

John Docherty, August 21, 2014
Creation Care

It may seem a little bit odd; a little bit out of character for me; and maybe even a little bit creepy, but I'd like to begin this meditation by quoting our Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

There are a few quotes. The first is from his address to the APEC summit in 2007 in Australia:

“Take one of the most important international public policy challenges of our time: the growing menace of climate change. The weight of scientific evidence holds that our atmosphere is getting hotter; that human activity is a significant contributor; and that there *will be* serious consequences for all life on Earth. The physical evidence is already there for us to see ... we want to be a global leader in the fight against global warming, and in the development of clean energy technology.”

The second quote is from his address to the Israeli Knesset in January of this year.

In his address to the Knesset, Harper underlined his government's unequivocal support of Israel, and he couched it, in part, with this statement :

“This is a very Canadian trait, to do something for no reason other than it is right even when no immediate reward for, or threat to, ourselves is evident ... It is, thus, a Canadian tradition to stand for what is principled and just, regardless of whether it is convenient or popular.”

The third quote is from a statement he made during a visit of the Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, in June of this year :

“... no country is going to undertake actions on climate change - no matter what they say - that are going to deliberately destroy jobs and growth in their country. We are just a little more frank about that, but that is the approach that every country is taking.”

Tony Abbott, for his part, said climate change is a “significant problem” but he said it is not the “most important problem the world faces.”

I'd like to tie Harper's first and third quotes to his second. The obvious irony is that he is absolutely unwilling to do what is principled and just when it comes to the environment. How very un-Canadian of him.

But I don't want to be overly harsh on Harper on this point. Because, quite frankly, I fear that he's right. Unless there's a political cost for ignoring the science behind the state of our climate, governments will continue to ignore that science and will refuse to act. Unless they can be convinced that it is in their best interest, short-term, to act on climate change, they will not act.

But I also don't want to be overly harsh on governments around the world on this point. Because, quite frankly, unless we, as citizens, are convinced that it is in our own best interest to have them act on climate change, we will not act either.

For some of us, our notion of our best interest will take a long view, and we will be prepared to take the steps necessary to protect the environment for the sake of the planet and everything in it. We will recognize that our own standard of living may well be affected by reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, but we will accept that as the price of establishing balance in our lives.

For some of us, the notion of best interest will also need to be on the short-term for us to act. In other areas of our lives, we usually know what is good for us : we know we shouldn't smoke; we know we should exercise; we know we shouldn't be overweight; we know we should eat more vegetables; we know we shouldn't speed; we know we should take better care of ourselves.

We know these things.

The information is available to us, and the evidence is fairly solid, but we continue to smoke, or live sedentary lives, or drink too much, or speed, or engage in other behaviours that we know are detrimental to us.

Where the environment, and climate change, is concerned, most of us accept the science behind the predictions of calamity to come. We see the reports on TV; we see the images of melting glaciers and diminishing arctic ice; we experience first-hand the wild and unpredictable weather patterns that are developing.

Apart from climate change, we hear stories of species extinction; collapsing bee colonies; disappearing rainforests; the elimination of diverse habitats to make way for various kinds of monocultures.

We hear stories of mineral extraction practices that pollute local environments beyond repair and leave a human toll of abuse and destruction.

In preparing for this message, I realised that I was being drowned in information. I knew that the questions of the environment, climate change, free-market capitalism, resource extraction, consumerism and human rights were all interlinked; that all of these play a part in defining the world we inhabit and exploit.

I knew that tackling the issue of creation care would be complicated.

I knew that.

But as I read this article, and read that article; as I waded through this study guide and that set of sermon notes; as I followed this line of thought and that possible means of attack; I got more and more mired in a surplus of data, differing perspectives, and discouragement.

Not to mention the results of the Scottish referendum on independence ...

I realised that I was hopelessly out of my depth in trying to offer a coherent meditation on what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus when it comes to taking care of our environment.

I've said before that I know that when it comes to an issue as complex as climate change that I'm not smart enough to brave an answer to the question of what we need to do in response.

Of course, a simple approach would be to acknowledge that the environment is vulnerable to our misuse of it; that we each have a role to play in ensuring that we, individually and collectively, live on this planet in a way that is responsible, sustainable, and just.

As a member of a community of faith, I could choose to read from Genesis chapter 2, verse 15 : "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" and I could highlight the fact that the human race was placed in Eden to nurture, enjoy, and benefit from its environment, with all of the positive nuance that image carries, rather than to "subdue and have dominion over it", as

we read in the first chapter of Genesis, along with all of the negative nuance that *that* image carries.

