And we'll incur our share of derision if we start our lament before full-blown catastrophe strikes. Indeed, the church has a habit—almost a “legacy”—of keeping safely behind the curve in its response to social issues. Around slavery, women's equality, civil rights, and LGBT rights mainstream Christianity came to the game late ... and after providing support or cover for the other side for far too long. We could play it safe here, too; bite our tongue until lament becomes the song of our culture, and only then take our place in the choir.

But recall Jesus' words (Luke 13:35), exasperated that the crowds who flocked to hear him were so oblivious to the *weight* of choices in front of them: “*How can you read the weather so well, but miss the signs of the times?*” In our case, “reading the signs of the times” *means* reading the weather—heeding the growing body of data about the climate—and feeling the weight of choices in front of us. If we wish to look our children and grandchildren in the eye with dignity, to be remembered by the next generations as those who *led the way* as the crisis became clear, then *we will risk derision now* and lead the way into lament for a world soon to be undone.

The exact shape of our lament will be as varied as we are, according to our diverse gifts and contexts. And because it's *our* lament, not mine alone, it will be up to churches, congregation by congregation, and across regions and denominations, to discern what shape lament takes in their midst. But I have a few thoughts. This journey will not be for the faint of heart—except that this journey *will include* all of us before its over, so what matters most is that we find ways to make it *together*.

It will involve learning about the *need* for our lament. There are plenty of articles, books, speakers, and films that can offer a beginning point in this journey—preferably as shared experiences so that conversation can follow. One opportunity, Elizabeth Kolbert's lecture at the U of M on "The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History" (Carlson Family Stage, Northrup Auditorium, April 13, 7:30PM), falls on Maundy Thursday. It's an inconvenient date, but a provocative one to learn more about another great betrayal: that of creation. There are plenty of excellent films that put visceral visual images on climate change and its consequences such as Leonardo DiCaprio's documentary *Before the Flood*.

We'll also need to process this grief *using the tools of our faith*. Our biblical, liturgical, and historical traditions offer a host of imagery related to lament, grief, and repentance. We should revisit the stories and psalms of lament in the Bible as well as the seasons of the church year, perhaps hearing them with fresh ears as we listen to *their* words now set against *our own* anguish. Ultimately we may *re-imagine them* with a suffering planet—and all its inhabitants—in mind. Reverently and soberly, creating new prayers, psalms, hymns, and rituals that can guide us through this grieving.

Each year we recall the slaughter of the holy innocents by Herod. We hear Matthew (2:18) echo Jeremiah's image (31:15) of Rachel, weeping for her children. Dare we imagine the poor threatened by climate change, the many creatures and plants likely to disappear forever—dare we allow *these imperiled ones* to be the focus of Rachel's tears today?

Jesus wept for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), because her people ignored prophet after prophet, never learning the things that make for peace. Dare we hear Jesus weeping today *for us*, that we have ignored prophets like Rachel Carson and Bill McKibben, that *we* have not learned the things that make for peace with creation?

I wonder how our baptismal prayers—or the art around our baptismal fonts—might reflect the undeniable and ancient kinship—between this "holy" water and the melting glaciers, dying oceans, and rising floodwaters around the globe. *Somehow* the wetness of gracious promise traced on our foreheads, connects us just as truly to the profound grief of water across the world.

Or how might we recognize that our Communion bread and wine—symbols of God's grace and Jesus' suffering—come from wheat and grapes often grown and harvested in ways so at odds with the planet's health? The very elements of our Eucharist have imprinted on them agricultural habits that, in effect, crucify land, water, and air.

How would we be changed simply by posing these questions with liturgical deliberateness? I don't know exactly *how* we do these things, but this *is* part of our work now—to take images that already hold power in our imagination and bring them to bear on the needs of this moment.

Perhaps church potlucks have a place in this work, times when, like a funeral luncheon, we come together to name, honor, and grieve the loss of habitats and creatures. If the monarch butterfly goes extinct, it may be important to create memory boards in churches across the country, and invite people to come and share a memory of a monarch—and then grieve that we did not act sooner on its behalf. I'm quite serious. If we truly own our kinship with the created world, *we will* be pressed to respond to this grief, too.

Much of this work will be felt personally, but it is *fundamentally communal work* done as congregations or as small groups within congregations. It's simply too daunting to take on by ourselves, least of all by our pastors. It's too much for anyone alone. This is *shared* ministry, and we'll need to read and write and weep and pray and create these pieces of an apocalyptic, lament-centered spirituality *together*. If ever there was a need for a priesthood of *all* believers, it's today.

On occasion, we'll venture out into public spaces with our grief, because everyone on the planet is going to be impacted by climate change. Not just Christians, not just believers. And we'll show others that eco-grief *is* possible, perhaps at City Hall or in the Capital Rotunda, maybe at the riverbank, on farmland, or in a threatened wilderness. And we'll bear witness to our recognition that grief is the *only* first step forward.

