

Caring for Climate

Moving from Anxiety to Action

I don't want to think about it! Climate, emotions and denial.

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Purpose

Develop practices of care and hope as ways to respond to denial and the emotions it protects us from, so that we can deal with this complex, existential threat.

Objectives

- **Learn** how soft and hard forms of denial protects us from the troubling recognition of how we contribute to the climate crisis.
- **Explore** some of the emotions, particularly guilt, grief, and helplessness, that denial protects us from.
- **Provide** a forum for discussing our personal emotional responses so that we can support each other in acting on climate in the midst of anxieties, worries, and concerns.
- **Consider** how worship, education, and other congregational ministries can support climate action by helping others move into action in the midst of their complex emotions.

Reflecting on our experience

For decades there has been a strange silence around climate change. For some it is a topic, like politics and religion, not to be discussed in polite company. And for many climate change is politically charged. But most do not see it as a spiritual issue.

Discuss your own experience of talking about the climate:

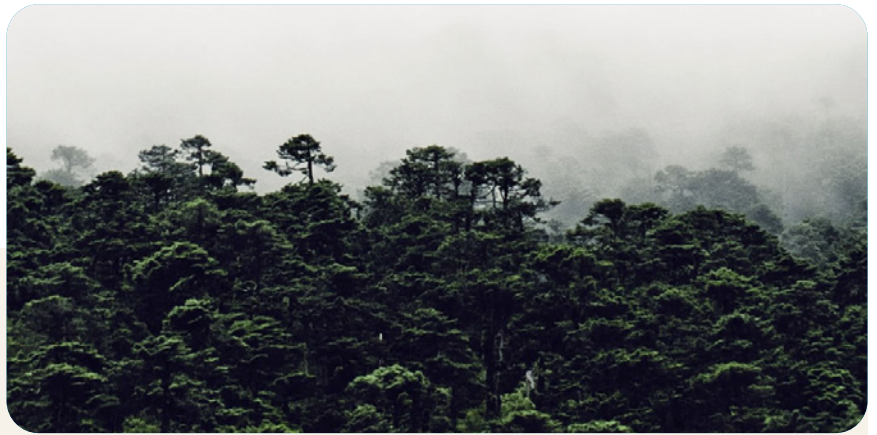
How often do you talk about climate change?

- Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Less? **Invite a show of hands.**

- Why do you think that is so? **Give people a few moments to think and then invite responses. These are some examples to spur their thoughts:**
- Too important not to
- Too upsetting
- Don't see what it has to do with me
- Not much I can do about it

Video

[URL for video](#) [Read or summarize the essay below](#) or watch the 4:57 video (same content)



For many years climate scientists thought: if only people had more information about what is happening, they would do something about it. This has not proved true. In some cases, knowing more about climate change causes people to do less about it.

This is called the Psychological Paradox of Climate Change by psychologist Per Espen Stoknes. Over the past decades as North Americans and Europeans become more informed about the changing climate, we care about it less. This may have shifted around 2016, but it still worrisome.

Information is not enough, we need to care. As a pastor who cares deeply about climate change, I ask: why don't people care more? How can I in worship, preaching, and education, shape people to care about the whole world that God has created?

Part of the problem is when we can keep it at a distance. As a white middle class middle aged male midwesterner, I am more insulated from the effects of climate change than a poor young woman in Zambia or a young Latino on the Gulf Coast. In my rural community there is a lot of denial about the climate, that it is not changing. This literal denial is supported by the fossil fuel industry. This hard denial is less common than many people think, but it is real and it is powerful.

But as the changing climate becomes harder to deny, another denial has become prominent, interpretive denial. Yes, the climate is changing, but not because of fossil fuel emissions. It has to do with how the earth wobbles or some other such sciency sounding interpretation.

But I believe that the most pervasive denial is even trickier to confront, a soft denial I find in myself.

This is implicatory denial. We deny the psychological, political, and moral implications of the changing climate. The facts are not denied nor are they given an odd interpretation. We acknowledge what is happening but we don't integrate it into our lives nor do we become politically active.