Either way, the Biblical picture of our relationship to creation isn't without its difficulties. I don't think the two versions of the creation story we have in Genesis 1 and 2 are necessarily contradictory. Certainly the two images of tilling and keeping versus subduing and having dominion over are not necessarily contradictory, depending on how we understand the charge, and how we act on that understanding.

But other Biblical examples of God's treatment of this creation are a little more difficult to understand and reconcile with our own concern for the environment. Think of Noah's flood and the near extinction of everything on the planet. Think of the final destruction of everything by fire that we find in the Book of Revelation.

Mind you, God is God, and, as Creator, certainly has the right to treat this creation in any way that seems fit. And, the Revelation passage *does* promise a new heaven and a new earth; a re-creation of Earth as it was originally intended.

We, on the other hand, are not God, and we *have* been charged with taking care of this planet in every way :

- in establishing *responsible* structures to ensure that our use of resources has an impact on the environment that is minimal;
- in establishing *just* structures to manage the resources available to us - meaning structures that balance our need for resources with our need to treat fairly with those who are affected by our need for those resources.
- in tempering our desire for resources with a reasonable level of need – meaning abandoning consumerism for a more rational approach to life that is content with much less.

The big question, of course, is “how do we get there?”.

On an individual level we can choose to change our lifestyles : stop driving our cars; limit our consumption of resources to a fair level; opt to take our vacations locally rather than flying halfway around the world or driving halfway across the country; be more disciplined in our reducing, reusing, and recycling.

But we're told that individual change may not be enough at this stage.

We're told that we need to take more drastic steps if we want to halt and reverse the damage we've already caused.

In preparing this meditation I decided to avoid statistics, data, numbers, etc. I suspect that a lack of information is not the problem.

But I would like to direct your attention to the website of Citizens for Public Justice. They've pulled together a vast amount of resources on the subject, including information packages, study packets prepared by the Canadian Council of Churches, videos, suggestions for actions, etc.

I'd encourage all of us to look their material over, and draw inspiration from their work.

And I'd like to close this meditation by quoting from one of the resource materials on their site. The quote is from a person by the name of Joy Kennedy, and is taken from a document entitled "Living Faithfully into a New Climate : A Bible Study on Creation Advocacy and Care."

It's a bit of a reworking of the message of Jeremiah, and a bit of an oblique jab at our current government's muzzling of the prophetic voices of our own scientists.

"An honest seeker of truth, Jeremiah listened deeply to God. He read the signs, reached evidence-based conclusions and made scientific projections – and then he went public. Faithful prophetic vision propelled him to proclaim what he knew. Jeremiah's family tried to silence him. The king denied everything in Jeremiah's written report and recklessly burned it to suppress it; he wanted him muzzled, even killed. Later, uneasy, he secretly questioned the prophet and let him go. The ruler and his coterie tried their utmost to maintain the myth of growth and exploitation of the land and people. Fortunately Jeremiah kept a copy of the fact-filled report for posterity. What was this terrible message? Utter destruction of the land-based natural resource economy. Financial calamity. Complete social disintegration. And, the need to abandon their arrogant, idol-worshipping, greedy ways. They had not practiced God's covenantal Jubilee principles – righting relationships and resting the land – but had disobediently built up a false economy of overconsumption and debt. There would be droughts and floods and other disasters. Everyone would be forced from their stratified business-as-usual society, exiled and enslaved. The catastrophe would affect all the surrounding region – eventually going global – and the poorest would, as usual, suffer the most. Jeremiah realized this was a systemic problem. He knew that the ultimate decision

*was made far above ordinary people. Still, there was individual responsibility, so he settled his personal property affairs. Some people got it and began to distrust the regime; some fled to Babylon's safety as refugees; the very poorest were left behind to survive as best they could on the depleted land. The king and his retinue were killed or imprisoned. The land was laid waste. Generations later the people repented and gradually returned – hopefully to live in a new and sustainable way that honoured the covenant with all Creation. It didn't last. **Fast forward to October 2011.** Over 60 leaders of Canadian faith communities issued the Canadian Interfaith Call for Leadership and Action on Climate Change, expressing their profound ethical concern and united conviction that the growing crisis of climate change must draw upon moral and spiritual resources. “We recognize that at its root the unprecedented human contribution to climate change is symptomatic of a spiritual deficit: excessive self-interest, destructive competition, and greed have given rise to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. Humanity's relationship with the environment has become distorted by actions that compromise the welfare of future generations of life ... With strong leadership, we can put the long-term interest of humanity and the planet ahead of economic concerns. Religious organizations – and all other societal actors – can play important roles in promoting ethical consumption, sustainable lifestyles, and daily practices to promote a future of security, prosperity, and justice – for humankind, and the whole of creation. There may yet be time.”*