

**“Beyond ‘Creation Care’:  
Building the Eco-Ethical Ark in the Age of Climate Disruption”**

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**Introduction**

Science fiction writer Neal Stephenson wrote a book published in 2015 called *Seveneves*.<sup>1</sup> The premise of the book is that something explodes the moon into seven chunks which eventually begin colliding with each other, sending pieces crashing down onto Earth's surface. Scientists study the phenomenon and realize that eventually all the pieces will break into smaller and smaller bits forming a white sky over the Earth. At that point, the pieces will begin falling in a cataclysmic event called “the hard rain” that will burn up Earth's atmosphere, boil its seas, and destroy all life on the planet. They predict that humanity has two years to put as many people and provisions into space as possible to preserve the human race and find a way for *homo sapiens* to survive for several thousand years until Earth becomes inhabitable again. This means they must put aside all of their differences of race, culture, religion, and socioeconomics and work together to build the “cloud ark” around the International Space Station. The first half of the book tells the story of this monumental effort through the eyes of several key characters charged with the task of overseeing this endeavor.

As I listened to the book (I “read” it as an audiobook), I could not help but make comparisons to the apocalyptic scenario our planet is *actually* facing right now. Climate disruption, the 6<sup>th</sup> great extinction, the growing “garbage patch” in our oceans, the massive die-off of coral reefs, the loss of Arctic ice and the corresponding rise of sea levels, along with the increasing frequency of catastrophic weather events, are all results of human activity on this planet. The timeline may not be as short as 24 months as it was in *Seveneves*, but scientists are debating how long the planet will remain habitable for human beings. 300 years? 100? 50? 10?

It is as if we are living in the midst of a dystopian science fiction novel of our own making. *We* are the hard rain. And we are bringing the planet to ruin.

Our conference theme is “God's Creation and Human Responsibility,” and right out of the gate I am telling you that humanity has largely shirked, dishonored, ignored, and violated that responsibility to the point that the viability of God's Creation is now in question. I realize that for some, the reaction to this statement may range from disbelief to dismissiveness. I will warn you that this will not be a lecture that avoids the hard truths about what we are facing as a human civilization.

I didn't use to be so blunt. For many years, I and others used the term “Creation Care” to instill a sense of moral and ethical responsibility into our discourse. It's as if we tried diligently not to offend or get too “political” with our rhetoric about issues that have become divisive and

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<sup>1</sup> Stephenson, Neal. *Seveneves*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015).

poisoned by partisanship. Even the leadership of my own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, shies away from using the term “climate change” for fear of offending the faithful. So “Creation Care” seemed a viable nomenclature, for how can one take offence at *caring* about and for Creation? Plus, it has that nice alliterative ring to it: “Caring for Creation.”

But I’ve come to the conclusion that we’re past the point of being able to “care” for Creation. Care is too benign a word. It does not convey the desperation of our planetary condition or the urgency needed to *act* on what is happening. I propose we need to move beyond the word “care” and adopt three other alliterative phrases in its place. Those phrases are:

- Creation Clarity
- Creation Compliance
- Creation Compassion

My lecture will take each of these phrases in turn. I will conclude with proposing the image of creating an “eco-ethical ark” for preserving what remains of our beautiful planet. You will likely notice that this presentation is heavier on grim truth-telling than it is on optimism. That is, unfortunately, where we are now. But that does not mean we are without hope. My goal in this lecture is to speak prophetic truth, galvanize us to act on that truth, and most importantly, to see each other as interfaith allies in undertaking this Great Work of our time.

### **Creation Clarity**

In August of 2016, Bill McKibben wrote a piece for the *New Republic* entitled [“A World at War”](#) explaining the ways in which climate change is a war that is attacking our human society at every level. The climate war is “a world war aimed at us all,” he said. “And if we lose, we will be as decimated and helpless as the losers in every conflict – except that this time, there will be no winners, and no end to the planet-wide occupation that follows.” He said that the only hope was to mobilize ourselves like we did for WWII.<sup>2</sup>

His hope has not been realized. A few months after McKibben’s article, the country elected a climate-change-denying president who has delivered on his promises to undo countless environmental regulations and pull our country out of the Paris Climate Accords. And he has installed a rogue’s gallery of environmental criminals within his cabinet to dismantle every possible protection against ecological felonies.

