

## What would Jesus say about... 4. Climate Change

Genesis 1:25-31a; Matthew 6:26-29

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Last week, the weather forecast for the week was hot and sunny, but instead, it was smokey and hot. That there was a forest fire was nothing new. There have been forest fires ever since there were forest fires. That there would be a forest fire in Canada that would impact the air that we breath – even that was not new. But that this effect is becoming an annual occurrence, that's what is new. Our climate is changing. A recent poll by Pew Research found that climate change and how we care for the earth is one of the top ten problems facing this nation. In this final message in our series on issues that we are facing, I want to look at how scripture understand our relationship with the Earth and what Jesus might say about climate change.

There is a generational divide over how critical this issue is – and I get it. At best, I only have another 30 years and weather patterns and season may change, but there are a lot of other concerns that are going to impact my life. But for my children and my grandson and one day his grandson, what I do today will have implications long after I'm gone. There's also a political divide over climate change. Is it real? And even if it is real, is it something humans are causing or is it a natural cycle in the way our planet works? And even scientists are not in 100% agreement. 80-90% of earth scientists say climate change is caused by humans, and we can do something about it, but a small percentage say that isn't clear. And if you've been on the Internet or listen to news report, you can hear a lot of different voices. So, let's begin with what the Bible says.

In Genesis 1, we find an almost poetic understanding of creation set within the seven days of a week. God began creating the heavens and the earth and everything that is. Each day there was morning and there was evening and when God looked at what had been created, God called it good. And by the sixth day, God made humans as the crowning act of creation – made in the image of God. And by the end of that sixth day, **God saw everything God had made: it was supremely good.** What we learn is that God created everything that exists – the planet, all of the parts, the laws of nature and how all of the parts work together. It is not accidental but purposeful – everything in its own way. As the Psalmist says: **The earth is the LORD's and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants too. Because God is the one who established it** (Psalm 24:1-2) But do you know the first commandment that God gave? It's right there in our scripture for today. Verse 28: **Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth** And we figured out how to do that and how that's rather fun to do – and now there are over 7.5 billion people on this planet. But there's a second part to this command, and it's the first ethical teaching of the Bible – even before “love your neighbor.” **master it. Take charge.**

Last week, ten of our staff spent two days together on a retreat. At one point, I shared my first experience of taking charge. The summer after I graduated from high school, I was hired by a seed corn company to supervise middle school and high school kids as they detasseled corn. My family had just moved to Montevideo, and after a few days of training I was given charge of two buses filled with kids I didn't know. When the buses arrived at a corn field, I told the kids what to do and how they wouldn't have a job if they didn't do what I said. And within two weeks, only a half a bus remained and a week later I didn't have a job because there was nobody left to supervise – either I had fired them or they quit because of how they were being treated. I took charge – my way or the highway. And frankly, it was a painful lesson that completely changed how I looked at leadership. That's not what God meant by taking charge. To take charge doesn't mean I get to do what I want, because there is a greater purpose. My responsibility is to serve

that greater purpose. God is saying, “Human beings, you are responsible for my creation. You are responsible for the earth. You are responsible to care for **the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.** This is us. No matter what you think about climate change, God has given us this commandment to be responsible for the earth.

Last week, I came across a video that was made on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the photo of the earth taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts. Several astronauts were interviewed about their experience of being in space and seeing the earth – something that was a deeply spiritual experience. Here’s a short excerpt from that video. [video] That we even exist, and that this planet exists is something we take for granted every day, but the truth is – there is a very delicate balance on this earth – and a thin blue line that protects us from outer space and makes it possible for us to live. But this planet is changing. Our climate is changing. Since 1880, here’s how the climate on earth has been changing. [video] Blue is cooler and yellow is warmer. The last decade has been the warmest decade on record. Today, there is very little debate about whether the earth is warming. The average temperature is up 1.8 degrees in the past 30 years, and if that trend continues every 30 years, by the end of this century it will be up 6 degrees. At first, that doesn’t sound so bad – who wouldn’t enjoy a Minnesota winter that would be six degrees warmer. But that change affects this delicate balance – and what happens if certain bugs don’t die off during the winter or what crops can be grown or how the water temperature will affect the fish. And if the ice caps melt, increasing sea levels, it will displace hundreds of millions of people. Temperature changes are nothing new. Over the course of the 4.5 billion years of this planet, there have been temperature changes. But in the past, the changes happened very slowly giving more time for the planet, plants, and animals to adapt.

