

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

### *On becoming an apocalyptic evangelical prophetic church*

Part 3: Prophetic: Resistance (STILL IN DRAFT FORM)

March 19, 2017 – David R. Weiss

I'm betting that most of you have been to either or both of the first two talks I've given, so I'll keep my opening remarks to a minimum today.

I've been exploring the question, What does Christian spirituality in a time of climate change look like? And I've responded: it's *apocalyptic, evangelical, and prophetic*.

Apocalyptic: because we live *already*—and *irrevocably*—on the far side of a warming planet. That was my first talk. “Mercilessly blunt,” I called it. Because we need to face *both* the scientific data and *also* our moral-spiritual responsibility for this crisis. We need to own the anguish that is ours—and find ways from personal devotion to Sunday worship and the public arena 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. That was my second talk. In it I suggested that such hope, grounded in a profound remembering of who God is—and who we are—will be essential to hold us steady as we lament and as we move toward resistance.

And Prophetic: because as we find ourselves more and more aware of the swirling anguish of ecosystems all around us—while being held fast by hope—from *that place* we will be empowered in spirit for resistance and renewal. We will begin to alter our lives, speak truth to power, and reshape our culture in ways that finally affirm that we *are* AT HOME ON EARTH. That's today.

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In popular culture “prophetic” often has to do with predicting the future, but in the Bible the prophetic task is primarily about *truth-telling*: It's about *naming the present* with dramatic clarity that creates opportunities for us to make choices that carry us toward a life-giving future—and sometimes it's about *enacting that clarity of vision in deeds*.

When the prophets call for repentance, *that's* what they're doing. When they go toe-to-toe with the powers in their day—whether kings, the wealthy, false prophets, or the Temple priests—*that's* what they're doing. During the Exile, when they declare a message of near-impossible hope—*that's* what they're doing. And when Jesus cleanses the Temple, symbolically dismantling the religious economy of his day, which claimed to sell access to God and played people against one another—*that's* what he's doing. In each instance they're engaged in truth-telling to call people away from choices leading toward death and instead to walk in the direction of life.

So, in one sense, this *entire* spirituality is prophetic; each dimension of it represents a powerful manifestation of *truth-telling*.

The apocalyptic declaration that our world, as we have known it, is ending ... *has* ended—*that's* prophetic truth-telling. The related call to grief and lament in response to creation's plight, that's *also* prophetic truth-telling. And the evangelical declarations of God's steadfast love and daring vulnerability, and of our deep identity as *humus* beings, commissioned to tend the Garden to which we are indelibly and intimately bound, these are *also* occasions of truth-telling in which the prophetic task is to *summon hope*. Here, truth-telling echoes the spirit of Ezekiel, who saw dry bones take on sinew and flesh and come to life, and Isaiah, who declared that out of no apparent future God would do a new thing (43:13).

But there is a particular dimension of this spirituality that is prophetic ... in a more active way. You might say this is point where words grow legs and walk. I'm tempted to say we'll need this prophetic dimension most of all, because it “gets things done,” but that's just my own impatience to *do* speaking up. And that's important to acknowledge. *Emphatically*. Because, like me, *you'll also be tempted* to move quickly past lament and focus here. But the truth is that, separated from lament or hope, even the prophetic responses I describe here would end up being little more than busy noise.

Broadly speaking, I call this response “resistance,” because it's largely oppositional in nature. It's where we challenge, both personally and politically, the forces that drive climate change. I place *repentance* here (rather than simply as an offshoot of lament) because, in a culture with interlocking forces that are hell-bent on destroying the ecosystem, acts of *repentance* are *indeed* acts of *resistance*. And as we attempt to repent of choices we no longer want to make, we'll discover just how hard our contemporary world can make repentance.

I think of Paul's declaration in Ephesians (6:12) that in our struggle to be faithful, we contend not merely with flesh and blood—not merely with the frailties and temptations of our own humanity, nor merely with the malice of others—but against “powers and principalities.”

His words were originally read as a reflection an unscientific worldview that saw human activity beset by demonic influences, but in the twentieth century a number of respected scholars (Jaques Ellul, William Stringfellow, John Howard Yoder, and Walter Wink, among others) suggested Paul was making a much more sophisticated, insightful observation. They saw him calling attention to the human capacity to set up empires,

societies, cultures, and the like, which establish *whole systems* with an inertia greater than any individual person—an inertia that *seemingly takes on a life of its own*. Not that it becomes conscious *per se*, but that it takes on an *institutionalized energy* that can *will* forward a set of assumptions that have powerful and dehumanizing consequences.