Still, the question looms, and it's *real*: how do we *endure* such anguish without being swallowed by the grief itself? Because this grieving will take ... *years*. It's not all that we can or should do. But it's *where our work begins*, and it will be with us *for a long time*.

So HOPE. A Christian spirituality in a time of climate change will be ... *evangelical*. If only in a still quiet voice, it will nonetheless whisper good news that can anchor the hope that can hold us steady as we endure soul deep lament and as we reach forward toward resistance and renewal.

We have multiple resources for this in our tradition. I'm going to identify two of them: *Remembering who God is*—and *Remembering who we are*.

First, God. Consider Adam and Eve's mythic banishment from Eden, Joseph being sold into slavery, the entire generations the Hebrews later enslaved in Egypt, and Israel's shattering experience of Exile. Each of these is an apocalyptic world-ending-moment in the Biblical tale. But in each case, the biblical story—and the lived experience of the people—revealed that God was with them.

We've known this all our lives. And it's been comforting to recall God's presence to other people and other communities in moments of devastation and despair. To realize that God was there, even then ... *for them*. It may be less comforting but more important right now to recognize that suddenly *this story is about us*. We're the ones facing an apocalypse today. It's *our turn* to remember that God will be with *us* even in THIS apocalyptic moment.

It's this persistent solidarity of God that leads Isaiah to name God *Emmanuel*, "God-With-Us." From the time of Matthew's Gospel onward we Christians have dared to see in Jesus' life the embodiment of that name, Emmanuel.

Besides this, and in both biblical testaments, we discover that *the manner* in which God is Emmanuel—*with-us*—is *primarily by way of vulnerability*. This vulnerability is perhaps both the most overlooked and *most important* aspect of God today. It would be fair to say that the vast majority of our climate crisis is the result of our centuries-long quest for control *over* nature rather than for harmony *with* nature. Having imaged God as *absolute power*, we've tried to echo that ourselves—with devastating consequences for the whole web of life.

Yet, in the biblical story, God chooses vulnerability again and again. Look at the company God keeps: second-born sons, enslaved people, slow-tongued leaders, women, Gentiles, and awkwardly outcast prophets. These are not choices made by someone betting on the conventional wisdom for success, not the companions you choose if you want to make sure the odds are always on your side. Instead, the path of presence that God chooses is *to pursue wholeness not by avoiding vulnerability but by embracing it*.

Jesus continues that pattern. He *incarnates* it. Yes, it culminates on the cross, where the vulnerability of both Jesus and God reaches a startling crescendo, but it's *also* at the very heart of his ministry. In daring to touch lepers and others whose illness has set them apart, Jesus' heals by stepping into the vulnerability of others. In choosing to eat with outcasts in a society where your table companions were carefully monitored and could cost you your reputation, Jesus unmistakably—*scandalously*—chooses to be vulnerable. In calling us to love our enemies, to meet them with creative nonviolence rather than outright force, Jesus commends the transformative power of vulnerability.

Remembering that God is not only persistently *present to us* but also deliberately *vulnerable with us* is important because it

anchor the hope necessary for enduring lament and for nurturing the seeds of resistance and renewal.

Moreover, in *remembering who God is*, we also begin to *remember who we are*: **imago Dei**—creatures called to *image a God who pursues wholeness through vulnerable solidarity with others*. And it is past time for our humanity to reflect this.

We might begin by deepening the sense of who we are and where we fit in creation. The Genesis 2 creation account says God fashioned "Adam" from the dust of the ground. That's what the *English* tells us, anyway. The *Hebrew* is more evocative. There God forms an **adam** from the **adamah**: literally, God fashions an *earthling* from the *earth*, or, as I like to say, a **HUMUS BEING** from the **HUMUS**.

It's a small wordplay, but it carries a powerful etymological—and *ecological*—truth about our profound kinship to the ground. It reminds us that, from Eden onward, we were *intended for intimacy: humus beings*, commissioned by God to tend the *humus*, to be caretakers of a Garden to which we are *indelibly linked*.

We have a *kinship with creation* that we have not yet fully acknowledged, but it has been true for as long as long human beings have been. We know now, that far from being set clean apart from our companion creatures, we live thanks to countless ones with whom we share an unimaginable intimacy. My relatively healthy human body is home to about *100 trillion microbes*. These tiny critters are NOT ME, yet they live in and on me, assisting my digestion, immune system, and carrying out other duties essential to keeping me alive. Some neither help nor hinder me; they simply call me "home." *100 trillion of them*.

And because microbial cells are a lot smaller than human cells, the total number of *their* cells actually *outnumber* my own human cells by *at least seven to one*. So right here, standing in front of you, *there are seven to ten times as many cells that are not "David" as cells that are David*. If we could separate them all out, these microbes would weigh somewhere around *seven pounds*. That's a lot of "not me" that's fully interwoven with me.

