

For a Thousand Generations
1 Chronicles 16:15, Ecclesiastes 1:4

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The Bible begins with the story of creation, and so does our faith. The Nicene Creed begins with the words “I believe in one God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” The conviction that there is a Creator behind all that is affects the way we look at the world and think of ourselves.

I am going to talk about climate change this morning as part of a national and ecumenical “preach-in,” but I want to “start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.” I read Genesis 1 as theological poetry. What is the theme of the poem? That God made everything and it was good. The beauty of the earth is not accidental; beauty reflects design. The world—from the stars far away to the smallest creatures near at hand—was created by God’s intention.

Human beings are the climax of that creation, both male and female made in God’s image. Humans were made the same day as all the land-dwelling animals; we too are creatures. We are part of nature. Humans are given *dominion* (1:26) over all the other animals. Dominion means “rule,” so the first creation story in Genesis 1 does in fact give humans rule over animals—but not the planet. Since we are to rule in God’s image, the presupposition is that we will rule the animals as God would, having found them good.

But when you come to Genesis 2 you find a second creation story, one which existed in Israel along with the first. In that story the first human is placed in the original garden to cultivate it. The Hebrew word which is translated here “cultivate” or “till” literally means to *serve*, as slaves serve their masters or people serve God. The human is pictured here as the servant of the earth. Another way to express that is to say that we are stewards, caretakers of a garden, a world that belongs to someone else. “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). So in Genesis we have two pictures of the human role in the created world, both ruler and servant—although Jesus showed us that in God’s mind those two are not far apart. We are called to rule not as the Gentiles understand ruling, but as servants.

Why is it then, that some of the people who argue most vehemently for the doctrine of creation and the importance of Genesis at the same time insist that humans have no role in stopping climate change? It is strange that creationism and skepticism about climate change seem to go together. Perhaps what unites the two concerns is that these people simply don’t believe in science. They don’t believe in rational observation of the world, but instead begin with fixed ideas and try to make the world fit those ideas.

That may be the obvious connection, but I want to suggest four others:

1. Fundamentalism is linked to fatalism. Some people have an idea of God’s sovereignty that has been twisted into the pagan notion of Fate. “When it’s your time, it’s your time.” “*Que sera sera*.” Tornados take more lives in the South than in Kansas because fundamentalists are fatalistic and don’t think there’s anything to be done about “acts of God” whereas the Lutherans and Catholics in Kansas take precautions.
2. There is a patriarchal view of power. The macho view is that just as a woman is to be used for our pleasure, nature also exists to be used.
3. Gnosticism still survives—the heresy the early church had to fight, that spirit is good and the material is evil. Some people who think of themselves as Christians do not really

believe that the earth is good or that God actually *became* human flesh; they think that this world is evil and temporary. They have no belief in a kingdom of God on the earth or that God has an ultimate plan for *shalom* on this planet.

4. The idea of the Rapture and that the end of the world is coming soon has been popular since the 19th century; it didn't really exist before then. Many Americans read the Bible (I think wrongly) to say that when Christ returns believers will be snatched out of this world, rather than going out to welcome Christ back to the earth as its rightful ruler. Those who believe that Christians will be plucked out of this miserable planet also believe that ultimately the earth will be destroyed, rather than renewed as the prophets and the apostle Paul taught. If you think that Jesus is coming back to pluck you out very soon, there is no reason to worry about long-term consequences. Scholars find in Paul's early letters this "interim ethic"—for example, why marry because the time is short. But even in Paul's later letters you see this view being modified as it becomes clear that the church is going to be here for a long time. For a brief period in college I was caught up in thinking that the end was near, so I considered dropping out of Princeton. If the world is ending, why bother? And if the earth is to be destroyed, why do anything to save it? I fear that attitude is more common than you may think since you live in the least biblically-oriented part of the country.

Against that view that time is short I want to posit a major biblical value: concern for coming generations. This is a core idea in the Torah and in the Prophets—that the covenant with Yahweh, the Lord, extends to all generations. The blessings as well as the curses will fall on your children's children, but even beyond that Yahweh is said to be faithful for a thousand generations. The covenants that were made with Noah and Abraham were "for all the generations to come." The same emphasis is there when Moses describes the covenant God has made: "Know that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love for a thousand generations" (Deut. 7:9). 1 Chronicles 16 has David singing a psalm which speaks to the people in imperatives:

Give thanks to the Lord...

Sing to him...

Seek the Lord and his strength...

Remember the wonderful works he has done...

Then there is this:

Remember his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations.

There is no sense in scripture that this world is temporary. Yes, the prophets and apostles say, this world is under sin and needs to be redeemed. But the good news is that God's reign is coming in fullness and the whole creation will be renewed. The whole creation groans for its redemption. One day there will be a new heaven and a new earth, which will be one. One day there will be peace and flourishing as sin and death are defeated and the lion lays down with the lamb.

In the wisdom tradition of the Bible it is taken for granted that God and the earth endure, even though we pass away. Psalm 119:9 says "Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures." Ecclesiastes 1:4 declares "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever."