This dynamic appears in multiple arenas in our lives today. Consider white privilege and structural racism; gender discrimination; cycles of poverty driven by systemic forces; chemically-dependent agribusiness; global supply chains linked to sweatshops. Today we name it systemic injustice, structural sin, or even structural evil, because it's so embedded in the way our world works that it's impossible to point to any single person who's morally to blame. The system itself promotes sin and makes it nearly impossible to make choices outside the system's bounds.

In particular, for us, the “powers and principalities” are the constellation of market forces that drive the insatiable and idolatrous pursuit of stuff that has crept into the entirety of our lives. This is where we most directly and consistently give our blessing to consumption on a scale that consumes the health of the planet. We must find ways to repent—to resist these forces, actively and decisively.

While material desire certainly has a long history in the human psyche, only in the last century has industry harnessed it for profit. You see, it's only been in the last 100 years that advertisers have stopped trying to sell us things based on their material qualities. Modern advertising appeared in the early 1900's with an agenda to strategically pair products with desired social values in order to sell them. So we buy cars or beer or jeans or perfume in order to acquire the images of happiness, sexiness, friendship, success that advertisers pair with it. Of course, you can't actually buy any of those values. But advertising has so colonized our social world, that it now intentionally shapes how we process our desires. It creates in us a seamless sense of reason-and-feeling that tells us *stuff brings meaning*.

And it's done that for a century now. Not all that long, really, but long enough that *it's all we've known in our entire lives*. Which means that while advertisers have been telling us we need to consume more and more in order to find meaning, *that lesson was often mediated to us through the habits of our parents*. This is insidious. Because it means *we learned the habits that are so hurtful to the planet from people we loved and trusted, from people convinced they were making good consumer choices*. And this will make it all the harder to unlearn them. My parents never taught me to destroy the planet, and they were far from excessive or wasteful in their consumption. Nonetheless, they modeled an innocent disregard for the way that stuff exacts a toll on Earth, and

they did so because of the powers and principalities at work in the marketplace.

Now we absolutely must break our addiction to consumption, because it's killing Earth. But we won't be able to resist the powers and principalities that drive this addiction on our own. We'll need, church by church, to establish support groups—I don't know what else you'd call them—where we can examine the patterns in our lives that are manipulated by forces that could care less about a livable planet. There *are* resources that can help us do this, but we need to be very clear: this type of awkward, uncomfortable engagement with one another around the role of stuff in our lives is *simply non-negotiable*. Either we do it—or by our *lack* of doing we tell our children and our grandchildren that the stuff we love simply means more to us than their future. *We cannot have both*.

As we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation it's worth noting that one crucial act of prophetic resistance is to proclaim a “real-as-Reformation” word of *radical grace*—a word that just might be our last best hope for survival as a species. I say that because of *this* challenge, this systemic temptation to chase after meaning through material consumption. Over against this nonstop lure to shop, hearing from the church, from our pastors and the rest of our faith companions, the gracious word of God's claim on each of us as *beloved child—exactly as we are, without need of any “stuff” at all*—that word alone, *should it become dramatically and existentially real in our lives*, is perhaps the only power sufficient to break the spell of stuff over our lives. This is likely among the most important things you'll hear across all three talks: *the Lutheran-Christian declaration of radical grace may be the only power sufficient to unbind us from our addiction to stuff*.

Alongside this, we need to prophetically resist the other lifestyle choices that drive exorbitant fossil fuel use. These range from diet to transportation to residential and office building to city planning and more. They're less about the stuff we accumulate than about the conveniences and preferences that we've been taught have no cost greater than our own wallet. They *do*. They *have*—for generations. And these choices, too, are foreclosing the future for our grandchildren, not to mention for others species and habitats. So we need to come together—this is communal, confessional, repentant work—to ask hard questions about the ecological cost of the meat we eat, the fertilizer we spread, the cars we drive, the roads we build, and more. And to ask these questions, framed by lament, steadied by hope, and steeled by a resolve to be faithful in our resistance to the powers that abide in cultural and corporate systems, *powers that pull us into choices directly counter to God's love for this world*.

