

## Climate Injustice, Truth-telling, and Hope

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### *God's Beloved Human Creatures: Called to Love*

It is an astounding moment in time to be people who serve the God revealed in Jesus. We who stake our lives on the promises of this God have been given truths that shake the foundations of the world. The first—or beginning point—is God's love. Nothing is surer, no truth stronger than this breath-taking claim of Christian faith: that God—the Light of life, the creating, liberating, healing, sustaining Source—loves this world and each of us with a love that will not diminish, a love more powerful than any other force in heaven or earth.

Next, this God is at play in the world, breathing life into it. This Spirit is present within, among, and beyond us. But that is not all. We human creatures are created and called to recognize this gracious and indomitable love, receive it, relish it, revel in it, and trust it.

Finally, after receiving and trusting God's love—being claimed by it—we are then called to embody it in the world by loving as God loves. We are beckoned to join with God's Spirit of justice-making, Earth-relishing Love in its steadfast commitment to gain fullness of life for all.

According to a widespread understanding of the Christian story, this is the human vocation, our life's work. We are called and given this reason for being. Two millennia of Christians and the Hebrew

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people before them have sought to heed this calling to “love the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). “Our responsibility as Christians,” Martin Luther King, Jr., declared, “is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.”<sup>1</sup> What love is and requires in each new time and place is the great moral question permeating Christian history.

What does loving mean for the world’s high consumers if, through climate change, we are threatening the Earth’s God-given capacity to generate life? Never before in this three or four millennia-old faith tradition have the stakes in heeding our call to neighbor-love been so high.

### *Truth-telling*

I am haunted by the contradiction between this reason for being—to love as God loves—and the hidden realities of our collective lives, what some call structural sin, especially in relationship to climate change. Entering into conversation and reflection on these realities and then daring to heed this contradiction draws us into a stark, seemingly godforsaken landscape—a terrain from which I for one would far rather flee. But hear me well: we will not stay in that stark terrain. We will move from it into life-giving hope. So we step with courage to look briefly at the unprecedented moral crisis facing the generations of people sharing life on Earth today, as a consequence of our collective lives.

The intimate Mystery that we call God must have an insatiable hunger for life and, moreover, for life that creates ever-more abundant and complex life. Indeed, the monotheistic traditions hold in common one reality: God created a fruitful Earth, a planet that spawns and supports life with a complexity and generosity beyond human ken. Fundamental to Christian and Jewish faith is the claim that it is “good” (Genesis 1). According to Genesis’ first creation story, “God saw that it was *tov*.” The Hebrew *tov*, while often translated as “good,” also implies “life-furthering.” And God said time and again that this creation was *tov*—a good that is life-furthering.

Herein lies a harrowing theological problem. The primal act of God—creation—is not merely to create a magnificent world. This

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” in *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 48.

God creates a magnificently *life-furthering* world. The scandalous point is this. We are *undoing* that very *tov*, undoing Earth's life-generating capacity. We—or rather, some of us—have become the “uncreators.” Indeed, one young and dangerous species has become a threat to life on Earth. The credible scientific community is of one accord about this basic reality, and hundreds of its widely respected voices have been articulating it for over two decades.

Less widely accepted, however, is a corollary point of soul-searing moral import. The horrific consequences of climate change are not suffered equally by Earth's people. Nor are the world's people equally responsible. Those least responsible for the Earth's crisis are suffering and dying first and foremost from it.

Some time ago, I was invited to India to work with church and seminary leaders on matters of eco-justice. They gently taught me to re-see climate change as “climate colonialism.” “Climate change,” declared one Indian church leader, “is caused by the colonization of the atmospheric commons.” When powerful nations “extract from the atmospheric commons disproportionately,” they pollute the atmosphere and “emit greenhouse gases beyond the capacity of the planet to withstand.” At the same time, communities which do not emit such gases are “forced to bear the brunt of the consequences of global warming.”<sup>2</sup>

Climate change, I learned, may be the most far reaching manifestation of white privilege and class privilege yet to face humankind. What do I mean? Climate change is caused overwhelmingly by the world's high-consuming people in economically “developed” nations, yet it is wreaking death and destruction first and foremost on the impoverished and vulnerable peoples of the world.

The estimated 600 million environmental refugees whose lands will be lost to rising seas if Antarctica or Greenland melt significantly will be disproportionately people of color, as are the 25 million environmental refugees already suffering the consequences of global warming. So too the people who will go hungry when global warming diminishes crop yields of the world's food staples—corn, rice, and wheat. The 40 percent of the world's population whose lives depend upon water from the seven rivers fed by rapidly diminishing Himalayan glaciers are largely not white people. As recognized in “The Future We Want,” the outcome document of the United Nations' Conference

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<sup>2</sup> From a conversation with the Rev. Christopher Rajkumar, executive secretary of the Commission on Justice, Peace, and Creation, National Council of Churches in India.

on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, climate change and sea-level rise “represent the gravest threats to their survival” for some island nations, some of which could cease to exist in their current locations as a result of rising sea levels.<sup>3</sup> The rising seas could also threaten more than 25 percent of Africa’s people,<sup>4</sup> producing climate refugees. It goes without saying that these nations are composed predominantly of people who are not white.