To be clear – the current administration is only the consequence of a long-standing national hubris that has undergirded this country since its founding. The myth of progress has been fueled by relentless commodification of humans and other-than-humans alike for hundreds of years. I fully admit that I am a beneficiary of this ecological hostility. But my fossil-fueled lifestyle, coupled with my privilege, positions me to take responsibility commensurate with what my privilege has afforded me. I am a cisgender, heterosexual, married female in my mid-40’s

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<sup>2</sup> McKibben, Bill. “A World at War.” *The New Republic*. August 15, 2016. Accessed May 28, 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/135684/declare-war-climate-change-mobilize-wwii>.

who benefits from the privilege of my white race, middle class upbringing, marital status, religion, level of education, and professional position as a Christian clergy person and seminary professor. And like most of my fellow preachers and teachers, I have not done enough to call my country to account for the ecological sins we have perpetrated against the planet. In fact, of all the justice issues that preachers may choose to address in their sermons, I have found in my research that environmental issues are among the lowest priorities.

As a homiletician, I have argued that preachers have a key role to play in helping congregations understand environmental issues as a matter of faith and moral/ethical obligation. This was one of the main tenets of my book, *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit* (Chalice Press, 2015). But when I was doing research for that book, I learned that it is rare for clergy to include issues such as climate change or species extinction in their sermons.

So after I wrote that book, I conducted a survey in the first two months of 2017. I targeted mainline Protestant clergy in the United States to assess how preachers are approaching their sermons during this divisive time in our nation's history. The 60-question online survey entitled "Preaching about Controversial Issues" ran for six weeks, from mid-January to the end of February. I received responses from 1205 participants in 45 states (with an almost equal number of male and female respondents).<sup>3</sup> The survey explores a range of topics, including the following:

- The difference the 2016 presidential election has made in preachers' willingness to address controversial issues in the pulpit;
- Reasons clergy list for either engaging controversial topics in their sermons, or avoiding them

One section of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate topics they had mentioned in their sermons in the previous 12 months, choosing from a list of 38 issues. The results indicate that environmental issues were among the lowest priority to address. Further, when given the option to choose two of the topics that they were most likely to *avoid* in their sermons, 42% of respondents listed at least one environmental issue. When listing them out individually, we can see how certain environmental issues compare to other "hot topics" that pastors deem off-limits:

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<sup>3</sup> I calculated my optimal sample size (1051) based on information collected from the statistics and research departments of eight mainline Protestant denominations to arrive at an estimate of the total number of pastors currently serving congregations. While I received responses that represented over 16 different denominations, I calculated my sample pool (67,701) based on the number of active, non-retired clergy currently serving congregations in eight denominations in the United States – United Methodist, Presbyterian Church – USA, Episcopal, Lutheran (ELCA), American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), and Reformed Church in America. The number of responses (1205) exceeded the optimal sample size needed for a statistically accurate sampling at a confidence level of 95% with a 3% margin of error. It is important to note that not all questions were completed by all participants, so the confidence level and margin of error is adjusted accordingly for each question.

Women's reproductive health	205	27%
Fossil fuel extraction (fracking, MTR, coal, etc.)	141	19%
Critique of capitalism	134	18%
White privilege	100	13%
Rights for LGBTQ	98	13%
Gun violence	96	13%
War/militarization	79	10%
Species extinction	72	9%
Environmental racism	60	8%
Climate change	29	4%

All of this leads to the question of *why*. What are reasons clergy list for not wanting to address environmental issues in their sermons? While I have not yet aggregated all the data, I did pull the narrative responses which yield some interesting statements. For some preachers, the idea of connecting any environmental issues to the Bible is completely foreign, or even anathema to them:

- “What do any of these [environmental] issues have to do with the gospel?”
- “[Fossil fuel extraction] isn't the gospel.”
- “[Clean/renewable energy] has no relation to the gospel message.”
- “[Species extinction] is not applicable to the gospel text.”

One respondent specifically dismissed the idea of addressing climate change because “It's in God's hands.”