Because this is my own experience, and that of many of my peers, this is what I have focused on. But in recent years as I talk to more people about our emotional life around climate, and I have discovered two other primary ways people engage or disengage climate.

I have heard more climate anxiety as I talk to young people. They will live with the consequences of older generation's neglect of this important issue. And as they consider both how their lives have been built upon greenhouse gas emissions and how their future will be devastated by natural disasters and social disruption, it is easy to feel anxious.

And finally, I find climate anger among many people as well, but it seems to be more prominent among some young people and among people of color. These are the people who already are experiencing the devastation of climate-fueled disasters. This is why Latinos and African-Americans take climate more seriously than whites in the US. Anger can be productive, causing people to engage in productive social change.

Later in this session we explore the emotions that keep us from engaging climate to those that do.

Per Espen Stoknes, *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming*, (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2015), chapter 1.

Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Rosenthal, S., Kotcher, J., Bergquist, P., Ballew, M., Goldberg, M., & Gustafson, A. (2019). *Climate Change in the American Mind: November 2019*. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Biblical Theme: Denial in Isaiah

Denial is not new. The prophet Isaiah confronted denial in his ministry. The theme emerges abruptly in the call of Isaiah in chapter 6.

After a beautiful vision in the temple, Isaiah hears these disheartening words in vv. 9–10:

*“Go and say to this people,
'Listen continuously but do not discern.
Look continuously but do not understand'.
Make fat the mind of this people,
and its ears make heavy and its eyes make blind.
Lest it see with its eyes, and with its ears hear,
and its mind discern, and it turn and be healed”.*

Why would God want that? This baffles and puzzles us. That Jesus quoted this very passage to explain why he spoke in parables, because of the denial towards his own ministry (Matt. 13:13–16), does not make it easier to take.

Discuss: Why would God want that?

In **Isaiah 6:11–12**, the following verses, a reason is given:

*Isaiah asks: “How long, O God?”
And God said: “Until cities lie wasted and deserted,
houses are empty,
and the land is utterly desolate.
YHWH will drive the people far away,
and there will be a vast emptiness in all the land.”
(Inclusive Bible)*

God’s judgment must be complete. The prophecy must be fulfilled. Until I started reading with an ecological lens, I had often overlooked how intricately tied the fate of the land is to the fate of the people, for the land must be empty and devastated to fulfill the prophecy.

Hebrew Bible Scholar John McLaughlin notes that this theme continues in the book of Isaiah.³ He connects it with the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the plagues, where God actively keeps Pharaoh from turning away from the enslavement and environmental injustice against the Hebrews so that the Egyptian empire is judged.



Read these Scriptures, coming from different contexts. Note the different attitudes towards denial and God’s role in keeping people in denial or bringing them out of denial. Invite personal thoughts, feelings and responses before moving into explanation from the notes.

A shift is seen in Isaiah 63:17. After the return from the Babylonian exile Isaiah’s later disciple pleads with God to reverse this approach and allow the people to see. What an interesting combination of divine and personal responsibility. The people seem to need God’s help to repent.

But an even more dramatic shift comes in Isaiah 42:6–7, What McLaughlin calls a “counter-commission” to that of Isaiah 6. This is the call of that later disciple of the original prophet. According to **40:6–7** the judgment is complete. Again, this reverses even more directly the Isaiah 6 commissioning:

*I, Yahweh, have called you in righteousness....
To open the eyes of the blind.
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
From the prison those who dwell in darkness.*

Now the role of the prophet is to open the eyes rather than close them. We actively do this.

We now may wonder, with **Isaiah 6:11**: “how long, O God?” How much punishment do we need to take? How many record-breaking, devastating, and deadly floods, forest fires, droughts, and heat waves do we need to experience? When will we turn to practices that are more in line with God’s intentions for all creation? Do we need to wait until “the land is utterly desolate?”

Invite further responses and questions.

³ John L. McLaughlin, “Their Hearts Were Hardened: The Use of Isaiah 6,9–10 in the Book of Isaiah,” *Biblica*, 75, no 1 (1994): 1–25.