Another thing we hear about is the Greenhouse Effect, something I remember from science class. The Greenhouse Effect is a natural process that warms the Earth’s surface. The sun’s energy reaches the Earth’s atmosphere, and some of it is reflected back to space and the rest is absorbed and re-radiated by greenhouse gases. These gases are like a blanket to keep the earth warm enough that we can inhabit. What happens if you put too many blankets on your bed at night? At first, you don’t notice but as you get warmer you start kicking off the blankets because you are too warm. But the earth can’t do that. There is this delicate balance that God created. We breath in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, and plants breath in carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen. All parts of creation depend on each other. And there is enough plant life on Earth to absorb all the carbon dioxide that humans exhale, but the problem is that carbon dioxide is produced a lot of other ways. The cars we drive, airplanes, power plants, fires – and the Earth ends up with more carbon dioxide than plants can absorb and so the blanket of greenhouse gases increases, holding in more and more heat.

What can we do? We can do nothing and adapt as we can and that may work for you and me at least in this country and in our lifetimes, but what about the next generation? And what about people who already live in drought stricken parts of the world or coastal lands being lost who cannot move. Or places where floods that happened every hundred years are happening nearly every year? We can do nothing and try to live with the consequences. Or we can do something. As caretakers of God’s world, we could reduce our consumption – choose things like LED lightbulb – which we did throughout this building – drive cars more efficient vehicles – some have installed solar panels. But even if we do all that we can, it will not solve the problem because the problem is too big. We need new ways of doing agriculture and creating power and doing this worldwide. And it will take persons who will advocate for that. What I find hopeful are young people like Greta Thunberg, Swedish teenager who began speaking up at age 15, addressed the United Nations, became Time Magazine’s Person of the Year and was even

nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by the time she turned 18 – advocating for a better world. You are never too small or too young to make a difference.

What would Jesus say about all this? Jesus never addressed climate change. It wasn't an issue then – and some might say, if Jesus didn't address it, neither should we. But God has put us in charge of the planet to care for it and everything in it. If we abuse the planet or mistreat it, what would we call that? Sin – right? And it's one thing when sin harms me, but to do something that harms others or fail to do something to keep others from harm that takes sin to another level. The Earth is God's masterpiece. Years ago, we were in Rome and in St. Peter's Basilica I remember seeing the Pieta, one of Michaelangelo's greatest works, depicting Mary holding the body of Jesus. In 1972 a mentally ill geologist from Hungary walked into the Cathedral and attacked the sculpture with a hammer. He broke off Mary's arm, nose, eyelid, and kept striking the sculpture until he was subdued. Though the sculpture was repaired, I could clearly see where the damage had been done. In many ways, that's how we treat God's creation when we are not caring for the Earth.

Jesus said this about how God cares for the earth. **Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them... Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dress like one of these.** God provides a planet with this delicate balance and as far as we know, there is no other planet in all of creation like this one. We've been given the responsibility to ensure the balance is maintained. Why wouldn't we do everything we can?

Last Sunday was my grandson's second birthday (you had to know I'd find a way to work his photo into this sermon). Our extended family gathered in a park in St. Paul to celebrate Basil's birthday. We had a great time, and he had the best time as the center of everyone's attention. I love that little boy more than life itself. I wonder what this world will be like when he gets to my age. That year will be 2084. The sea level will have increased. The air temperature will be another 4 degrees warmer. Then I saw this photo of Gooseberry Falls, one of my favorite places on Minnesota's North Shore. Due to our lack of rain, it is dry. But the last time I was there it looked like this. [full of water flowing over the falls] I'd like my grandson to be able to take his grandson there to see the waterfalls.

