

CLIMATE CHANGE, ECO-ANXIETY & HOPE

Genesis 2: 1-9; Joel 1:1-7,17-20, 2:12-13,15-18,21-24,26

On September 1, 2019, hurricane Dorian slammed into the Bahamas with 360-kilometer/hour winds and 7-meter-high waves. The storm lasted for well over 40 hours. By the end, 70,000 people had been displaced and 13,000 homes had been destroyed. Morgues were filling up with bodies and search-and-rescue dogs were sniffing out corpses buried under debris far too deep for anyone to reach. Over the next several months, Mental health professionals also got to work providing psychological support to thousands of survivors. The most common mental health effects of the disaster reported were: insomnia, depression and feelings of being retraumatized every time the wind was strong. Equally intense but less reported were excessive drinking, drug consumption, domestic and sexual abuse, as well as increases in attempted and actual suicide-deaths.

While we have always had to deal with climate-based disasters throughout history, there is now wide-spread scientific consensus that climate change is increasing the frequency, duration and intensity of such disasters. Whether it's fires burning or flood-waters rising, whether it's storms of various kinds like tsunamis, hurricanes and tornadoes, whether it's major snowstorms in regions ill-equipped to deal with them or heatwaves combined with smog and bad air quality, suffering and death and the massive challenge of rebuilding are growing realities.

Given all this, mental health researchers have identified a new global mental-health pandemic. They call it: eco-anxiety. Eco-anxiety is pandemic because it affects millions of people world-wide and it's spreading like a disease the more climate-based disasters are increasing. Studies are multiplying and statistics are being collected all over the world. Here in Canada, studies show that a rapidly increasing number of people think about climate change often and are getting very anxious about it. This number only increases with younger-age populations. One study done in 2020 reveals that 78% of Generation Z (those in their late teens and early 20s) do not plan on having children because of climate change, while 71% of millennials say that climate change is a major factor in their mental health. Moreover, as stress levels in younger people rise, there are increased feelings of betrayal and anger toward older generations who aren't committed to cleaning up the mess they

have caused and are causing. As one young climate striker's sign recently put it: "We won't die of old age. We'll die from climate change."

Eco-anxiety has also fueled a massive growth in what's called eco-therapy or therapy that is 'climate-aware.' This means that people who seek therapy for any number of anxiety related issues are also helped to track how the larger cloud of climate change hanging over us all is exacerbating if not directly causing the mental health stress they are suffering. If it's not in the forefront it's there in the background making everything else much worse.

So then, if we refuse to deny climate change is happening and if we refuse to believe there is little we can do to slow down if not halt the warming of our planet, how, then, do we respond positively to this global pandemic crisis called climate change and the eco-anxiety it is precipitating?

Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom and guidance.

Our first reading is from the book of Genesis. Even though this book, like the bible as a whole has been read and studied for thousands of years, reading it over again we pick up things we may have missed before. And usually, the things we notice that seem new are connected to new experiences in our lives and things that we are newly aware of in our world. Climate change and the global threat to our planet is something newer for many of us. And so, what do we notice in this reading that we may have missed before?

One thing I've noticed is that creation is not just about human beings as if we're the centre of the universe. No. We humans have a place, a role and a responsibility, for sure. But we're part of a larger whole, not the centre. Our well-being and the well-being of the earth and all its creatures is totally intertwined. Were told that once "the heavens and the earth are finished, and all their multitude," the creator takes time to step back and rest. This rest is called Sabbath. The purpose of Sabbath rest is to take in the beauty and wonder of creation and delight in it. You cannot destroy that which you find beautiful and that in which you delight in with wonder and awe. And the delight is in all creation not just us.

So here we have problem number 1. Once humans forget to find Sabbath time for the purpose of delighting with wonder and awe at the beauty of all creation, they begin to treat creation as a resource to be used and abused

rather than delighted in. And problem number 2 follows closely after. We read: God formed humans from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, and humans became living beings. We are made from the dust of the ground. The word Adam comes from the word for dirt, ground, soil. We are soil-formed, ground-formed, earth-formed creatures. All that lives and breathes around us is part of us and we're part of it. What happened that we somehow separated ourselves in our minds and hearts from all that is around us?

And then there's problem number 3. Once we neglect Sabbath time for the purpose of delighting in creation and once we forget that we are part of the earth around us, we separate ourselves not only from the earth but from all other life, including the creator through whom we have received the breath of life itself. The classical word for this state of being is: alienation. Alienation means we are not only disconnected from all life around us. We are also disconnected from our very selves. Have you ever felt disconnected from yourself. This is why we go to therapy or we come to church. We are seeking to reconnect again to ourselves, to life, to God. Today, we must also discover how such connection has to involve life all around us, the earth we stand on, the air we breathe and the water we drink.

And this brings us to our second reading from the prophet Joel. The prophecy is written thousands of years ago. It uses spiritual language to describe what we today would express in more scientific language. It describes climate-based disaster for the people in the form of a prolonged drought and an infestation of locusts. The vines have been laid waste, the fig trees are splintered, the tree bark has been stripped and the branches have turned white. "The seed shrivels... the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are ruined because the grain has failed," we're told.

