

“A time to tear, and a time to mend:

A response to climate change”

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Intro Story: atmosphere

I don't often think about the atmosphere; like a lot of things about the Earth, I tend to take it for granted. I partly blame this on the atmosphere: it's clear, doesn't post to YouTube and lacks a definitive outer boundary. Even though I've spent almost all my life breathing in the life-giving air around me, it's only under exceptional circumstances that I've given it a second thought.

One of those moments came in April 1982 at Franklin Public School in Kitchener. After what seemed like an eternity of selling over-priced garbage bags and chocolate bars to family and neighbours, our school had finally raised enough money to build what was then known as a “creative” playground. Creative was code at the time for “can actually promote behaviours and activities known to spike injury rates amongst users”. As children, we knew exactly what it meant, and had perfected the “26 person human log jam” halfway down the opaque plastic tube slides before the lawyers eventually caught on and put a halt to the fun. *Some things never change....*

In a particularly creative bit of play that April morning, I had decided it would be a good idea to try to leap off a raised wooden platform to grab hold of a sliding ring that had become stuck in its overhead track about 5 feet away. I made just enough contact with the ring to turn myself horizontal before I fell flat on my back on the gravel below.

I was a bit stunned by the fall, but my big surprise was that I was no longer breathing. As some other students and eventually a teacher began to gather, I struggled to tell them this, without being able to talk. It was dawning on me that this whole breathing thing was a cooperative venture with the atmosphere, and that I wasn't holding up my part. I vaguely recalled the obstetrician mentioning something about this before that memorable first spanking. My part, it turns out, was simply to expand my chest cavity a little bit, and atmospheric pressure would take care of the rest. Here I'd been thinking

that I was the one taking in a deep breath when I felt like it, but all along, I had just been making a little more space inside for the breath of life to rush in.

And that's how it is, living in this lightly veiled surface of Mother Earth. So many miracles, so little time....it can be hard enough to appreciate and celebrate the creation miracles that are the sun and clouds, Lake Ontario, the trees and earth when one is running late for the dentist, or buried under email, or listening to your parents. And the air around us is even that bit more ethereal...that bit easier to take for granted.

Review of climate change basics

Taking things for granted is part of how we find ourselves where we are. So let's take a bit of time this morning to talk about climate change, how we got to this point, and what we should do as individuals and the Church, the body of Christ going forward.

It appears we're in a bit of trouble on the climate front. I'm sure we're all familiar with the basic storyline....The earth's average temperature (land and ocean) is rising because more of the sun's energy is being retained. This much is not in dispute. There is some debate about whether this extra energy is actually due to an increase in the amount energy being received...ie closer to the sun or increased solar activity. But while there is a long geological history of natural warming and cooling cycles, this one appears to be different because of the rapid nature of the warming. Over the last 150 years, a blink of an eye in geological time, we have warmed about 1 degree Celsius, with two thirds of that warming coming after 1975. As you're well aware, there are huge amounts of data and information on this topic, and while some debate remains, the clear majority of the scientific community believes that the recent warming trend is anthropogenic, or caused by the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a by-product of humanity's fossil fuel combustion associated with the industrial revolution. There is currently a proposal to limit warming to a total of 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era levels (the Paris Accord targets), of which we've used up 1 degree already. Warming is anticipated to continue at approximately 0.2 degrees per decade, giving us about two and a half decades before we reach the 1.5 degree warming threshold, with about half that time, or 12 years, available to take decisive action. There it is, basic climate change summed up in a nutshell...

What has brought us to this point? (The culture or atmosphere of technology)

What thinking underlies the behaviours that have brought us to this difficult place? I would argue that we made an inadvertent Faustian bargain when we in the West substituted individual human flourishing as the highest good, and underwrote that pursuit with science and technology on a massive scale. There have been many positives that have come along with the shift, with a demonstrable move away from the “nasty, brutish and short” life expectancies that were the norm 500 years ago. But technology comes with a shadow side. As Quaker, former Toronto resident and Order of Canada physicist Ursula Franklin noted, technology always comes with secondary effects; unintended by-products of the primary goal. Whether the technology is agriculture, medicine, power production or city building, there are a myriad of secondary effects that surround our technological pursuits. They can be as obvious as noise, exhaust and urban sprawl, or as subtle as changes in brain structure, social norms and the concentration of trace gases in the atmosphere.

Ursula Franklin also noted that new technologies generally start out as optional, promising freedom and efficiency in the present context. But as the technology begins to be adopted, a shift begins to occur in performance expectations, and also in demands that more supporting infrastructure be made available, both of which propel a trajectory towards a more mandatory adoption.

Examples of this typical pattern include cars, washing machines, smartphones and air travel. Though still in the future, the pattern is likely to be repeated with autonomous vehicles. Perhaps we, or people we know, have declined to adopt one or more of these common technologies. It can certainly be done, but often one is left explaining repeatedly why one has NOT gotten on board.