Other respondents just didn't see environmental issues as a priority:

- “I can't envision [clean/renewable energy] as a topic for preaching, as there are other issues that are much more important, urgent, and relevant to preach on.”
- “There's little direct action anyone can take. There are more important/pressing issues.”
- “I don't want to lose my job. I don't want to distract congregation from doing healing work.”
- “[Species extinction is] not my most pressing issue. But, I recognize that the increase of our population has changed the national and international landscape and division of resources.”
- [Species extinction]: “Other bigger fish to fry (ironically enough!)”

*Environmental racism* was a topic that stymied a few respondents. Some checked that they did not feel adequately informed about the issue. Others either denied the existence of it, had never heard of it, or stated that it was too complex to address in a sermon:

“This item [environmental racism] does not exist.”

“I have no idea what [environmental racism] is.”

“It’s too complicated.”

“I feel getting them to admit racism is a problem first is a step we've yet to achieve (on the whole).”

Regarding the topic of *fossil fuel extraction*, a number of respondents indicated that their reticence had to do with the industry being a major source of employment for their parishioners:

“So many livelihoods in the congregation are tied to fossil fuels. Also, misinformation is too strong to untangle in one sermon.”

“Too many parishioners have livelihood in this industry; hard to separate personal from systemic.”

“It's difficult to preach against an industry where most of your members make a living or are directly associated with it.”

“Members associated with fossil fuel extraction view [clean/renewable energy] as a direct economic threat in an already severely depressed area.”

“Livelihood of some in my congregation depends on coal.”

“This is my congregations' primary source of income.”

“Heavily fossil fuel based industries in the area.”

“The economy of my city is heavily dependent on fracking and although it is a deeply eco-aware congregation, it is also a congregation that realized that the slowing or elimination of fracking in our community has incredibly far-reaching negative impacts on families in our community.” (Colorado)

“Critique of the false dreams regarding capitalism we have been promised, e.g. the factories and coal jobs are not coming back. I am struggling to find the Gospel witness. Where does the unemployed coal miner find and hear the good news in the end of his family’s primary vocation? At this point the issues seems to be one of pastoral care until Scripture helps me find a voice.” (Kentucky)

While all of these reasons are valid concerns, I still contend that homilies and sermons are vital for the Creation Clarity we need right now that can raise awareness and help mobilize people for action. Research from a 2014 PRRI/AAR survey appears to confirm this assertion, in that “Americans who say their clergy leader speaks at least occasionally about climate change are more likely to be climate change Believers than Americans who tend not to hear about climate change in church (49% and 36%, respectively).”<sup>4</sup>

Another aspect of Creation Clarity is to help people realize that many of the issues listed in the survey intersect and overlap with each other. For example, climate change contributes to and exacerbates the refugee crisis, which is also complexified by Islamophobia and xenophobia. It is that intersectionality which is both a challenge for the task of preaching, but also provides opportunities. For example, a preacher might be able to address environmental issues by connecting it with other “safer” topics.

To illustrate: since hunger issues seem to be a more palatable topic among justice issues, how might we connect that issue within a sermon about climate change? The preacher could explain how climate disruption affects crop production, blight, and the devastation of agriculture due to catastrophic weather events such as drought or storms (witness Puerto Rico’s decimated farming industry after Hurricane Maria). This, in turn, drives people from their farms because the land can no longer support agriculture, which has contributed to the crisis of war and refugees coming out of Syria. The preacher, then, can pose the question – what kind of church shall we be in the face of this devastation? How might we read scripture through a “green lens”? When Jesus talked about the sin of “blaspheming the Holy Spirit” (Mark 3:28-30; Matthew 12:31-32), could we apply this to our desecration of God’s very breath, the atmosphere of Earth, the *ruah*, the Holy Spirit? What is God calling us to do in the midst of this crisis? How is the Holy Spirit leading us to respond?

But I must admit that most of the time, I find myself having to make the case that “Creation-care” is, indeed, part of our responsibility as Christians. We have to spend so much time playing catch-up, just helping people understand that the Bible authorizes Christians to address contemporary ecological threats. Meanwhile, the climate crisis is already well-beyond our baby steps. Speaking for my own denomination, most Lutheran leaders at every level – from parish pastors to the bishops – have failed to exercise their prophetic voice and to equip their congregations for the crisis already upon us. So in addition to Creation Clarity, I believe we are at the point where we need to convey the message of *Creation Compliance*.

