A Practice of Hope

Psalm 8; 19:1-4
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
By: Ryan Dueck
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We are on our second last week in this year's Faith Questions sermon series. This week's question is another big one: "How should a Christian respond to the global climate crisis?"

Over the past few weeks, I've been casually surveying friends and acquaintances about how they would answer this question.

Usually—and tellingly—the first thing people do is sigh.

For me, this speaks to both the enormity of the question and the exasperation that many feel about how politicized and polarized it has become. It has been wearying few years and for many people, the fate of the planet is more than they can take on right about now.

At any rate, I'll share two of the responses I received. Both came from people who believe that it is a duty of faith to steward creation well. Both came from people who were reasonably well-read and engaged in the topic. Both came from people with either a master's degree or a PhD.

The first person said, "Well, I'm not sure if Martin Luther actually said this or not, but some say that he was once asked what he would do if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow. Luther's response: "I would still plant my apple tree."

Turns out Martin Luther most likely didn't say this, but maybe he should have. The quote speaks about a devotion to the world God has made and a hope that God can be trusted beyond whatever we can see or imagine from our vantage point, however bleak it might be.

The second person I asked said this: "How should a Christian respond to the global climate crisis? I dunno. Go for a hike and read a psalm?"

Well, we're not going for a hike this morning, but we have read a few psalms.

I offer these two responses more or less as a humorous way into a difficult topic, even though I believe that both contain seeds of important truths about how a Christian out to respond.

Here's what I'm not going to do this morning.

I'm not going to present any evidence for the reality of human-induced climate change. I'm not going to present you with data and temperature graphs and a list of official-sounding declarations from official scientific organizations.

You did not come to church for a science lecture, and you will not get one from me ☺

There is plenty of intelligent analysis widely available out there. The climate scientist Katherine Hayhoe (a Canadian and an evangelical Christian, by the way!) would be a great place to start. She has a new book out now called *Saving Us* that's worth reading.

Mennonite Church Canada has also recently released an official statement that advocates six initiatives on climate action ranging from resourcing congregations to urging simple living to creating working groups, to better resourcing and advocacy. There is plenty of reading material available there, too.[1]

But as I said, I'm not going to spend much time on this. In general, I require almost no convincing that human greed, self-interested apathy, predatory capitalism, and wide-spread corruption are having devastating ecological effects.

These things are corrosive to our souls, to our relationships, and communities; I would expect them to have the same effect upon the created world. And it seems to me that they clearly do.

I believe that climate change is real, and that human behaviour is hastening it along.

I'm going to spend more time on the "How should a Christian respond" part of the question than the "global climate crisis" part. If nothing else, I feel more qualified to address the former than the latter.

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How *should* a Christian respond? Well, the first thing I think a Christian should do is to ground ourselves in our own story.

I have long felt that Christians ought to make the best environmentalists. I say this for theological, not scientific or political reasons.

[1] https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/climate-action

Our story begins in a garden, after all. It begins with God speaking into being a world of beauty and diversity and grandeur, a fertile and fruitful creation full of possibility and promise.

God plants his image bearers in the garden and commands us to be fruitful, to multiply, to promote flourishing, to take what was made and cultivate it, in every sense of the word.

Basic to the Christian understanding of the nature and task of humanity is that we bear God's image, we are little creators. We have a role to play in God's will being done *on* earth and *for* the earth.

Of course, we haven't done so well. We've misused the "dominion" we were given in Genesis 1:26 and which is praised in Psalm 8.

But this doesn't change the nature of our role in the world. Katherine Hayhoe puts it well:

> Dominion is not the same thing as domination; the very word implied stewardship and sustainability... In fact, if Christians truly believe that we've been given responsibility—"dominion"—over every living thing on this planet, as it says at the very beginning of Genesis, then we won't only objectively care about climate change. We will be at the front of the line demanding action because it's our God-given responsibility to do so. Failing to care about climate change is a failure to love. What is more Christian than to be good stewards of the planet and love our global neighbor as ourselves?[2]

Amen.

I must pause here to note two ironies in our discourse about climate change in the broader culture (outside the church) and the role human beings ought to play.

First, it is ironic that a good deal of climate change discourse exhibits a very conflicted view of human nature. On the one hand, we are often told that human beings are just one more part of nature and that that we have no greater ultimate significance than a tree or a toad.

