

Climate Change and Spiritual Transformation

A sermon on Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 & Luke 15:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 September 2019

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Message

The threat of extreme climate change can only be averted with a major spiritual transformation, and Jesus shows the way.

Sermon

The first reading we heard tonight, the one from the prophet Jeremiah, was written about 2600 years ago, so it is startling to hear how contemporary it sounds. We are daily witnessing serious effects of climate change, and the projections for what we are facing in coming decades are truly terrifying. And now the voice of a prophet from 2600 years ago comes to us saying:

A hot wind comes out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse – a wind too strong for that.

“For my people are foolish,

they have no understanding.

They do not know how to do good.”

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;

and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,

and all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,

and all the birds of the air had fled.

I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,

and all its cities were laid in ruins.

Two months ago, I was in the Bahamas for the Baptist World Alliance meetings. Since then, the Bahamas has been smashed by one of the most intense hurricanes ever recorded.

Unfortunately, hearing that this or that catastrophic weather event is the most intense ever is no longer a rarity. The intensities continue to rise.

Here in Australia, it has been more about bushfires lately, even though down here in the south, the fire season hasn't even begun yet. In Queensland, there are more than eighty fires burning between Cape York and the New South Wales border, and that's not as bad as it was last week. What's most disturbing and almost unprecedented about some of those fires is that they have burned out of control into tropical rainforest areas. Tropical rainforests don't usually burn. They are too wet. It's so rare that we don't even know whether our tropical rainforests can recover from serious fires. They are not a system that has evolved to deal with cycles of fire. The Queensland government is now preparing for the likelihood of this year's bushfire and cyclone seasons running into one another.

As horrific as the Australian fires are, they are a mere blip on the radar compared to the fires in the Amazon and the Arctic.

The Arctic circle is suffering its worst wildfire season on record, with huge blazes in Greenland, Siberia and Alaska. Since June there have been more than 100 fires, and the

plumes of smoke can be seen from space. Because there is so little human infrastructure up there, Arctic fires are usually left to burn, and they sometimes burn hundreds of thousands of hectares. When the vegetation and peat laden soil burns, huge quantities of carbon dioxide that was previously trapped in the Earth gets released into the air. That leads the planet to warm even more, which in turn increases the likelihood of more serious Arctic fires.

The situation in the Amazon is similarly catastrophic. More than 87,000 forest fires have been recorded in Brazil so far this year, and although that is not a record, the records have all occurred in the last couple of decades. The Amazon basin is crucial to keeping global warming in check. Its rainforests absorb millions of tonnes of carbon every year, but when they are cut or burned, their capacity to absorb greenhouse gases is reduced and the carbon they are storing is released into the atmosphere. If the clearing and burning continues at its present pace, there will be little or no chance of the planet escaping a climate catastrophe.

The political leaders of Brazil show little interest in changing course, and to be fair to them, there is some justification for them feeling miffed about the rest of the world calling on them to fix the problem while not being willing to make much change themselves. Our government here in Australia keeps hiding behind the claim that we are one of the few countries that will actually do better than the Kyoto 2020 targets, but that's only because our Kyoto targets were woefully inadequate in the first place. On a per capita basis, Australia remains one of the worst greenhouse gas emitters in the world, and the little progress we are making is way less than that which all countries need to make if a global warming disaster is to be averted.

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and a hot wind comes out of the bare heights.

The dire warnings from the prophet Jeremiah become even more striking and more relevant when you study the words he uses and recognise the connections that he is making. That phrase that is translated as “waste and void” – “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void” – that phrase only appears in one other place in the whole Bible. It is used in the first sentence of Genesis to describe the state of the planet before God began the work of creating everything. So Jeremiah is telling us that the world he foresees will be a world de-created, a world whose evolutionary progress is wound back to zero.

The prophet really works this image. The fiery hot wind coming out of the bare heights contrasts with the wind of God's breath sweeping over the face of the deep at creation.

Each day of the creation story ends by telling us that God looked, and lo, it was good. Whereas each stage of Jeremiah's vision begins with the prophet saying “I looked, and lo,” another stage of creation was undone. The heavens have no light. The mountains and hills are dissolving. There are no living creatures on the earth. There are no birds in the air. Fruitful vegetation is gone. The planet is nothing but waste and void once again. The whole creation that God was so pleased to have made has been wound back to nothing, utterly trashed.