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Robert P., Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, *Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted About Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science: Findings from the PRRI/AAR Religion, Values, and Climate Change Survey*, Public Religion Research Institute and American Academy of Religion; Washington, D.C., 2014; 4.



## Creation Compliance

Recall Bill McKibben's article I mentioned earlier, "A World at War," in which he issued a kind of "call to arms" for citizens to rally for the climate movement. I foolishly and earnestly believed that the moment of reckoning for America would happen in time. As I read the article, I remember thinking that Hurricane Sandy should have been our "Pearl Harbor moment."<sup>5</sup> I had hoped that the 2012 superstorm which attacked the densely populated East Coast, destroying so much of the New Jersey shoreline and putting New York in the path of devastation, would be the wake-up call we needed. I thought this would be the one event that would shake the scales of denial from our collective eyes and spur us to mobilize ourselves to fight climate change.

At the time, I insisted to my good friend and fellow climate activist, Peterson Toscano, that like the attack on Pearl Harbor which created the political will for the U.S. to enter World War II, the moment with the war on climate was still coming. The question he and I were debating was how blunt we should be in warning people so that action could be taken now rather than later to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Peterson hosts a monthly podcast for Citizen's Climate Lobby called Citizen's Climate Radio. He created an excellent episode called "[Apocalypse now? Fear and climate communication.](#)" in which he discussed reactions to the July 2017 *New York* magazine article by David Wallace-Wells called "The Uninhabitable Earth."<sup>6</sup> Wallace-Wells noted that the thawing of the arctic permafrost is creating a feedback loop of global warming. He warned that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has overlooked key factors in its evaluations of the present and future of global warming. In frightening terms, he laid out the worst-case scenarios we will face from climate change. These include crop failures, increases in heat deaths, wars over resources, a surge of climate refugees, exotic diseases, unbreathable air, oceans unable to sustain life, and economic collapse.<sup>7</sup>

In response to articles such as these, environmentalists have debated the use of fear tactics for climate communication. Some argue that such doomsday messages can undermine our efforts and cause people to resist or even deny the dangers at hand. If we scare people too much, it will backfire, the argument went. That argument seems quaint now.

In light of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, and the sheer onslaught of raging fires, floods, and catastrophic weather events across this planet in the past decade, and especially in the past year, the debate about the messaging regarding climate communication seems a moot point. It's like telling the biblical prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and John to tone down their

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<sup>5</sup> Information about Superstorm Sandy: "Superstorm Sandy Anniversary: Remembering Hurricane Sandy Two Years Later," by Eric Zerkel, weather.com, Oct. 29, 2014. <https://weather.com/storms/hurricane/news/superstorm-sandy-anniversary-20141029#/>

<sup>6</sup> Toscano, Peterson. "Citizens' Climate Radio Ep. 14: Apocalypse Now? Fear and Climate Communication." Citizens' Climate Lobby. March 16, 2018. Accessed May 28, 2018. <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/citizens-climate-radio-ep-14-apocalypse-now-fear-climate-communication/>.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace-Wells, David. "When Will the Planet Be Too Hot for Humans? Much, Much Sooner Than You Imagine." *New York Magazine*. July 10, 2017. Accessed May 28, 2018. <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>.

message to make it more palatable. They couldn't do that then, because they knew the trajectory of the oncoming destruction, and we know that trajectory now.

Here's what I'm starting to realize. We're long past the possibility of mobilizing ourselves to combat climate change. Even the Great War metaphor is wrong. The problem with the WWII comparison is that the metaphor positions us as "the good guys" who swept in and took care of those evil Nazis and the Empire of Japan. But we're not the good guys this time. We've been the arrogant rogue nation for decades now, insisting that we can have our way with the planet, and that others must bear the brunt of the cost. The United States has been at the forefront of launching the eco-holocaust. Imperial America has muscled its way across the earth, digging, drilling, fracking, pipelining, and toxifying water, land, air, and human health along the way.