But on the other hand, at the heart of all pleas to "save the world" or "stop climate change" is the assumption, whether acknowledged or not, that human beings somehow have a special role to play. The trees and the toads presumably have no burden to save anything.

[2] Katherine Hayhoe, *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World* (New York: One Signal, 2021), 19.

Despite widespread cultural acceptance of a narrative where human beings are nothing more than the result of time plus chance, we *all* —religious or not—tend to retain conceptions of nature as something separate from us, and of our role as unique.

In other words, we all—religious or not—tend to operate with a Christian anthropology. We should acknowledge this honestly. Human beings are "of the earth," yes, but we also have abilities and obligations that transcend the rest of the created world.

Second, there is frequently a religious character to environmental ethics.

Michael Shellenberger is a *Time* magazine "Hero of the Environment" and an invited expert reviewer of the most recent Assessment Report for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He's noticed a shift in the tone of much discourse around climate advocacy over his lifetime:

> Environmentalism today is the dominant secular religion of the educated, upper-middle-class elite in most developed and developing nations. It provides a new story about our collective and individual purpose. It designates… heroes and villains. And it does so in the language of science which provides it with legitimacy…
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> [A]pocalyptic environmentalism is a kind of new Judeo-Christian religion, one that has replaced God with nature. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human problems stem from our failure to adjust ourselves to God. In the apocalyptic environmental tradition, human problems stem from our failure to adjust ourselves to nature. In some Judeo-Christian traditions, priests play the role of interpreting God's will or laws, including discerning right from wrong. In the apocalyptic environmentalist tradition, scientists play that role…
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> The trouble with the new environmental religion is that it has become increasingly apocalyptic, destructive, and self-defeating. It leads its adherents to demonize their opponents... And it spreads anxiety and depression without meeting the deeper psychological, existential, and spiritual needs its ostensibly secular devotees seek.[3]

Human beings cannot live without a grand narrative to give their lives purpose and meaning. In a world where many have left or are leaving Christianity or other religious narratives behind, all kinds of rivals are rushing in to fill that void.

But these alternatives inevitably take something that should be a part of a grand narrative of meaning and substitute it for the whole.

[3] Shellenberger, 263-65.

I think that a consistent Christian ethic toward creation can ground both our conviction that human beings have a unique obligation and task *and* to scratch the religious itch that environmental ethics on its own cannot.

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Ok, thus far this has all been kind of theoretical. The question asked what Christians should *do*, after all.

Well, we must simply strive to be good stewards. We could start by living more simply and consuming less. Of the six initiatives recommended by the Mennonite Church Canada Climate Change statement, this was the one that stood out to me the most. It was described as "a traditional Mennonite value."

Long before "reduce, reuse, and recycle" became a slogan, it was embedded, whether out of choice or necessity, in many Anabaptist ways of living in the world. It remains very good advice for practical living, even if some might be tempted to think that it is too little too late.

We can explore more ecologically friendly alternatives to oil and coal (solar, electric, wind, etc.) and do so while paying attention to the carbon footprint that the development of these new technologies has.

We can get involved politically. The large-scale changes that are necessary to slow down the most devastating effects of climate change will only come about via the political realm. We should vote for politicians and parties that take these matters seriously.

We can get involved in lobbying and activism. Here, too, I want to pause.

There are times when some of the more aggressive advocates for climate change (outside and inside the church) give the impression that if you are not making climate change the animating force of your life, you are failing as a citizen, a human being or a Christian.

I don't think this is helpful, for starters. I think that guilt and fear are very poor motivators, whether we're talking about religion or science or politics. I rarely see people become whole-hearted, enthusiastic proponents of *anything* because they feel guilty and afraid.

I also don't think it's a true reflection of who we are and how we're individually wired.

I was struck recently by an article in the *New York Times* reflecting on the life and death of the late Sidney Poitier. Poitier was one of the first black leading men in Hollywood. He was a trailblazer in a world where he faced many obstacles and a good deal of racism along his path.

And yet, listen to his approach:

> His style, however, remained low-key and nonconfrontational. "As for my part in all this," he wrote, "all I can say is that there's a place for people who are angry and defiant, and sometimes they serve a purpose, but that's never been my role."[4]

Today, I fear that Poitier would be "called out" for not being committed enough to the work of racial justice. And yet, he felt free—I think quite rightly—to say that we're not all called to the same path when it comes to the important issues of our day.