So, in fact, we live not just in a physical atmosphere that we have taken for granted, but also in a technological atmosphere that can be invisible, and nearly inescapable, to us. It is this technological atmosphere that has provided the cultural conditions for the incubation and adoption of so many of our current technologies, including the massive extraction and combustion of coal, oil and natural gas. We saw an opportunity to harness the trapped energy of the sun, and it has been irresistible. Our unstated cultural assumptions around efficiency, progress, value, domination and even living without

limits are found here in this ether, rarely seen, but always swirling around both our everyday discussions and those about how the next technology will set us free.

The concept of climate change is intimidating. It takes some things that we thought we were on top of, namely light, heat, shelter and transportation, and upsets the apple cart. And that upsets us too, with the accompanying rise in ecology-related anxieties. And I will suggest that some of the anxiety we feel around climate change is because we're in the process of having the wind, the technological atmosphere, knocked out of us.....some staples, like gasoline and natural gas, which worked so well we took them for granted, have suddenly stopped looking like such a bargain and yet still feel somewhat mandatory.

The labyrinth

We are in a difficult spot, and as Michele mentioned a couple of weeks ago in her sermon on Mother Earth, it's easy to feel frozen, not really knowing what to do next. It's also disorienting to be losing control of a predictable future along with some of our go-to technologies. It feels to me like, just after having the wind knocked out of us, we're entering a labyrinth. Labyrinths are a type of maze laid out on a floor or outdoor area, often featuring a single, twisting path that leads from the outside to the centre, and back. I used to be dismissive of labyrinths as an unnecessarily complicated walk (like golf), until I found myself suddenly lost. Michele pointed out to me that labyrinths help us to focus on the next few steps ahead on the path, rather than trying to figure out the whole big picture. When I stepped into the labyrinth at High Park, I finally really understood what Psalm 119 meant by its reference to "*Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path*". The lamp illuminates what's nearby, but doesn't show the whole route through to the destination. Likewise in the labyrinth, there was never any doubt about the next steps to take, and equally, there was no sense of getting progressively closer to the centre of the labyrinth. Step by step, I had to continue a journey in faith, giving up a sense of control over how and when I would get to the centre. And as we confront climate change today, and in the weeks and months and years ahead, what we are going to need most is a clear sense of our next steps, and the faith to keep putting one foot ahead of the other.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 – A time to tear and a time to mend

Part of that clarity comes to us in today's reading from Ecclesiastes. In some of the Bible's most famous verses (thanks to the Byrds' musical adaptation), the Teacher (or Solomon) lays out his observations about life's many and varied seasons. It is a clear-eyed view from an older person's perspective about what really is going on around them. And just like my own grandparents, it has a few zingers that make us cringe....

The passage is poetic in its contrasting couplets, listing out the best and worst of our human experience. Among other things, it's a reminder that, regardless of the season we find ourselves in, time will bring change. There is celebration, lament and transformation. There is the observation that life comes with unavoidable difficulties. That grief is a price of love; that searches come to an end one way or another, that joy and laughter are valuable travel companions, and that keeping and letting go must be balanced. There's lots here that resonates with our lives...

But one line stuck out to me when I thought about the path ahead: *a time to tear and a time to mend*. It brings to mind fabric, and the sound it makes when torn (*tear fabric here*). In the time of Salomon, tearing one's clothes was a more common expression of grief and lament. There is an earthiness in many Jewish traditions and the physicality of tearing something we value seems to briefly make visible our inner anguish. There is wisdom in rituals that allow our emotional life to have a physical expression, and help move us along in the grieving process.

While this connotation of tearing plays a role in our lamenting over the damage done to creation, I wanted to focus on a second interpretation: that we may need to engage in some tearing at the societal level as part of our response to climate change. Now before you all go home and rummage for your brass knuckles and tire irons, the tearing I have in mind has more to do with simple presence on the lawn at Queen's Park. I can see that it may be necessary to tear away at the indifference shown by government to an issue they feel they can afford to ignore. I see that lawn filled with people, regular people with all the traits of the TUMC welcome statement. I see that lawn filled to overflowing with our brothers and sisters from the First Nations, from Rosedale, from Rexdale, 416/905, Niagara and Napanee. I see a tenacity and a willingness to stay the course,

until understanding and resolve flows down from those front steps and floods across the lawn in a cool and welcome wave of joy and relief.

This is also a time to mend. To mend our hearts and our ways. Climate change is an issue that can degenerate into fear mongering, name calling and endless worry. We are burdened by our shame, the load we carry and our need to be right. But I see on that great expanse of lawn those who believe we should focus on adaptations such as flood proofing, those who disagree with me, those who favour nuclear power, those who want to target emission reduction and those who want to extract emissions from the air. So many viewpoints, and all with a role to play in the solution. What we cannot afford to do is repeat the debacle that is transit planning in Toronto, where the focus on the **best** plan has become the enemy of the good plan.

The need to mend also extends into our own lives. We have some hard choices to make about where our food comes from, how we get around, where and why we travel, what our thermostat settings are. Perhaps we can be helped in making better choices when carbon facts become as common as nutrition facts on the sides of our packaging, when the stickers at the gas pump are modelled after those on a cigarette package. I don't want to focus too much on our consumer behaviours, because while it matters, it matters less than transforming our thinking about our citizen behaviour. Part of our paralysis on this issue is our ingrained starting position, as individuals and consumers, rather than congregations and communities. As Swedish student and activist Greta Thunberg puts it, in her refreshingly blunt way, climate change has already been solved; we just need the collective will to get on with the job.