The hurricanes in August and September of 2017 were like "climate bombs" – the largest, most devastating superstorms ever experienced in the United States, each dropping within weeks of each other. When this occurred, I could not help but think of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. I believe the planet is sending us a direct message: surrender. Which is why I am suggesting the phrase "Creation Compliance."

We are not going to win this war on the climate. It has already won. There is no fighting back. We must humble ourselves and agree to the terms of surrender.

Nature is giving us a [Potsdam Declaration](#) that demands the complete disarmament of our fossil-fuel industry and the unconditional surrender of our imperialistic economy. And as with the ultimatum of that historic declaration over 70 years ago, we are being promised "prompt and utter destruction" if we do not surrender.

As a Christian, the words of Jesus keep echoing in my mind: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" (Luke 9:24-25).

In other words, we must surrender to a higher calling of humility, obedience to the dictates of God's Creation, and radical focus on rebuilding a just and equitable society and economic infrastructure focusing on "the least of these" – those who have suffered under our oppressive reign. From an ecofeminist perspective, this means attending to Earth as if it is our own body. Because, in fact, it is. This means attending to those most vulnerable as if they are our own selves. Because they are.

I, for one, am willing to surrender. I want our leaders to accept Nature's terms. I want there to be Creation Compliance. I want us to survive. I want peace with this planet.

But I'll admit, such a desire has not made its way through the collective psyche of the human species. I'm often asked, why aren't we doing something about this? Why aren't we meeting the demands of our planet? Scientists have developed a "roadmap" for meeting the Paris climate goals, which includes halving global CO2 emissions each decade, radically altering our planetary diet away from meat and fish towards plant-based foods, and developing



technologies and techniques such as carbon farming for drawing carbon from the atmosphere on a massive scale.<sup>8</sup>

But all of this would have to happen within the next 30 years for us to avoid the worst effects of climate change. Even knowing what we need to do, and the timeframe in which it needs to happen, something is keeping us from voting and acting in our own best interest.

There is a point in the *Seveneves* where some people doubt the scientists predicting the hard rain. They think it's a conspiracy to undermine their country's sovereignty. They think it's all "fake news," and ridicule those preparing for the inevitable. They try to continue with business-as-usual and scoff at the evidence that is right in front of them. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway wrote a revealing book called *Merchants of Doubt* (which was also made into a documentary) that explains how "A loose-knit group of high-level scientists, with extensive political connections, ran effective campaigns to mislead the public and deny well-established scientific knowledge over four decades."<sup>9</sup> This happened with the tobacco industry, acid rain, the ozone hole, the banning of the chemical DDT, and now with climate change. Under the guise of free market fundamentalism, they astutely manipulate the American public into doubting what is right in front of our eyes.

But I think it's more than just a matter of skewing public understanding. Humans simply are not predisposed to think in global terms, or to conceive of time beyond a few years. Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh says it this way: "The dilemmas and dramas of climate change are simply incompatible with the kinds of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, especially in novels, which tend to emphasize the journey of an individual conscience rather than the poisonous miasma of social fate."<sup>10</sup>

This leads to my third alliterative phrase: Creation Compassion. Because I think there may be another way for us to understand people's resistance to accepting the reality of our planet.

### **Creation Compassion**

You may have heard of the Stages of Grief developed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. I have found this to be a helpful paradigm for seeing the different ways in which people are responding to the message about the climate crisis. I first learned about this when I was a seminary student doing my Clinical Pastoral Education as a hospital chaplain. Keep in mind that not everyone goes through every stage, and the stages do not necessarily happen in this order. Also, a person may

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<sup>8</sup> Plumer, Brad. "Scientists Made a Detailed "roadmap" for Meeting the Paris Climate Goals. It's Staggering." Vox. March 23, 2017. Accessed May 28, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2017/3/23/15028480/roadmap-paris-climate-goals>.