We need to change MUCH more than just our personal consumer choices, but we cannot change less than them. And as difficult as these changes will be, the *real* work—that is OUR work, our CHRISTIAN work because it means joining God in loving this world—this *real* work is to resist and then alter *the very systems* that hold so much power and wreak so much havoc on the health of creation. Compared to personal change, making systemic change can seem impossible.

But the clarity of vision that lets us see how entangled ... how complicit ... our ordinary lives have become in patterns that imperil the survivability of so many, *that vision falls short of truth if it does not also bequeath the power to act.*

And *that* power to act—to face down and challenge the systemic forces, the powers and principalities, that threaten us and all life today—comes from two sources.

First and foremost, it comes from the *Love of God*. We meet this foremost in the gospel message, but even Luther—amid his *sola Scriptura* commitment—admitted that God's *other* book of revelation was nature. And nature—in its sheer abundance, its breathtaking beauty, its fierce determination to grow and recover and heal—*nature, too, reveals the Love of God*. Which is to say that, while we in the church will use God-language to announce the Love that sparks the power rising up within us, *that same power*—because it is born of the Spirit, who blows wherever She chooses—is available in other religious traditions and even to those with no religious tradition at all. Far from rendering our faith redundant, this means that our Christian faith becomes one soaring harmony amid a chorus of voices that swell on Earth's behalf.

The second source of power necessary to our efforts to undo, bit by bit, the merciless mosaic of structures and systems that compel destructive choices, is *the power of collective action*. So many movies invite us to cheer on a hero or superhero, lulling us into the false belief that only such a phenomenally heroic person—someone who is, of course, far more heroic than we dare imagine ourselves—could actually face the villainous forces at work against us. That cultural myth, working in complement to our rampant individualism, *keeps us cut off from our own power*, which, in order to stand any chance against structural evil, cannot hinge on individual will, no matter how heroic.

Rather, our real power lies in arms joined, lives linked, hearts sewn together, imaginations devoted to another way of being. And, see, *we already know this power*, though we rarely have truly exercised it. Our theology, from Moses and the prophets to Jesus and Paul, is *profoundly communal*. God liberated *an entire people* from Egypt and then fashioned them into a community commissioned to do justice. Jesus' parables, healings, and table fellowship didn't save people simply for themselves—but *for each other, for community*. And Paul's theology of baptism and

Eucharist makes clear: these sacraments do not promise personal encounters with God, they are *eschatological events in which a whole church is born*.

We were made by God, redeemed by God, and claimed by God *for collective action on behalf of the world*. That is *the biblical story*, from the first humus beings in the Garden and the promise made to Abraham and Sarah back in the Book of Genesis, to the persons scrambling for faith in the face of chaos in the Book of Revelation. From first to last—the biblical story is a tale of *people called to be*, for the sake of God's world. Now, *that story is ours*.

Practically speaking, this means very concretely that the prophetic task of the church today is to *become a living laboratory of transformative love in the midst of climate change*. Gandhi saw himself engaging in “experiments with truth.” *We must do no less*.

This is the nitty-gritty. Where we roll up our sleeves and get dirty, covered with the humus we care for and come from. Again, this is not merely MY work to do, it's OUR work to do *together*. I offer a few first thoughts.

If prophetic resistance aims to be a force of transformative love, what will that look like? I note four things.

First, as persons called to love our neighbors, we must recognize that in the global economy *neighbor-love necessarily includes all persons anywhere whose land, water, air, or labor we are connected to*. If the global economy, through the reach of corporate powers that we may detest, is capable of harming others, *then we are duty-bound and faith-driven to love them instead*. And not simply as a passive tragic attitude, but through pragmatic opposition to the forces that threaten their wellbeing.

Second, as *humus* beings commissioned to tend *all* that shares this humus-covered planet with us, *neighbor-love includes active care for our non-human neighbors*. It means resisting the forces that reduce both creature and habitat to mere objects for our use.

Third, *transformative love is not content with charity*. It pursues *mutuality*, it seeks after relationships in which all can flourish—in which all can reflect the glory of God in their own way and to the highest degree. *Transformative love aims for justice*.

Fourth (and audaciously so) *transformative love aims for history*. It is *not* a utopian dream. It may not be perfectly realized in this life, but the witness of the prophets and the call of Jesus are *unmistakable*: love in the form of justice IS seen by God as an historical possibility. *So it is our aim*.

If these four features help show the nature, the scope, the aim of the transformative love we're called to seek, how do we *guide and measure* our efforts? I can offer a couple objective measures to help frame our communal and public actions toward justice for a livable planet.