Therefore we cannot frame our ethics as if the short term is all that matters. We must act as if the earth will endure, whether we do or not. We must act for the good of future generations. You may have seen the brand of “green” products called “Seventh Generation.” The name comes from the Native American idea, contained in the law of the Iroquois, that ethical decisions must be based on how they will affect the seventh generation. They understood that we must take the long view, imagining how our choices will affect not only our children and grandchildren but the seventh generation. The Hebrew Scriptures sometimes seem to go beyond that: the covenant we have with God lasts a thousand generations. Of course they mean “forever,” but if we calculate 25 years per generation, we are talking about 25,000 years—and we’re only 4,000 years into it.

In his second inaugural address, President Obama said “We the people still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity. We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations.” There are many ways Christians can approach the issue of climate change, but I want to suggest that this is one way that is easy to understand: we have an obligation to leave the climate livable for future generations, and not just for a few but for a thousand generations.

One of the problems with getting people to think about climate change is that it is happening gradually. The sea right here on the east coast is rising four times faster than in some parts of the world, due to the melting of polar ice and the fact that the oceans have a very large mass, so a tiny amount of expansion due to heat is still measurable. But the sea is only rising about 1/8 of an inch per year. No big deal. But the projections are that if present trends continue the sea level from North Carolina to north of Boston will rise by the year 2100 by over three *feet*. My grandchildren will probably be living then. If they come to Block Island, what will be left? What will be the effect on the fourth generation of my descendants, or the fifth?

The science behind all of this is no longer really controversial, except among politicians and certain preachers. We’ve known about the greenhouse effect for 150 years. The greenhouse effect is good; if we didn’t have those gases to hold in heat the earth wouldn’t be warm enough for us to live. But since the Industrial Revolution, when fossil fuels began to be burned for energy widely, the carbon dioxide in the air has increased by 40%. In recent years that number is going up faster and faster. Of course there *are* natural causes that affect variation in climate: El Nino, volcanoes, sun spots—but the trend lines in temperature tell us that something beyond those natural causes is making the worldwide temperature go up. The only plausible explanation scientists have found is the measurable increase in greenhouse gases: CO₂, methane, and a few others in small amounts.

The predictions are that by 2100 the average temperature of the air will increase by between 3.5 and 11 degrees, depending on your model. Governments have agreed that a 2 degree change is about all we can tolerate. Bear in mind that the change that occurred at the end of the Ice Age, when the glacier that created Block Island began to retreat, was between 10 and 14 degrees, over an extended period of time. We are possibly looking at an equivalent change in the 21st century.

The reason this warming affects weather is that more heat leads to greater evaporation, causing droughts. But warm air holds more water, so that in areas where it *does* rain, it will rain more than in the past and flood. Dry areas will get drier and wet areas will get wetter. Because circulation of air will be changed, some areas will have milder winters but others will have much harsher winters. There will be more storms and severe weather events, Mayor Bloomberg pointed out after Sandy.

All of this will affect the poor more than the rich, because the poor have no insurance, less ability to adapt, less ability to migrate, and because of poor housing are more susceptible to extreme weather. More droughts will lead to more famines. CO₂ will increase growth of some plants—especially weeds—but faster growth leads to lower yields. More forests will be lost to fire and to pests which will live longer in warmer weather. Fewer forests will in turn reduce the amount of CO₂ that trees take out of the air. There will be fewer fish to eat. We've already seen how warmer water—rather than overfishing—have led to the loss of cod in New England and in the North Sea. Droughts also affect fisheries. Lake Chad in Africa supports 150,000 fishermen, but the lake has lost 92% of its surface area in 40 years. There may be a few areas in Siberia or Canada that will be better off with global warming, but studies have demonstrated that the adverse impacts far outweigh positive effects. [The information in this summary of the science comes from Dorothy Boorse, *et al.*, *Loving the Least of These: Addressing a Changing Environment*, National Association of Evangelicals, 2011.]

So what are we to say to this? If we are to act in a way that blesses future generations, if we are to care for the poor, if we are to be faithful stewards of the earth that God has entrusted to us, how shall we then live? Perhaps we can discuss the how-to in our Postscript time, but it is obvious that the only solution is for humans around the world to burn less fossil fuels. We are taking small steps by adding solar panels at church, changing light bulbs, insulating pipes, turning down the heat, replacing the washing machine. You can take similar steps. But we will need to push our leaders about the way tax codes can affect consumption, how the US can help developing countries to get access to alternative energy, how we can move to mass transit and encourage people to live near their workplaces. There are many, many ideas, and almost every one will be opposed by those who make money off the consumption of fossil fuels. We need not demonize them, but help them to move to other sorts of energy production and see that the survival of the human race is in the best interest of every corporation. Perhaps most of all, we need a change in our thinking, from making decisions based on the bottom line 5 or 10 years out to making decisions based on how they will affect our children's children to the seventh generation and even, as the Scripture says, for a thousand generations to come.