A final piece of mending work I want to mention has to do with those who've toiled in the oil and gas sector, bringing us decades and decades of reliable, easy to use fuels that were always in demand. I'm thinking specifically of Alberta here, and the mutual suspicion that's broken out again along Canada's east-west divide. Our family lived there for almost a decade, and I can tell you that you'd be hard pressed to find a group of more decent, humble and warm people anywhere across the country. But Albertans are hurt right now as the world begins to move away from their primary export. And the behaviours we see on display are in many ways, I believe, a reaction to that hurt. We need to apply a bit of Maree Kondo's simplicity teachings to this issue. We need to

acknowledge people's past hard work and effort, and offer our thanks for supplying a steady stream of hydrocarbon energy, an era which is beginning to sunset. We need to do this bit of mending to release our Albertan brothers and sisters, as well as ourselves, so we can all get on with preparing for our future.

Matthew 6:19-24 – Where our treasure is

We also heard Jesus' words in Matthew about treasure and our hearts. In typical Sermon on the Mount fashion, the words are arresting: *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Pause)*. 2000 years before we knew we had a problem, Jesus put his finger on the problem. Climate change is not a head problem, it's a heart problem. Facts, figures and parts per million are not going to mobilize us into action. The inconvenient truth of the matter is that climate change is an awkward collision between our treasure and our planet. Intensive fossil fuel use has created, and still creates, tremendous amounts of wealth and prosperity in the industrialized societies. We are reluctant to give that up, because we have grown accustomed to getting more out than we put in: more fruits and reward for our labour relative to our effort; fossil fuels have let us put a finger on the scale. And yet the evidence keeps piling up that creation is groaning under our ill-informed attempts at dominance. Canada is warming at twice the global rate, with an increase in forest fires, floods and loss of permafrost among the visible signs of distress. But we resist accepting in our hearts that we have a problem at the personal level. Perhaps it's our shame, our complicity? If I'm honest with myself, I think it's because I don't like the stark simplicity of the last line of the passage from Matthew: You cannot serve both God and Money. I can tell that I want to bargain – what about the environment and economy prospering together? It's not my fault that I was born into such a big carbon footprint. What if the neighbours don't do their part, and I make these sacrifices for nothing? Do you recognize any of these from your own bargaining?

Conclusions

It's notable that Jesus follows up these harsh words about treasure with counsel about not worrying, which Cedric spoke about last week. He knows our troubled relationship between stockpiling and worry, and instead directs us to seek first the kingdom of God as our priority. By placing this first, we are freed from the suffocating power of the

anxieties of life (though there still will be occasional worries), from the need to know the whole path through the labyrinth, and we can begin to work on the next steps immediately before us...I'll finish with a look at three....

1) Action

Love your neighbour. Feed my sheep. Look after the sick. Jesus' commands us to take action on, not necessarily solve, the issues that usher in the Kingdom of God. I don't think it's a big leap to assume that list now includes caring for Mother Earth in the form of climate actions. It comes down to some basic issues, which are hard because they tear at the status quo. Get to know your carbon footprint, and be prepared to spend money and time to reduce it. Help deal with existing emissions by figuring out ways to capture excess amounts of CO₂ already in the atmosphere....this could be as simple as planting trees, or as complex as direct air capture and sequestration techniques. Help prepare your neighbourhood for the effects of a changing climate, starting with heavier rainfalls. And because we need to work collectively, not just individually, host a "More for Less" potluck with those same neighbours. Consider spending some time on the lawn, pushing for political change to make all climate workstreams easier and more visible.

2) Unity

If there's something the world needs more of these days, it's unity. We can all find reasons to disagree with those outside our identity bubbles, aided and abetted by our devices and their curated information streams. This is an area where the church, and specifically the Mennonite church can be an example of how to deal with difference, without tuning out. Think of our welcoming statement. And our potlucks. Though we won't always agree with those who approach climate change differently, let's heed Paul's advice on being one body with many parts as we move ahead.

3) Hope

Once we make the difficult decision to lean in to the problem of climate change, there are signs of hope everywhere. There are students around the world stepping out of class to protest inaction. There are emerging groups like Extinction Rebellion, with thousands of members willing to bring central London to a standstill. There is intensive multi-

disciplinary research figuring out how to better collaborate with the earth and augment her stabilizing systems. And within those intricate systems of life, there is so still much we don't know, so many plants, animals and fungi all making their hidden contribution to the workings of our wonderful planet. Keep an eye out for algae...I think it's going to be one of the heavy lifters.

In conclusion, climate change is one of our big challenges, and its effects are being felt now. In the midst of our actions, let us also take comfort in Jesus words from Matthew: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"*

As we begin to catch our breath and work our way into the labyrinth, let us be thankful for the breath of life, never taking for granted this wonderful earth that is God's creation, and working together with its fauna, flora and fungi for its wellbeing.

Amen.