<sup>9</sup> Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Wallace-Wells, "When Will the Planet Be Too Hot for Humans? Much, Much Sooner Than You Imagine."

move in different directions among the stages, depending on the circumstances. The stages are: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance.<sup>11</sup>

I remember being called to a patient's room in the hospital one evening after the family had just been given the news that the woman – a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, and friend – was terminally ill. I stood in the doorway surveying the room with family members and friends, each in their own stage of grief. One young man, a grandson, was just staring into space, like he was in a daze. He couldn't move or speak. He was in the first stage – shock.

His mother, the patient's daughter-in-law, was in denial. "This can't be true. We just went shopping a few days ago. She seemed perfectly healthy. I just can't believe this. Just wait, I'm sure she's going to be fine."

In contrast, her husband, the patient's son, was in the stage of anger and was taking it out on the doctor. "What kind of incompetent idiot doctor are you? Did you even get a second opinion? You just want to make as much money off of her as you can! How are you even allowed to practice medicine?"

Let's pause here and consider these stages in relation to ways in which people react to the news about the climate crisis. Many are still in shock and take no action at all. Many are in denial that the planet is dying and live as if everything is going to be fine. Theologically, this is often expressed as "God wouldn't allow this to happen." Or, "Jesus is coming back and there will be a new heaven and earth anyway, so it will all be fine."

Still others are angry at the messengers – the scientists and environmental activists who have been trying for decades to convey the message so that people will respond. They go on the offensive, attacking, mocking, accusing us of undermining our country's sovereignty, being "Luddites," and disparaging our character. While we may feel frustrated by these responses, they make sense within the stages of grief.

There were other people in that hospital room at the other stages as well. The patient's brother talked to the doctor in pleading tones. "Isn't there some experimental treatment we can try? Can you do some kind of surgery? I'd be willing to give blood or even donate my kidney if it would help!" This man was in the Bargaining stage, looking for a way out of the situation. In my work I find a great number of environmentalists in this stage. For years we thought that if we just changed to LED lightbulbs, or drove hybrid cars, or installed a few solar panels, we could "save the planet," as the saying goes.

This willingness to sacrifice on an individual level was noble, but such wishful thinking may have actually undermined the efforts needed to mitigate climate change. Because real climate solutions require massive policy changes, laws, and intergovernmental agreements that are actually enforced. It requires top-down as well as bottom-up solutions.

Of course, there is some good news, such as rapid technological advances, a steep drop in the cost of solar energy, and widespread pushback to the energy and environmental policies of the current Administration across a wide spectrum of American businesses, municipalities, and

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<sup>11</sup> "Understanding The Stages Of Grief." BetterHelp. Accessed May 28, 2018. <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/grief/understanding-the-stages-of-grief/>.

organizations. Plus, the global grassroots climate movement is growing. As you can see from this conference, people of faith with incredible stamina and unrelenting courage are mobilizing across Earth to preserve what is left of our planet.

Still, the hour is late, the stakes are high, the obstacles are great, and the time left for effective action is terrifyingly short. It's easy to understand why some folks find themselves in the stage of grief characterized by Depression. It's what I have called "the dark night of the green soul." It's the daughter in the corner of the hospital room who just sobs inconsolably, knowing that her mother is dying. I must say, that person is me more often than I care to admit. Such as when I read about "Sudan," the last male northern white rhino on the planet, who died in Kenya on March 20, 2018.<sup>12</sup> It might as well have been Good Friday. Because the extinction of this rhino species is part of an Earth-wide crucifixion, what I call the "eco-crucifixion."

Creation Compassion is critical at this stage. We must honor the sorrow and despair with the honesty of biblical lament. Like the angel in the Book of Revelation, we want to proclaim with a loud voice: "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees" (Revelation 7:3). Like the prophet Hosea, we grieve that "There is...no knowledge of God in the land...Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hosea 4:1b, 3). Our telling the truth about the state of our world is like a form of biblical lament. Walter Brueggemann tells us lament achieves three things:

1. recognizes the reality of injustice, loss, and grief
2. names that injustice as intolerable
3. ultimately, moves us to action to follow God's call to make it right again.<sup>13</sup>

But of course, lamentation is not where we can permanently reside. Lament must be used to break through apathy and numbness, creating a space for hope and action. Some of us are parents of children, and leaders within our respective faith communities whose members look to us for a way forward. Some of us are clergy whose congregations turn to us for an authentic word of witness during this frightening time. We have friends and colleagues who have linked arms with us to face the future with courage. And we worship a God who, in the Christian tradition, promises resurrection, even after all hope has been crucified.