Numerous studies link climate change to hunger. Oxfam’s “Extreme Weather, Extreme Prices” report declares: “Increased hunger is likely to be one of climate change’s most savage impacts on humanity.”<sup>5</sup> Large-scale Amazon dieback would drastically affect ecosystems, rivers, agriculture, energy production, and livelihoods. With global warming, dry places will become dryer and wet places wetter. If “free market” rules govern food prices, during droughts the poorest starve. Desertification, which will strike hard in the Arab world and southern Africa, also provokes war; it was a factor in the Darfur conflict.

Within the United States, too, economically marginalized people are most vulnerable to ongoing suffering from the extreme storms, illness, and food insecurity brought on by climate change. The Oakland Climate Action Coalition warns that between three and five thousand Oakland residents live in areas likely to be flooded with a 1.0 and 1.4 meter rise in sea levels. Nearly 90 percent of them live in areas that are low income, non-white, or non-English speaking.<sup>6</sup> Environmental racism and white privilege strike again in climate change.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Future We Want,” Outcome Document, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), June 20–22, 2012, §31; <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/futurewewant.html>. See also Hannah Brock, “Climate Change: Drivers of Insecurity and the Global South,” Oxford Research Group, June 1, 2012; [http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing\\_papers\\_and\\_reports/climate\\_change\\_drivers\\_insecurity\\_and\\_global\\_south](http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefing_papers_and_reports/climate_change_drivers_insecurity_and_global_south).

<sup>4</sup> Monica Juma, “Security and Regional Cooperation in Africa: How Can We Make Africa’s Security Architecture Fit for the New Challenges?” in *Climate Change, Resources, Migration: Securing Africa in an Uncertain Climate*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, August 2009; [https://www.iisd.org/pdf/2010/climate\\_resources\\_migration\\_africa.pdf](https://www.iisd.org/pdf/2010/climate_resources_migration_africa.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> “Extreme Weather, Extreme Hunger: The Costs of Feeding a Warming World,” Oxfam International, September 2012; [www.oxfam.org/en/research/extreme-weather-extreme-prices](http://www.oxfam.org/en/research/extreme-weather-extreme-prices).

<sup>6</sup> *Community-Based Climate Adaptation Planning: Case Study of Oakland, California*, Pacific Institute, July 2012, 16; <http://pacinst.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2014/04/community-based-climate-planning-Oakland.pdf>.

Truth-telling reveals the unthinkable, the unbearable: Just by housing, feeding, clothing, and transporting ourselves, we cut down the life chances of countless neighbors. By doing nothing or little, we actively bring on the catastrophe. But truth-telling demands digging deeper. That some cause climate change while others suffer most from it is but the first layer of the travesty. Jesus cries out: “Have you not eyes to see?” A people freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor is called to see more deeply. The second layer is no less horrific. Climate-privileged societies and sectors—like us—may respond to climate change in ways that protect us from its worst impacts while relegating the nations and sectors that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change—the “climate vulnerable”—to devastation.<sup>7</sup>

The third layer is this: Measures to reduce carbon emissions designed by privileged sectors may further damage poor and marginalized communities. A recent study on the impact of climate change and the political economy on India notes that climate change has “two sets of impacts” on vulnerable people. One is the actual impact of climate change. The second originates from actions that governments, corporations, and industries take “in the name of mitigating climate change,” such as genetically modified plants, large-scale “energy plantations” seeking to produce “green fuel,” and large dams built for the production of energy.<sup>8</sup> Food is lost when crops go for bio-fuel instead of food. In these and many other ways the climate crisis reinforces the very forms of injustice that neighbor-love calls us to dismantle.

Facing realities such as these breeds despair and powerlessness. To acknowledge the widespread suffering that may be linked to my material abundance would be tormenting. How could I live with the knowledge if I truly took it in? And if I dare to see, then I view also the power and complexity of structural injustice. Where would I find the moral-spiritual power to transgress tidal waves of political and economic forces lined up to maintain those complex systems that

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<sup>7</sup> As defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “vulnerability” refers to “the degree to which a system is susceptible to, or unable to cope with, adverse effects of climate change.” IPCC Working Group 2, *Third Assessment Report, Annex B: Glossary of Terms*, 2001; <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/glossary/tar-ipcc-terms-en.pdf>. I use “climate privilege” to indicate nations and sectors most able to adapt to or prevent those impacts, or less vulnerable to them.