Listen, because this is *good news*: there are a multitude of ecosystems that we need to find our *deep* connection with, but we begin right here: *I am my own ecosystem*. And so are you. *Both theologically and scientifically we are intended for intimacy*. Our path forward, as people of faith, as inhabitants of a finite and fragile planet, *is by way of intimacy*: with each other, with our companion creatures, and with our planet. Remembering *who are*—that we are already deeply interwoven with creation in multiple ways—can renew in us a *felt* kinship that allows us to grieve for the rest creation, now imperiled by our own folly, *as for our own kin*.

One small one habit we might adopt as part of our newfound intimacy with all things created, would be to *go on*

a *first name basis* with our home planet. We needn't declare her a living being (though even some scientists say she acts like one in certain respects), but let's drop the "the," that we so casually add to Earth. I don't say of my wife, "I love 'the' Margaret." No, "I love Margaret." To insert a "the" sets up an impersonal distance that is immediately obvious when we're talking about a person, but slips through unnoticed when we're talking about our own planet.

We don't say "the Mars," or "the Saturn," but we too easily say, "the Earth." Listen to the difference it makes when I say, "I live *on* Earth. I care *for* Earth. I hope my children get to *know* Earth as I did. I *want* Earth and all her companion creatures to thrive." There is an undeniable personal character to this speech, an intimacy born in this simple use of words. A recognition, so eloquently phrased by Martin Buber, that *we are most human when we meet Earth as Thou*.

Lastly, what would it mean to think about *incarnation on an ecological level*? We say that in Jesus God "took on flesh." That means that like me, like you, *God took on flesh with the assistance of 100 trillion microbes*. Suddenly "incarnation" isn't about God becoming "human," but about God dwelling in the midst of all creation. No less than any of us, *Jesus' humanity is interwoven with the cosmos*. The iron that reddened his blood was first formed in the stars. The water that comprised over half his body weight had been here on Earth for some four billion years. When John 3:16 says, "God so loved *the world*," it uses the Greek word *cosmos*, meaning "the whole of creation." We've tended, perhaps selfishly, to presume that, of course, God loves us, humans, best of all. But just maybe a *vulnerable* God, a God more intimate with creation than we can fathom, loves stardust and iron, water and microbes, *just as much as us*.

Perhaps it's time for our psalms and songs, our art and ethics to recognize it's neither scientifically accurate nor theologically wise to narrow down incarnation to humanity. But, like our task of lament, the church's ministry of evangelical hope in a time of climate change, is not *mine* to map out, it's *ours*. And we'll map it as we walk it: *together*.

This dance between apocalyptic grief and evangelical hope will last for decades ... likely for the rest of our lives. Even if *in this very moment* we altered all the Earth-damaging behaviors we engage in, her wounds run so deep, and the inertia of our wounding is so great, that it would be generations before we actually reversed course. But this is the *best choice before us*—to live in this uncomfortable tension ... for the sake of tomorrow. The only other option is to resign ourselves and our children and our children's children to a planet too wounded to ever again truly welcome them home.

Moses called heaven and earth as witnesses, to see whether the Hebrews would choose life or death. Those same witnesses—and the same choice—are before us today.

So hope is essential. We should be clear, however, that we aren't "hopeful" as an end in itself, as a sort of abstract optimism. In the face of the truly apocalyptic moment that looms before us, hope serves two critical roles. It keeps the grief over what we have done from overwhelming us; it sustains us in our lament. And—it makes possible, against all outward signs that we cannot make a difference, the conviction that *prophetic resistance and renewal is the forward form our faith takes today*.

I'll be the first to admit: this is a *daunting picture*, starkly drawn but truthfully spoken, I believe.

So let me add: we'll *need* moments of joy and laughter, rest and relaxation. And they will come. In fact, I believe that once we turn *faithfully* toward lament, we'll discover a new depth to our moments of joy, a new richness to the ring of our laughter. Because it will become the counterpoint to our honesty. But the longer we delay, the more quickly what we count as happiness today will become regret tomorrow. Those probably don't sound like upbeat words, but if you could see the coming storm, you would realize they are actually filled with hope.

What does "Christian Spirituality in a Time of Climate Change" look like? It's *apocalyptic, evangelical, and prophetic*.

Apocalyptic: because we live *already*—and *irrevocably*—on the far side of a warming planet. We need to own the anguish that is ours—and find ways from personal devotion to Sunday worship and beyond that allow us to plumb the depth of almost unfathomable lament.

Evangelical: because we are loved by a God who—according to the tales we hold sacred—will be with us no matter what, a God who has shown vulnerability as the path to wholeness, and a God who intended us for intimacy with all creation, and who yearns to accompany us as we take up that call.

And Prophetic: because when we, who have felt full the anguish of the ecosystems all around us while being held fast by hope, *THEN* we will be empowered in spirit for resistance and renewal. To alter our own lives, to speak truth to power, and to reshape our culture in a way that finally affirms that we *are AT HOME ON EARTH*. That's next week.

Thank you.

For Reflection:

How has this talk impacted you emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually? Where do *you* see opportunities for the church to manifest grief or to offer hope?