And here's the thing about this prophecy which follows our reading from Genesis so closely. It's not just human beings who are suffering. "How the animals groan! The herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dazed." Later on the prophecy also names the wild animals and the very soil of the ground that are "crying up" to their creator God. Wow! Just because the animals and the trees don't communicate in language we understand, doesn't mean they are not communicating. We're told their creator God is listening to their cries. What about us? What must happen in us so that we hear their cries too?

But here's the thing. Even though all creation is suffering it is human beings who are primarily responsible. Thousands of years ago, they would not make a scientific link between human behaviour damaging the earth and atmosphere directly. Moreover, ancient peoples didn't have the kind of industrial technological development that could make such a destructive impact directly on our planet. But the connection here is still about moral failure. The people have become alienated from God which has led to creating a society where social injustice, inequality and mistreatment of the vulnerable by those more powerful has become rampant. Alienation from God and from each other has led to alienation from creation as a whole and a disconnection from life itself. The suffering of the land is a mirror into the corruption and alienation of the human heart itself.

Today, we would describe such alienation in much more scientific terms. We know full well how our collective behaviour as human beings is directly linked to climate change and the disastrous effects it is having on us all beginning with those most vulnerable.

So, what's the way forward for the people in Joel's day and for us today? Firstly, it's all about repentance. "Yet, even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning... return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..." Repentance is about turning around, shifting directions 180 degrees. It's about returning to God which is returning to our created selves as part of this earth.

How are you and I going to do that - change directions 180 degrees and return to God and to created life? The thing with repentance is that it's not about shaming. There is a difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is constructive. It identifies what is wrong and challenges you to change direction. It's not about making you feel worthless. Shame keeps you stuck in a pit of worthlessness. Guilt activates you to change.

Step one for you and me is actually weeping and mourning what we're doing to the earth and all life in it. We need to start hearing the cries of the earth as God their creator hears them. And then we need to change direction. Eco-therapists know that unless they help their clients find positive, constructive ways to make changes in their lives that align with the health of our planet, their clients will not begin to heal. Repentance is about a new beginning to changing our lifestyle and doing positive things to help reduce climate

change. What positive change in your lifestyle is linked to helping reduce your carbon footprint?

Second, though, there is a difference between change that is motivated by guilt and blame versus change that arises from a search for reconnection and renewal of relationship. We're told that God is gracious and merciful... abounding in steadfast love, a love that will stick it out all the way despite all the brokenness, hurt and damage done. Sadly, the strategy of a lot of climate activism in trying to arouse change in us uses the language of guilt and blame. Do it for your children and grandchildren, we're told. What about doing it because it's the right thing? What about doing it because that's what we're made for? What about doing it because the very life you are destroying is part of you? How much are you willing to change, change in a way that will require meaningful change in the way you do things, from the things you buy, the way you travel, the priorities in your voting, the values that define you? If it doesn't cost you something in terms of your convenience and lifestyle it's not real change.

Ok, preacher, fine. I'll make some change. I'll think about everything I use and buy and changes to my everyday habits and leisure pursuits. I won't just give them up for lent, but give them up and make change permanently. But what real difference will it make in the big picture? How can my individual actions make any dent in the larger problem?

21-year-old climate activist, Clover Hogan, has been receiving therapy for major depression. She, like many young climate activists don't see any positive outcome for the future. Older generations are just not prepared to change enough of their lifestyles, their habits of energy consumption, travel and the overall carbon footprint they produce. And they won't elect governments that require strict conditions similar to what we've had to enforce under Covid for the sake of our planetary future.

What therapy has helped Clover do, however, is separate what she feels compelled to do because it's the right thing to do, from whether this will make any real impact on stopping and reversing climate change. Hogan says she will continue to work and coach others to work regardless of the outcomes. "Now that I've gone to the dark place of grief I was afraid of and came out the other side, I see I'm okay," she says, "and it makes me feel more authentic in my hope for the future."

500 years ago, the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, said something like this: "If the world were going to end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today." In Luther's day, the threat was not climate change, but this collective anxiety that the world would end in some cosmic apocalyptic catastrophe. As Christians, we carry a vision of eternity in our souls. This means that everything done today and tomorrow, everything done by me personally, is done within a larger framework of eternity beyond history and beyond time. I cannot control what will happen to this planet today, tomorrow or a million years from now. But I am responsible for living on this earth in child-like wonder as a child of God in a relationship of delight with a world that I am very much a part of in every particle and molecule of my being.

I will not be judged by whether I made a measurable difference in my world and its fate. But I will be judged on whether I was living and acting in alignment with the love out of which I have come to be. And such love is just a word unless it is expressed in tangible form in my concrete relationships with other life in this world.

Thank goodness for the grace and mercy of God, for it is only by divine grace and mercy that our feeble efforts to live out of love and for love, will be taken up and blessed by God eternally... May we learn repentance anew and may we renew our relationship with planet earth and all its creatures. May we learn how to hear the cries of the earth, the trees and the animals... And may our repentance turn into changed behaviour beginning with our everyday habits. Amen.