

Climate Grief, Climate Hope

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NPMC - July 24, 2022

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV); Isaiah 11:6-9

Hymns: VT 209 - We Dream of a Turning, VT 838 - The Peace of the Earth Be with You

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV):

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born and a time to die;

a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill and a time to heal;

a time to break down and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek and a time to lose;

a time to keep and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew;

a time to keep silent and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate;

a time for war and a time for peace.

Isaiah 11:6-9

⁶ **The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.**

⁷ **The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.**

⁸ **The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.**

⁹ **They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.**

A couple of weeks ago, scientists released the first pictures from the powerful new James Webb space telescope, which showed images from the furthest out in space that we've ever glimpsed as humans. Perhaps more incredibly, these pictures are also glimpses of some of the oldest galaxies we've ever seen, back in the first few million

years of the existence of the universe. Because of the speed of light and how long light takes to reach the earth, these images are snapshots of the new-born, newly created universe as it looked billions of years ago.¹ Though I don't completely understand the science (that's not the "heaven" that I've studied!), I do find it utterly fascinating to think about this glimpse into creation that we have gotten with this new telescope. My reaction to these beautiful photos and mind-blowing explanations is awe and wonder at this great, mysterious universe lovingly created by God.

We are living at a somewhat strange time in the history of humanity. On the one hand, we have this amazing knowledge and technologies that allow us to look into and explore far reaches of space. At the same time, on our little vulnerable planet – the only one we have access to that can sustain life – we are living with increasingly unpredictable and devastating natural disasters and effects of human-caused climate change. Things have gotten so dire that some are simply now calling it the climate crisis or climate emergency. We're seeing back-to-back heatwaves, forest fires, storms, earthquakes, floods, polar vortexes, and simply more extreme weather more often. Weather records are being broken at frightening levels – and it is frightening. These unpredictable weather disasters are wreaking havoc on our mental health, especially among young people, leading to the coining of the term, "climate grief" – grief at the destruction of the delicate balance of life on our planet and the suffering it's causing and will cause to humans and other life on earth.²

Earlier this summer, a Mennonite Church Saskatchewan youth retreat was held at Shekinah Retreat Centre. Can you guess what their theme was? It was "climate

¹ <https://www.space.com/james-webb-space-telescope-earliest-galaxies>

² See <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200402-climate-grief-mourning-loss-due-to-climate-change>

anxiety.” Youth leaders had been hearing from their youth that this was a concern for many, and that it often takes the form of “just a general sense of dread” about the future of our planet. So they gathered to share these concerns and bring them to God in prayer.³ As a parent, this is a worry that I share, especially when I wonder about what my children will have to face in their lifetimes. It really isn’t fair that we’ve left our youth and children with this burden. So, I wonder with *Sojourners* magazine writers Karyn Bigelow and Avery Davis Lamb: “What are we to do in the face of utter catastrophe? How can we possibly have hope amid the undoing of the world?”⁴

While these kinds of anxieties can seem unprecedented, or like a very modern problem, the Bible actually speaks to the end of the world at various times and in various ways. Psalm 46 discusses trusting in God, “though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult” (46:2-3). Similarly, when the Holy Spirit descends on the early Christians in the book of Acts, a quote from the prophet Joel is included. With the coming of the Spirit, Joel declares that God

...will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day (Acts 2:19-20).

This kind of eschatological or “end-times” imagery has inspired all types of speculation about when precisely the end of the world will come, and what kind of violent judgment from God it will entail. As Patrick and I will be discussing next month when we tackle the

³ Emily Summach, “Anxiety and Hope Co-Exist,” *Canadian Mennonite* (June 27, 2022): 14, <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/anxiety-and-hope-co-exist>

⁴ Karyn Bigelow and Avery Davis Lamb, “Hope is a Climate Survival Strategy,” *Sojourners* (August 12, 2021), <https://sojo.net/articles/hope-climate-survival-strategy>

book of Revelation, that line of interpretation is, at best, unhelpful. But these images sound a lot like what is happening with climate change, and they are meaningful in that they are a (very human) attempt to understand what God is up to when it feels like things are falling apart, when it feels like the world is ending. This is not a new feeling, but is there already in the Bible.

Worship Deacon Don Klaassen was kind enough to pass on to me a helpful article by Karyn Bigelow and Avery Davis Lamb, which I quoted before. As co-executive directors of an organization called Creation Justice, Bigelow and Lamb work on questions of what Christians can do to care for creation and for justice issues such as food security in the midst of the climate crisis. In their article in *Sojourners* magazine, they both acknowledge the seriousness of the climate crisis and encourage us as Christians to have hope. Not only that, but they specify a certain kind of hope, writing, “Hope is not optimism. It is not the expectation that everything will turn out alright in the end. Nor is it the belief that we are doomed, despite our best efforts. Rather, hope is the possibility that through truth-telling and holy action, we might turn back to God.”⁵ Within the rhythm of Ecclesiastes 3, we can say that there is a time to grieve and a time to hope; a time for truth and for holy action.