First, we need simply and directly to make ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE the measure of our lives. We are *far* from it today, but this is minimally a *directional measure*: can we say of each new choice that we are at least moving *toward* it? It means, in our households and congregations—and ultimately in our culture, our corporations, and our public policy—that we renounce a bottom line demarcated only by dollar signs. That we say out loud—and I’m only using WalMart as one glaring example, but it’s time for us to say *clearly* that slogans like, “Always low prices. Always.” *cannot be described as anything other than Christian heresy*. It is a shopping sentiment that damns our neighbors to poverty and death—and the planet along with them. *And in our baptismal vows we renounced all such empty promises as this*. It’s time to say that.

We’ll want to become conversant, at least casually in our households and quite meticulously in public policy, with notions like the “triple bottom line” that requires an accounting of social and environmental costs alongside the cost of materials and labor. Commitments to shop “Fair Trade” and to support for local and small-to-medium businesses will become hallmarks of a Christian lifestyle, *because such economic practices reflect neighbor-love on a fragile planet*.

We’ll need to admit that the way of life we “take for granted,” in truth was mostly *taken by force and taken by thievery* from others. Our ecological debt—the extent to which we’ve used resources *needed for life by others*—people and creatures ... past, present, and future ... is by now a yawning chasm of injustice. It’s also a rising threat since the consequences of climate change will hit first and hardest on those places and peoples who have contributed to it the least and whose capacity to respond is much less than ours. This admission begins as personal and communal confession, but it takes life in transformative love when it pursues policies that work to lessen global inequity and treaties that share freely the green technology we’re developing with the very nations whose wealth we have too often plundered and whose people are now most exposed to peril.

One last hint. Because our final goal is to reclaim human community as an arena where life-sustaining choices are possible, we’ll need—in the practice of transformative love—to create *conditions for true corporate and government accountability*. We cannot hope to address climate change over the long-term if we do not undo the claims of corporate personhood and the unlimited role of money in politics. We don’t like to view things like these as “religious” issues, *but they are, in fact, structures that shackle our faith, systems that require us to betray our neighbors and to despoil creation with nearly every commercial transaction we make*.

As we imagine ways that we might personally, communally, publically, politically embody a prophetic

response to climate change, these three concrete measures can help us assess ideas. Will this proposal increase the ecological justice of our choices—and policies? Will that one increase the economic justice of our choices—and policies? And how do we increase the level of corporate and political accountability to a livable future for all of us?

These aims can be rooted directly, deeply, and creatively in our Christian tradition, but here is the genius in them—*they are also aims that are echoed directly, deeply, and creatively in other human traditions, religious and otherwise*. They allow us to draw inspiration from the sacred sources that are life-giving to us AND to form common cause with our neighbors in the wider world.

The prophetic task of resistance, the daring attempt to bring transformative love to bear on the systems around us, is, without question, daunting. *But it is absolutely doable*.

So, a few closing words.

It seems like we have so much to do. And as though it is so late in the day, and we’ve missed years and decades and generations of opportunities to start sooner. That’s all true. But the moment that we *have* is *right now*.

Climate change *is* upon us, and if we intend to be faithful to God, to one another, and to Earth and all her creatures, *we’ll seize this moment without delay*. We’ll fashion a spirituality that is *apocalyptic* and enables us to truly lament. We’ll fashion a spirituality that is *evangelical* and anchors us in hope. We’ll fashion a spirituality that is *prophetic* and empowers us to repent and to resist. We’ll commit to these things as individuals and as communities, and we’ll carry them over into the public sphere as well. And as we embrace each dimension of this spirituality we’ll find ourselves drawn more deeply into the other dimensions as well.

Start as soon as you can. Go together. Pace yourself for the long haul. Listen for places where the liturgical seasons connect to concern for our climate. You’ll find plenty. Move through the three dimensions again and again so that each can deepen the others. Trust that every step forward—even the small ones—has value.

And don’t hold back on happiness. In this undeniably hard work, relishing community and wonder, savoring laughter and joy, will also become prophetic acts of resistance and renewal.

We have *always been AT HOME ON EARTH*. In the face of climate change, it’s time to embrace both the scientific and the spiritual *truth* of this affirmation with more fervor than ever before. *The whole world is waiting*. Not for us to lead the way. Simply for us to take our place in the chorus.

I can already hear the music. I hope you can, too.

Thank you.

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