So some of us are moving to the stages of testing and acceptance. This is the patient's husband and sister who were actually talking to the woman, asking her questions about what she needs, what she wants, how they can best spend their remaining time together. For those of us doing this work of Earth-chaplaincy, it involves deep listening to our Earth and to each other, which is what we are doing during these three days. It is through this listening that we are hearing the call to cherish what is left. Now is the time for us to come together to build the "eco-

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<sup>12</sup> Schade, Leah D., "The Last Rhino, Good Friday, and the Preachers' Silence." Patheos. March 27, 2018. Accessed June 16, 2018. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2018/03/last-rhino-good-friday-preachers-silence/>

<sup>13</sup> Brueggeman, Walter., *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress: 1984). Chapter 3

ethical ark.” We are bringing together the wisdom of the traditions in order to create a place of sanctuary for the most fragile ones threatened by the oncoming deluge.

### **The Eco-Ethical Ark**

My own interfaith work to fight fracking and a tire incinerator in Pennsylvania, and continuing now with Kentucky Interfaith Power and Light, has shown me that I have more in common with many Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Sikhs, for example, than I do with most so-called “Christians.” It grieves me deeply that the faith that has taught me to care for God’s Creation is the same faith that has been used by others to throw it away. But there is no time left to try to convince those who wish to remain unconvinced. Noah discovered this in the ancient story of the first ark. As a clergy colleague said to me, it’s no use fanning the ashes. You’ll only get debris in your eyes that will make you cry. Instead, fan the embers of the fires of love that remain.

A climate activist and friend of mine, Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, has done incredible work with interfaith coalitions to fan those embers and engage in climate activism. Just before Easter and Passover, she organized a crowd of faith leaders and members of faith communities gathered on the steps of the Massachusetts State House to call upon Governor Baker to take bold leadership in addressing climate disruption. Drawing from the ancient stories of Moses confronting Pharaoh and of Jesus confronting the imperial powers of Rome, they celebrated our shared determination, as people of diverse faiths, to set ourselves free from fossil fuels and to create a more just and sustainable society.<sup>14</sup> What if this were to happen in every state house and governor's office across the country? This may stimulate your own thinking about how to create an interfaith event that lifts up the urgency of prophetically confronting the Fossil-Fuel-Pharaohs of our time.

As part of our contribution to the eco-ethical ark, Margaret and I are compiling a book of essays called *Rooted and Rising: The Search for Meaning and Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*. In anticipation of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day in 2020, we are assembling a volume of essays that will bring together a diverse range of voices speaking to the spirituality and faith perspectives that sustain our climate activism. We envision this book as a “message in a bottle” to future generations – a glimpse of the various ways that people alive today found spiritual meaning and strength as they took action to build a more just society.

This image of the eco-ethical ark, then, can give us the means by which people of differing faiths can meet and connect either philosophically, mystically, or ethically. I base this image on Paul Knitter’s idea of the “ethical-practical” bridge.<sup>15</sup> Knitter explains that the religions of the world need to emphasize what they share in common, namely the global problems of suffering in the form of poverty, victimization, violence, and patriarchy. He adds that the

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<sup>14</sup> Bullitt-Jonas, Margaret. “Exodus from Fossil Fuel: An Interfaith Witness for Climate Action.” *Reviving Creation*. April 3, 2018. Accessed May 29, 2018. <http://revivingcreation.org/exodus-from-fossil-fuel-an-interfaith-witness-for-climate-action/>

<sup>15</sup> Knitter, Paul. *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. (Maryknoll, NY: 2002). 134-5.

sufferings of the earth and its creatures are integrally tied to human suffering. He identifies the “threatened, endangered earth” as the literal “common ground” which people of all faiths can both stand upon and take a stand for.

While the bridge imagery is beautiful and worked well 15 years ago, it is no longer sufficient. A bridge needs stability on either side to support it. We can no longer assume that to be the case. Civilization is changing at such a rapid pace, the assumptions of stability are crumbling beneath us. Thus, I believe the *ark* to be the most plausible metaphor for the kind of project humanity must undertake in the decades ahead.