What kind of world will we leave behind? I hope we will do all that we can to fulfill God's first command: TAKE CHARGE.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 25, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** When we stop and consider you, O Lord, our hearts are stirred, and our minds are amazed. When we consider the heights and depths and grandeur of your creation, we give you praise. When we ponder our place, as humanity, in the midst of your creation, we are humbled. Help us find our true place in the garden of your creation, following the way of Jesus. Amen.

### **Monday, July 26**

#### **Scripture: Genesis 1:1-3, 24-31**

When God began to create the heavens and the earth— the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters— God said, "Let there be light." And so light appeared.

God said, “Let the earth produce every kind of living thing: livestock, crawling things, and wildlife.” And that’s what happened. God made every kind of wildlife, every kind of livestock, and every kind of creature that crawls on the ground. God saw how good it was. Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.” God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.” Then God said, “I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food.” And that’s what happened. God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good. There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.

**Observation:** This is a selection from the first of two creation stories in Genesis. The writing is poetic and was likely used in worship. Many of Israel’s neighbors in the ancient near-eastern world had their own creation stories, which tended to see violence between rival “gods” as creating the earth. The Hebrews, in contrast, saw creation as the beautiful gift of the one divine Creator. The world, they believed, came fruitful and supremely good from God’s hand.

**Application:** At the end of the week of creation, God is in a position to stand back, survey the six days’ work as a whole, and smile in satisfaction. The project has come out very well. It looks great. List 3-5 ways in which you still find the original goodness of the Creator’s intention in our world. How can you act on God’s charge to watch over and care for God’s good creation?

**Prayer:** Dear God, thank you for the gift of our beautiful, abundant earth. Help me be a faithful steward of your gifts, always mindful of my choices and their impact on your world. Amen.

## **Tuesday, July 27**

### **Scripture: Genesis 2:4-9, 15-17**

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

On the day the LORD God made earth and sky— before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew, because the LORD God hadn’t yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being to farm the fertile land, though a stream rose from the earth and watered all of the fertile land— the LORD God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life’s breath into his nostrils. The human came to life. The LORD God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed. In the fertile land, the LORD God grew every beautiful tree with edible fruit, and also he grew the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The LORD God took the human and settled him in the garden of Eden to farm it and to take care of it. The LORD God commanded the human, “Eat your fill from all of the garden’s trees; but don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it, you will die!”

**Observation:** Genesis’ second creation story was folksier and less structured. It said God created a human first, before any plants or animals. (Remember, the authors of scripture are not describing the science, but helping us understand why things are as they are.) It called God

“Yahweh” (translated “LORD”) rather than Genesis 1’s “Elohim” (God). Yahweh gave the newly created human a garden, a fertile setting in which to thrive, and charged him “to take care of it.”

**Application:** The Hebrew words for human (adam) and fertile land (adamah) sound alike and emphasize the connection between human beings and their land. This connection was natural for Israel’s mostly agricultural people. In what ways has our more industrialized, office-centered, high-tech setting robbed us of that sense of connection? Why does it matter to remember that the land still nourishes our life?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, make me ever more aware of the ways in which my choices can harm the people, the other forms of life, and even the life-sustaining earth around me. Amen.

### Wednesday, July 28

**Scripture: Matthew 6:26-30; John 1:1-5**

Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith?

In the beginning was the Word  
and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.

The Word was with God in the beginning.  
Everything came into being through the Word,  
and without the Word  
nothing came into being.

What came into being  
through the Word was life,  
and the life was the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.

**Observation:** Jesus lived in a society shaped in part by the Psalms, which spoke of all creation praising God. To teach people to trust God’s providing heart it was natural for Jesus to point to the birds and the flowers, aspects of our world we tend to take for granted or dismiss as just natural. When we begin to see the world through Jesus’ eyes, we are, John’s gospel reminded us, seeing through the discerning, appreciative eyes of the Creator.