<sup>8</sup> Soumya Dutta, Soumitra Ghosh, Shankar Gopalakrishnan, C. R. Bijoy, and Hadida Yasmin, *Climate Change and India: Analysis of Political Economy and Impact* (New Delhi: Daanish Books, 2013), 12.

benefit a few while damaging so many? A sense of inevitability may suck away our hope.

I speak straight from the heart here. As a young person I first learned about structural injustice through my church youth group. At a regional youth convention, I saw a film portraying the brutal exploitation of workers in the Dominican Republic that was committed by large global corporations in the quest to maximize profit. Soon I began to learn more and more about structural injustice, especially economic exploitation. Utterly appalled, I became involved in organizing teach-ins, demonstrations, and projects to address hunger. I longed for the churches to be more involved, and by the time I had finished high school I was deeply discouraged by what I felt was untenable disinterest on the part of the church. To make a long story short, I fell into profound despair that lasted for years. I know viscerally the despair that can come from looking honestly at structural sin and our engulfment in it. (I will say more shortly about how the Spirit has helped to lift me from that despair.)

However—and this is crucial—an alternative, justice-making response to the climate catastrophe is utterly possible. This crisis could catalyze far more equitable, democratic, and compassionate ways of living and organizing our life in common. If the body of Christ on Earth has any calling today—and *it does*—it is to insist with prophetic fervor and fierce love that our societal response to the climate crisis serves the good of the vulnerable rather than furthering climate injustice. This will mean faithful resistance, revisioning, and rebuilding.

### *Seeds of Hope and Moral Power*

How then shall we live? Wherein lies the moral courage to face the truth and not run from it, the vision and wisdom to repent and change direction? Wherein lies the moral–spiritual power to embody neighbor-love in the world today?

At this—the testing point of human history—something new is asked of humankind: to forge ways of living that serve and protect garden Earth and that enable all to have the necessities for a fruitful life. Where something new is asked of humankind, something new is asked of religion: to plumb the depths of our traditions for wellsprings of moral–spiritual vision, hope, and courage, and offer these to the broader public. Christian traditions are fertile with theological seeds of this hope and moral–spiritual power. I will offer here just three

seeds of such hope and power. They are only a beginning; there are so many more.

*First is the resurrection promise: Life in God is more powerful than all forms of death and destruction.*

I am tempted toward despair when I acknowledge the insidious nature of climate injustice and its consequences. A subtle voice within me whispers that things will continue as they are despite our best efforts. However, the cross and resurrection defy that voice and promise otherwise. This I believe with my whole being.

When as a young person I despaired in the face of structural injustice and its pernicious impacts I realized that I needed to talk with someone who was deeply aware of structural injustice and the massive suffering it causes, and yet who maintained hope, active efforts at social transformation, and a sense of joy in living. I thought of one person, a Lutheran pastor who was a leader in religious resistance to the Trident nuclear submarines that were stationed in Puget Sound. (I was living in Seattle at this time.) He—along with his eighty-five-year-old mother!—had been in one of the small boats that were trying to block the passage of the submarines across the Sound. When I poured out to him my pain and despair, and asked him how he maintained his hope and laughter, his response was life-changing for me. He said, “You know, Cindy, I know the end of the story.” Instantly I knew what he meant: God’s life-saving, justice-seeking love is stronger than all else. In some way that we do not grasp, the last word is life raised up out of death. God “will not allow our complicity in this evil to defeat God’s being for us and for the good of all creation.”<sup>9</sup> We have heard the end of the story. In the midst of suffering and death—be it individual, social, or ecological—the promise given to the Earth community is that abundant life in God will reign. So speaks the resurrection.

In all honesty, I do not know what this promise means for Earth’s community of life. It does *not* lessen our call to build a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world; it does *not*, that is, allow us to sit back and let God do the work. That conclusion would be absurd, because God works through human beings. Nor does resurrection hope ensure our survival as a species in the face of climate change.

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 249.

It *does* ensure that the radiant Good beyond comprehension that is above, beyond, under, and within all, ultimately will bring all to the fullness of life. We are to live trusting in that promise and allow ourselves to be God's "rusty tools" (the term is Luther's) in fulfilling it.

*A second wellspring of hope is the sacramental notion of creation that is central in Anglican tradition and in a number of other Christian traditions.*

Indeed some streams of Christianity, from its earliest centuries, have affirmed that God, the One who is saving and has saved—this God—inhabits all of creation. This claim is particularly striking when uttered by theologians not commonly recognized for it. Martin Luther is one. "The power of God," he writes, "must be essentially present in all places, even in the tiniest leaf."<sup>10</sup> Christ so "fills all things" that he is "present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water."<sup>11</sup> In these claims Luther is by no means alone. The assertion of God abiding in all of creation has been present in Christian theology since its beginning.