This ark must be built with planks of the strongest ethical teachings of each religion, faith, and spiritual group. It must be supported with joists of justice and beams of righteousness. And the first ones on this ark must be the real people who are most affected by climate change, especially people of color, islanders, fisherfolk hut dwellers, children of refugees, those living in poverty, and the species that are on the brink of extinction. The only way the eco-ethical interfaith ark will have any credibility is by learning from those who have lived through and are currently suffering from the realities of the system's collapse. The colonialist traditions, the media executives, the advertisers, the rulers who have no heart for justice – all of them have had their time, and now #timesup. We ignored the rest of the world in creating the problem; we must not make that same mistake in trying to abate some of the damage and salvage what is left.

Are we ready to step into this gap? Can we challenge our faith leaders to step up and fill the void of moral and ethical leadership on this planet? There is evidence that we may, in fact, be moving in that direction. Organizations such as Greenfaith, Interfaith Power and Light, Blessed Earth, and the Poor People's Campaign are doing important work to help build that eco-ethical ark.

Two books in particular I can recommend as we are making preparations for this eco-ethical ark. One is entitled *Who Do We Choose To Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* by Margaret J. Wheatley (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017). This book is for folks of any faith or no faith, and provides a clear-eyed historical, sociological, and cultural analysis of the fall of civilizations – including our own. But she focuses on how we can maintain our integrity, while practicing effective compassion while we cope with the relentless upheavals and rapid shifts of this troubling time.

Another is from my own Christian tribe, and it's called *Living Beyond the End of the World* by Margaret Swedish (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008). Margaret takes off the theological kid-gloves in her exegesis, eschatology, and focus on justice in the midst of the mounting environmental calamities. She writes: “[W]e have to do something difficult - live into what we do not understand, what we cannot quite see, what we cannot hold in our hands, what doesn't lay out a neat predictable map for how to behave in order to be saved. We will need to walk into a kind of spiritual darkness, feeling our way through, not controlling the transition but letting go and allowing it to happen through us, trusting that it knows what it is doing" (172).

## Conclusion

As my time draws to a close, I acknowledge that the despair is palpable and the case for hope is less than convincing. I spent a great deal of time making the case for truth-telling with studies and data and research. But there isn't any data for hope yet, is there? We can document the despair, but the hope feels more tenuous, like tendrils of green shoots trying to push their way out of the soil after a very long siege against the land.

Yet I still look for those tenacious tendrils the way Noah's dove scanned the waters, circling above the ark, watching for that glint of green. I relentlessly trust that in the midst of this work, we will discover that which will enable us to face the impending crisis. And I believe that thing is the deep and abiding gift of *friendship*.

In the book *Sevneves*, only seven members of the human race survive the hard rain. The second half of the book imagines the world 5000 years from that time. All religions have vanished, but there emerges a secretive group who believe in what they call The Purpose. While never defined, I came to understand The Purpose as something mysterious that connects people with each other and their fierce love of life itself which transcends horror and tragedy. It is the relationships and friendships among the characters that join them to something bigger than themselves and enable them to survive.

What I have learned through my own experiences with interfaith community organizing is that the precious bonds of friendship forged through the struggles and suffering together for the causes of peace and justice are what empower me to move through the stages of grief and into acceptance. My friends in this work enable me to gain perspective and Creation Clarity. They give me the courage to prophetically proclaim the need for Creation Compliance. And these friendships are what ground me in Creation Compassion.

Jesus had special words about friendship. In John 15:12-14 he declared, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, than one lays down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."

I think of those women who went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body. Their friendship with him and with each other compelled them show up because it was the right thing to do, the compassionate thing, the most loving thing they could do in the face of death and despair. We do the same. We do it not to be successful, but to be faithful, as Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said. We pick up the hammer and nails to stand beside Noah and begin building that ark. We pick up the anointing oil and walk to the tomb to attend to those crucified places and people of this Earth. Who knows – perhaps in this journey of despair, we may be surprised by who we meet there: the Divine One, meeting us in those places of pain to transform those wounds into the scars of healing.