Changing Our Lives, Engaging Our Emotions



Denial protects us from complicated emotions around climate change, and here are a number of these emotions connected to climate change. Pass a handout or project a list of some of the emotions connected to climate change.

Invite people to consider which ones they most experience or identify with. Invite comments and reflection on this. People may talk about an emotion they don't see, which is great! Or they can argue about which column it belongs in. Many of these are based on social psychological research, but some is intuitive too.

Ask people: Some feelings that come up when I think about the climate crisis...

Depending on the size of the group, give a minute or two for silent reflection, then move into pairs, and finally open it to group discussion.

I have put them in two columns with one focused on troubling emotions that may keep us from engaging climate and one on contributing emotions associated with supporting policies to address climate change. We may perceive these as positive or negative emotions on either side.

The discussion can focus both on what are our personal emotions connected to climate change and how those emotions affect our engagement on climate change.

For your background I say a little more about each one below.

As a leader there are two things to be careful about.

1. Some will prefer to share their thoughts which may have nothing to do with their personal feelings. This is the reason I offer a list of feelings at the beginning, to help people consider what they feel. If people are talking more about thoughts and other people, gently direct the conversation back to personal feelings. I recognize this makes us feel vulnerable. Perhaps it will help if you as a leader share your personal feelings, as a way to model what we are looking for.

2. We are inclined to help people avoid what we perceive to be harmful or negative emotions. But this is not the goal. The goal is to recognize and process emotions and to move towards engagement, which in some cases may mean deepening some so-called negative emotions like worry or anger.

| Troubling | Contributing |
|--------------|-------------------|
| Helplessness | Interest |
| Guilt | Personal efficacy |
| Grief | Hope |
| Fear | Purpose |
| Despair | Anger |
| | Worry |

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Helplessness

Climate change is a "superwicked problem" meaning "a highly complex social problem for which... there is no clear solution, a need for extensive change, and the sense that time is running out." So we naturally feel helpless, a powerful emotion. Responses require large-scale social and political engagement and there is not a lot trust in or knowledge of the political system.

Helplessness can lead to **despair**, a deep sense of futility about climate. We will explore this in the final session on hope and despair.

Guilt

Climate communication has created strong associations with guilt. We feel guilty of being caught in a system that is destroying the planet, but we don't know how to escape it. One American student, Jocelyn, talked about how no matter what you do you are going to ecohell: "I feel like that guilt can be really overwhelming when all you hear about is what we're doing wrong. It's like we can maybe cut down on this or that, but you're still going to ecohell or whatever."

⁴Kari Norgaard, Location 2639-2642.

⁵Kari Norgaard, Location 2721-2722.

Changing Our Lives, Engaging Our Emotions

Grief

Aldo Leopold: "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds...."
From *Sand County Almanac*

Grief is the emotion that arises from the pain of loss. Only recently have psychotherapists started to describe environmental grief over the loss of ecological places. We really don't have ways of expressing these griefs in a socially acceptable way. I encourage congregations to find ways to express griefs around ecological and other issues. We can engage rituals of lament.

Fear/Anxiety

Once we move past images of polar bears, the images of climate change are scary and can produce fear. One disaster after another, a world gone awry, an apocalyptic hellscape without inhabitant. While fear can motivate immediate action, such as running away from a bear, it is less helpful when the problem is as complicated and ongoing as climate change. Fear and anxiety tend to shut down good thinking rather than aid it.

This transitions from troubling to contributing emotions.

Who cares about climate change? In surveying Americans, Anthony Leiserowitz and Nicholas Smith note that the emotions most associated with support of climate policies are hope, interest, worry, and personal efficacy. From further reading and experience I have added purpose and anger.

Interest/Curiosity

Finding climate change is interesting is obviously going to help. You may not think of this as an emotion but it is related to other knowledge emotions such as confusion and surprise. When we are curious about a subject, we spend more time with it. There is a sweet spot, something is new enough to evoke curiosity but not so far out of our range that we can't imagine figuring it out.