So first: truth-telling, which is maybe a hard one. We must recognize and name that climate change has been caused by human actions, and, furthermore, that “just 100 companies are responsible for 71 percent of climate pollution,” according to Bigelow and Lamb. As much as the blame has been placed on individuals to make lifestyle changes, these multi-national companies must be held to account for their major part in the destruction of our planet, and their silencing of research into climate change since

⁵ Bigelow and Lamb, paragraph 3.

the 1970s. Bigelow and Lamb write, “They are like [those] who the prophet Amos scolds, “sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals ... trample the poor into the dust of the earth and they push the afflicted out of the way.” “For Amos, and for us,” say Bigelow and Lamb, “the response to exploitation is justice flowing down like waters.”⁶

We also need action – both political and community action – to reduce the fallout of the climate emergency. There is a sculpture in Berlin, Germany, created by Isaac Cordal, that depicts politicians continuing to debate while waters rise up to almost cover their heads. It has struck a chord among those concerned about the lack of global action regarding the climate crisis.⁷ The time for debate has ended – it’s now time to make changes that will see our economies and industries shift to clean, green energy, that will stop making our human and planetary well-being a partisan issue and show “moral leadership” in creating a just transition to clean energy for the sake of all of our futures.

But community groups also play a role. I think of a place like Wanuskewin Heritage Park, just outside of our city, that has seen a return of the bison to these lands after their near-extinction in the 1870s. This small herd is helping to heal the exploitation of the land and the destruction of Indigenous cultures and traditions that went hand in hand here. Each new baby bison is a sign of hope and restoration, returning balance to the land and revitalizing Indigenous traditions around this powerful animal. As David

⁶ Bigelow and Lamb, paragraphs 6-7.

⁷ <https://theworld.org/stories/2014-03-26/what-politicians-debating-global-warming-will-look-soon>

Shield reported last month, there were 6 new babies born to the herd this year, bringing it to 24 animals.⁸

I am also reminded of our church organizations like Mennonite Disaster Service, which helps rebuild people's homes and lives following natural disasters like forest fires and floods, which are occurring with more frequency these days. At least three people of our congregation have served with MDS this year, helping bring peace and hope to those who have lost their homes and suffered due to the climate emergency. These too are hopeful, faithful ways of responding to the climate crisis.

Finally, Bigelow and Lamb remind us that in all of this, we need God's grace and redeeming power. They write, "Even as we truth-tell and take action for a more beautiful world, catastrophe continues to unfold around us and destroy the places and people we love. In Colossians 1, we read of a Christ in whom all things came into being and through whom all things are held together. ... It seems that today creation itself – creatures included – are being crucified with Christ."⁹ We know from our Scriptures that God loves creation and created it "very good." Passages like our text from Isaiah 11 remind us that the lion and the lamb, the calf, the bear, the snake and the human child are all part of God's good creation, and are all included in God's redemption of the universe, God's ultimate vision of *shalom* or peace and right-relationship for all. How poignant that it is a child who will lead creation into this new vision, this renewed future.

The youth who gathered at the MC Sask. conference also ended up in a place of hope. Zoe Schellenberg, a youth from Osler Mennonite Church said, "I'm scared about the responsibility, but I'm also hopeful because a lot of people care about climate

⁸ David Shield, "Wanuskewin Heritage Park Welcomes 6 New Bison Calves," *CBC News Saskatoon* (June 24, 2022), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/new-bison-calves-wanuskewin-1.6500744>

⁹ Bigelow and Lamb, paragraph 11.

change. I think it's good to care more when you're younger... We have more time to accept what's happening to the environment and to try to change things...."¹⁰ Bigelow and Lamb would agree wholeheartedly; in their words, "Perhaps by the grace of God and the work of our hands, we might have hope." AMEN

Benediction (*Sing the Journey* 141, by Jan Richardson):

*Creating God,
For those who are wise
To the ways of your earth:
Thank-you.*

*For those who listen
To the language
Of tree, rock,
River, earth,
Ocean, stars,
Creatures, sky:
Praise.*

*Teach us the vocabulary
To convey our care
The words to tell the earth
We hear her crying for peace,
The syllables of solace
For all we have lost,
The gestures of healing
For all we have harmed. AMEN*

¹⁰ Quoted by Emily Summach, "Anxiety and Hope Co-Exist," *Canadian Mennonite*.