Now it is true that Jeremiah describes this devastation as being a punishment meted out by God, but as the scriptural revelation continues to unfold, we see more and more that God's angry judgement is understood as simply leaving us to reap the consequences of our own actions. We bring disastrous judgement upon ourselves by our own actions without God needing to do anything. This is the same thing that the scientists are telling us.

The problem is not just a scientific one either, but a spiritual one. Not only is it a global sin to destroy God's creation, but our capacity to do so has frequently been propped up and defended by false spiritual claims and deceptive use of the Bible. The creation story itself has been wilfully misread as mandating not respectful stewardship of the earth, but domination and a need to conquer and subdue.

Images of a new heaven and a new earth have been used to say that the fate of this earth is irrelevant and so we might as well strip mine it. Empires of greed and power are very adept at distorting scripture to justify their agendas, but when we see how these different parts of the Bible shed light on each other, we can more easily see through the lies and call them out.

Funnily enough, sometimes it is the scientists who see more clearly than us the spiritual dimensions of the mess we are in and of the only possible ways out. Listen to this, for example, from [Gus Speth, the dean of forestry at Yale University, speaking to a group of religious leaders:](#)

"I used to think the top environmental problems facing the world were global warming, environmental degradation and eco-system collapse, and that we scientists could fix those problems with enough science. But I was wrong. The real problem is not those three items, but greed, selfishness and apathy. And for that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that. We need your help."

Greed, selfishness, and apathy. Science knows how to halt global warming and protect eco-systems. But there are powerful vested interests driven by greed and selfishness that are not willing to tolerate any changes that might cost them anything in diminished profits or comforts. And the apathy and despair of the rest of us allows them to go on unchecked.

The gospel reading we heard tonight tells us of a God who will stop at nothing to prevent even one sheep from a hundred being lost, let alone one species or one in every hundred species. But these stories too can be wilfully distorted by empires of greed and prosperity theologies that would retell them as justification for never giving up on every last possible percentage point of profit.

The irony and generosity of Jesus's point is lost. When Jesus said, surely you would all leave the 99 behind in the wilderness and go search and search until you found the one lost sheep, the expected response is one of awkward embarrassment, because no we wouldn't. Sensible business ethics does not leave the 99 unguarded in the wilderness to go off searching for the one. Common sense cuts its losses and makes do the remaining 99. That's the decision the human race has made, species after species, eco-system after eco-system. No point worrying about the one we've lost, and letting that interfere with getting on with business with the ones we've still got.

But, says Jesus, that is not what God is like. That is not how the culture of heaven works. And now every day our newspapers are full of ample evidence that such an approach has not served us well and our 99 are looking sicker and sicker and we may soon be left with nothing. Now the fires are so big that not even the tears of a heart broken God are enough to douse them.

That forestry scientist from Yale was quite right – this is a profoundly spiritual predicament. The presenting symptoms may be physical and scientific, but the only possible solutions are profoundly spiritual.

Turning around the rampant tide of greed, selfishness and apathy requires a large-scale transformation of the human heart, the human mind, the human spirit. Jesus has walked the way of spiritual transformation ahead of us, and called us to follow, but for the most part we have lawyered his words back into a self-righteous competition for spiritual privilege that keeps us trying to outdo one another and reducing the creation to a mere resource base for our petty moralistic one-up-man-ship.

The Church, as the followers of Jesus, could and should be taking the lead in this spiritual transformation. There are some encouraging signs. Our own Baptist Union here in Victoria will be discussing a proposal next month to begin using the language of “a climate emergency” and calling on governments and industry to do the same and act accordingly. They’ve put out a good discussion paper, which I encourage you all to read, outlining significant ways that we can contribute, as churches and as individuals. ([Pages 8-21 in this linked document.](#))

It’s about all of us learning to resist the toxic distortions of the greedy empire, and to follow instead the one who danced with joy as creation was unfolding and who willingly lays down his life that not even one creature might be lost. That following starts right here at this table, as we encounter our broken but risen Lord, embodied in the fruits of the earth, in bread and wine, but that following doesn’t end here, self-satisfied with our own spiritual obesity. Following Jesus starts here but continues right on out the door as we set our hearts and minds to a life of humility, simplicity and fierce compassion that will not stand apathetically by as the 99 continue to be decimated, species by species, until the planet is wound right back to nothing but waste and void, and the hellfire and brimstone people are tragically shown to have been closer to the truth than we ever imagined.

Jesus is showing the pathway to life in all its fullness for all creation. It is up to us to follow.