Worry

Some emphasize staying away from negative emotions about climate change. But negative emotions work more deeply in our psyche. As mentioned before, fear and anxiety



are problematic because they can shut down creative thinking. Worry allows more intense and ongoing cognitive processing that can eventually lead to improvements and solutions.

Personal efficacy

This is the sense that what we do matters. Ben Brabson, Indiana University climate scientist, says what he likes about Mennonites is our strong sense of personal efficacy. We care about what we do.

Hope

How can we foster hope? This is complicated and the theme of the final session. Pastoral theologian Panu Pihkala suggests a bifocal vision that keeps both the good and bad in view. If we paint too pessimistic a picture, people give up. However, if we paint too optimistic a picture, people suspect that we are lying. So we might talk about hope in the midst of tragedy. This recognizes the losses while also holding into hope.

Anger

While some may see anger as a negative emotion, it often fuels action. The anger is often directed at those most responsible and they need to be held accountable. Anger tends to lead to less depression, anxiety and stress. It leads to collective action, the kind of action that is needed to take on such a complex social problem like the climate.

Purpose

Being involved with something critical in life gives us a sense of purpose much larger than ourselves. This is what has been so empowering in my personal experience with climate change. I feel like I am doing my part, with the gifts that I have, to cooperate with the Spirit of Life. This is critical to my future, the future of my family, the future of humans and all creatures. It's hard to get more purposeful than that.

⁶ Paul J. Silvia, "Interest—The Curious Emotion" *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, no. 1 (2008): 57-60.

⁷ Panu Pihkala, "Eco-anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change." *Zygon* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 554, 561. His term is "binocular" but to me "bifocal" communicates the concept better.

Invite a prayer where people again name their emotions and experience around climate change and then pray one of the prayers below.

Spirit of Life, who suffers the pains of creation, have mercy on us. In your kindness and love, you have given humanity the role of caretakers for Creation, to live as your image-bearers in a world you created for your delight. But we have turned from your will, often abusing Creation for greedy and selfish purposes. Now we face global climate disruption as a result of our rebellion. Forgive us our sins, and the injustice of our society. In your kindness, lead us to repentance. Create in us a clean heart, ready and willing to carry out your will on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

God, you created the world with your dream of what it could be. You dreamed of people and plants, animals, and air, all living in right relationship to you and to each other. Today we confess how we have not lived by that dream. Because of our disregard for your limits we live in a world threatened by a changing climate that harms our atmosphere, that wounds the poorest and most vulnerable, that leaves this wonderful planet in poor shape for future generations. Help us to listen to your voice, your Word, and your creation. Amen.

Toolkit

Organizations and processes

Good Grief Network offers 10-step programs, online and regionally, to help people process their deep emotions about ecological devastation and move to engagement. They call it “10-Steps to Personal Resilience & Empowerment in a Chaotic Climate” <https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org/>

Waterspirit, a New Jersey-based ocean ministry founded by a Catholic sister, offers a version of the Good Grief groups. They call them eco-anxiety support groups: <https://www.waterspirit.org/10-steps>

Carbon Conversations is a process developed by a psychiatrist Rosemary Randall in Cambridge, England, the focuses on the complicated emotions and losses around ecological devastation. Getting started with this is more complicated and less user-friendly in today’s digital age. It also seems to have more of a network in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia than in the United States. <http://www.carbonconversations.co.uk/>



Climate Pastoral Care Course is a self-directed 13-session course developed by Waterspirit and Common Grace (Australia). <https://www.waterspirit.org/climate-pastoral-care>

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Per Espen Stoknes. *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2015.

⁸ Samantha K. Stanley, Teaghan L. Hogg, Zoe Levistona, Iain Walker, “From anger to action: Differential impacts of eco-anxiety, eco-depression, and eco-anger on climate action and wellbeing” *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* January 28, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2021.100003>: 3-4.

⁹ This is based on a service developed by Wendy Janzen, at Hidden Acres Camp, New Hamburg, Ontario, November 20, 2018.

¹⁰ Joan Weber, in Anne & Jeffery Rowthorn, eds., *God’s Good Earth: Praise and Prayer for Creation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018): 230.