We can all do *something*. We are not all called to do precisely the *same* thing. We would do well to remember this.

Finally, when we consider the question of what a Christian ought to do in light of the climate crisis, we must acknowledge that our reflection and action on this matter is taking place in a cultural context where trust—in government, in media, in authorities, and in science—has been seriously eroded if not shattered.

"Follow the science" sounds different today than it did two years ago. Rightly or wrongly (I think mostly wrongly), the last two years have made many people suspicious of just trusting what science says.

We know now (if we didn't before) that science changes over time (this is the nature of the task!) and that it can be made to say many things. Science in some pure sense may be objective but how we use it is not.

This is the world we live in. And this must shape how we engage this topic.

Facts alone do not persuade.

If you want to see a grimly amusing example of this, there's a film on Netflix right now called *Look Up!* In the movie, scientists have discovered an asteroid on course to crash into earth and wipe out all life. They desperately try to persuade the public and policy makers with the facts of the matter, but the politicians and media mostly just ignore it or wonder how it can be spun to increase tv or approval ratings.

[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/movies/sidney-poitier-dead.html

Sadly, this isn't so far from the world we live in.

I don't think it will do to just become ever more devoted to trying to get people to agree to the facts, more data, more studies, etc. If there's anything the less two years have taught us, it's that everyone's facts come wrapped in a political package.

As in every other area of life, it is stories that move us. This is one of the best parts of Katherine Hayhoe's book. She honestly acknowledges that most people are weary of facts and that we all have motivated reasoning when it comes to how we employ the facts.

So, tell stories, she says. Tell stories about your love of gardening or diving or hiking or skiing and how you don't want to lose these things. Tell stories about people you love whose lives are being negatively affected by climate change. Connect with people around shared values.

And do so in such a way that avoids labelling and demonizing those who don't think like you. It seems to me that this is wise advice.

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I want to end by returning to Mennonite Church Canada's document on climate change.

I was struck by what the document *didn't* say. It says that it is good news that God so loved (and loves) the world (and we should, too). It quotes Romans and says that we are called to enter into the groaning of all creation. Yes. All of this is true and worthy of affirmation.

But what about the promise of God? I saw little of this.

It quotes John 3:16 which reminds us that God loves the world. This is good. But John goes on to say in verse 17 that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world (*cosmos*) might be saved through him."

God has not abandoned the *cosmos*. God promises to save the *cosmos* through Christ.

Earlier I said that our story began in a garden. It ends in new creation. Revelation 22:1-3:

> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Yes, Revelation comes to us drenched in metaphor and symbolism. But how interesting that at the end of all things, we encounter images so similar to how it began. A world of beauty and diversity and grandeur, a fertile and fruitful new creation full of possibility and promise.

And, just like the beginning of our story, it comes as the unearned gift of God.

Many people who have watched the movie *Look Up!* have commented on the ending. I won't spoil it for you, but I do want to share one scene.

There's a character named Yule (played by Timothée Chalamet). Yule is a seemingly disaffected skateboarder, raised in an evangelical home, but has something of a conflicted relationship with his parents and his faith.

At the end of the film, the central characters gather around a table for one last meal together. There are expressions of gratitude for one another, for the work they have done in trying to alert people to the looming catastrophe. It feels something like a holy moment but nobody's terribly religious and nobody knows what to say.

The characteristically quiet Yule responds that he's "got this" and begins to pray:

> Dearest Father and Almighty Creator, we ask for your grace tonight, despite our pride, your forgiveness, despite our doubt. Most of all, Lord, we ask for your love to soothe us through these dark times. May we face whatever is to come in your divine will with courage and open hearts of acceptance."

It's a great prayer. But to it I would add, "let us face whatever is to come with *hope*." And not a vague hope, but a concrete hope grounded in the character and promise of God who loves this *cosmos* too much to abandon it.

In her book, Katherine Hayhoe says that she has come to understand her work as a Christian and as a climate scientist as an exercise in "practicing hope." I like this. Hope is indeed a practice and something that we need to keep on practicing.

May God help us. And may God strengthen our hope.

Amen.