**Application:** How could Jesus tell ordinary peasant people who often faced food insecurity not to worry? Jesus asks them instead to view the world with new eyes – to see all around them evidence of God’s care and provision. How can nature’s lasting beauty (despite too many cases of ignorant or indifferent human stewardship) help you to trust God’s care for you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, what came into being through you was life. Thank you for creating new life in me. Keep teaching me how to trust your creative power to provide what I most need in life. Amen.

**Thursday, July 29**

**Scripture: John 20:19-28; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58**

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Listen, I'm telling you a secret: All of us won't die, but we will all be changed—in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the final trumpet. The trumpet will blast, and the dead will be raised with bodies that won't decay, and we will be changed. It's necessary for this rotting body to be clothed with what can't decay, and for the body that is dying to be clothed in what can't die. And when the rotting body has been clothed in what can't decay, and the dying body has been clothed in what can't die, then this statement in scripture will happen:

*Death has been swallowed up by a victory.*

*Where is your victory, Death?*

*Where is your sting, Death?*

(Death's sting is sin, and the power of sin is the Law.) Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! As a result of all this, my loved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.

**Observation:** Jesus' response to Thomas and his doubts showed that the risen Jesus did not discard his human body. It clearly had some new qualities, but still bore the scars of crucifixion. So the apostle Paul didn't say in 1 Corinthians 15 that we will be replaced. Rather, we will be changed; our mortal bodies "clothed" in what cannot die. Easter is the start of God's new creation. It has already begun! And we who believe in Jesus are to become, in the power of his spirit, not only beneficiaries of that new creation but also agents.

**Application:** In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle boldly proclaimed a divine victory so sweeping and comprehensive that death itself would be "swallowed up," and would be no more. But he didn't then say, "So relax and wait for the resurrection." No. He wrote, "You must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord." How can you trust that every effort to make the world more like the kingdom of God "isn't going to be for nothing"?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, thank you for winning the biggest victory of all on my behalf. Thank you for calling me to grow, stretch and become more than I am as I join in your victorious work. Amen.

## Friday, July 30

### **Scripture: Romans 8:19-22**

The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice— it was the choice of the one who subjected it— but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now.

**Observation:** For much of human history, most people thought of the earth as a given, assuming that the air or the rivers and lakes would remain clean no matter what we put into them. But 2000 years ago, the apostle Paul understood that not just human beings but the whole creation was suffering from the effects of departing from God's path. Yet he didn't write in despair. He had great hope.

**Application:** Economic and political factors have made understanding the causes of more intense tropical storms or the disastrous wildfires in California and Oregon controversial. But no matter how you understand causation, it's hard to deny that these conditions and others fit Paul's phrase that "the whole creation is groaning together." How can God's people be actively involved in relieving the suffering in our world?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, help me to care about your creation the way you do. Show me how I can better care for your world and help me encourage the people in my life to do the same. Amen.

## Saturday, July 31

### **Scripture: Revelation 11:15-18, 21:1-5, 22:1-3**

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, and he will rule forever and always." Then the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God. They said, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and was, for you have taken your great power and enforced your rule. The nations were enraged, but your wrath came. The time came for the dead to be judged. The time came to reward your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth."

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

**Observation:** In the Biblical creation stories (Genesis 1 and 2), God made human beings stewards to care for and protect God's good earth, not the owners who were allowed to exploit and ravage the planet's people, living creatures and resources. The seer of Revelation said the time would come when God would destroy those who wickedly destroy the earth (specifically, in his focus, the brutal Roman emperors and those who served them). But his great vision didn't stop there. The vision was Paradise restored. With images from the prophet Isaiah as well as the Genesis creation stories, the writer described the world as God meant it to be, full of harmony, beauty and well-being.

**Application:** Every day natural or man-made disasters, illnesses, some large or small economic factor declining or the world scene getting more hostile can make it feel as though the news is trying to snuff out hope. In whom do you place your confidence that "the worst thing is never the last thing"? Do you trust that Jesus meant it when he promised to make "all things new"? Can you live in hope that, in the end, God will win, restoring you and the world you live in?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I yearn for the day when you make all things new. Empower me to live and work for good with trust and hope in a world painfully short of both. Amen.