Fascinating to me and relevant here are the implications of this theology for moral–spiritual power. We know that the Spirit of God, wherever it is, is saving and renewing the world. If God is present within the trees, waters, winds, and creatures—human creatures included—then God is at play *within us and our earthy kin to save and renew the world*. We are called to hear the healing, liberating, and transforming Word of God in Earth's creatures and elements.

Contemplate for a moment what it might mean to take seriously the Christian claim that God lives within the creatures and elements of this good Earth. How will we prepare leaders of the church to learn from a cosmos animated by the Spirit of the Living God? How will we—who may never have sought God's saving presence in the trees and waters—cultivate that capacity in the leaders of the church? If Christ indwells the Earth, then our hope and power for the work of radical love may be fed by God incarnate in the created world.

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body,' etc. Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," in *Luther's Works, Volume 37, Word and Sacrament III* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1976), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2012), 228.

*A third seed of hope is grounded in the church's commitment to community building.*

This source of hope is *theological anthropology*. It means, of course, the question of “who are we?” Who we think we are matters. The Bible teaches that we humans are—in the words of my favorite second-century theologian, Irenaeus of Lyons—“mud creatures,” crafted from soil (humans from *humus*, Adam from *adamah*). (Incidentally, in Genesis 2, this *adamah* is the same soil from which other animals are made.) Science concurs; we are children of stardust—the very elements that spewed forth some 15 billion years ago in the birth of the cosmos. Yes, this is crucial. We will understand ourselves as a *part of* Earth's community of life—rather than *apart from* it—or we will not live long as a species. We are community beings or we are dead. Moreover, we are an utterly dependent species. Countless creatures enable our bodies to live, from the tiny animals that live in our guts to the breathing trees (our external lungs, you might say) that give us oxygen. Without them neither you nor I would have awakened this day. And finally, before we are anything else, we are beloved. Each of us is beloved by a love that will not diminish regardless of whatever we do or fail to do.

But who are we as *moral* beings? Theologies throughout the ages teach that we are paradoxically two opposing things at one time. First, we are sinners, in bondage to sin, including structural sin. Yet we are also the body of Christ on Earth, called to love as God loves. We are lovers. The God whose life-giving love is more powerful than all else abides within and among us. Said differently, we are bearers of the divine Spirit—*Ruach* in the ancient Hebrew—that force of God's being that God pours into the human creature despite whatever else we are.

Biblical faith insists that *this* face of our being (body of Christ on Earth) is *more truly* us, and ultimately will prevail. This is an ancient faith claim, that God's love in Christ lives in and among us as justice-making, self-respecting, Earth-honoring love. This love is the counterpoint of structural sin, including climate sin. This is a word of hope for us, given the irrefutable perils of climate change and our implication in it.

We are both structural sinners and bearers of divine love. The way forward is to feed and water the one side of our being while we repent of the other. For this feeding and watering, I offer an image,

again from Irenaeus of Lyons. According to Irenaeus, our task as mud creatures is to remain moist with the dew of the Holy Spirit so that the two hands of God—Word and Wisdom—can mold us, and through us all of creation, into our destiny of union and communion with God. In our congregations and communities, we will ask: What practices of liturgy, prayer, eating, transportation, organizing, Bible study, community-building, advocacy, celebrating, and more will keep us moist and feed our being as God's beloved who love with God's love? We will not do so alone, but rather as communities, as people working as a body. I no longer think about what *I* can do, but rather about what *we* can do.

Christian traditions offer countless seeds of hope and moral-spiritual power. I have noted only three: (1) God's liberating and healing love, made flesh in—but not only in—a dark-skinned Jew on this fragile planetary speck called Earth, is more powerful than all forms of death and destruction; (2) God's life-saving presence is coursing through all of creation; (3) While we are indeed complicit in structural sin, we also are—as communities—the abode of God's justice-making, Earth-honoring love. For this we know: “neither death, nor life, . . . neither things present, nor things to come, nor powers, . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

### *Closing*

Our moment in time is breathtaking. It is pivotal. The generations alive today will determine whether life continues in ways recognizably human on this beautiful and broken planetary home called Earth. May Christians bring the gifts of our faith traditions to the great moral-spiritual challenge of the twenty-first-century—forging ways of living that Earth can sustain and that build justice among people. Doing so will mean holding raw anguish and joy in one breath. It will mean seeing good and evil tangled up together, with no person or system being either all good or all bad. And it will mean savoring the sensuous delights of life in this good garden Earth, while letting holy rage serve the call to love.