

Caring for Climate

Moving from Anxiety to Action

What difference does it make? How climate change impacts your life

02



Written by Kenneth Pitts

Ken recently retired after 35 years of secondary biology and environmental science teaching, most recently as an Environmental Science School Outreach Specialist for Oregon Metro in the Portland area.

Purpose

Investigate current and future climate impacts on people and nature at local levels, so we can find inspiration to respond with informed wisdom and focused passion.

Objectives

- **Learn** how climate is impacting people and the environment at local levels.
- **Provide** a place to discuss changes we are personally experiencing due to climate change.
- **Find** inspiration to engage and move forward with both climate mitigation and resilience.

Reflecting on our experience

Discuss your own experience with how you are seeing the impacts of climate change:

Discuss your own experience of talking about the climate:

- a. Have you observed impacts of climate change in your local area? What have you observed?
- b. Have you and/or your community been impacted by local outlier weather events made more likely by climate change? How did that make you feel?
- c. What are you hearing from others in your area about how

they experience climate change?
d. If you are not aware of local climate impacts, do you know how to find out more?

Hint: Resources in the toolkit below, but also state universities, governments, regional environmental organizations are all places you might find more information.

Video

[URL for video](#) [Read or summarize the essay](#)
Watch the 5:24 video or read the transcript



Hi! I am Ken Pitts, and I live in Portland, Oregon. I am a retired high school science teacher, and more recently, a climate educator for Oregon Metro, a regional government for the 25 cities surrounding Portland. I started to seriously care about climate change when I began teaching Advanced Placement Environmental Science nearly 20 years ago in Corona, California. Its predicted impacts were apparent to me in worsening degradation of the forest in the Santa Ana Mountains directly behind my house, by temperature extremes, drought, and unseasonable weather. An inflection point happened for me personally when a stressed ancient Canyon Live Oak that I loved to be under as I photographed wildlife coming to a pool near its base, had its five main trunks instantly come crashing down around me. I was physically unscathed, but left speechless and stunned as I stood there breathing the dust of its untimely death.

In this second session, we are going to focus on local impacts of climate change. You will hear climate stories describing those local impacts in the Pacific Northwest region. You will also have the opportunity to share your own local observations. Our hope is to use those observations and a Biblical story as inspiration for movement forward with climate mitigation and resilience actions.

For the past decade, I have lived in Portland, OR in the gorgeous Pacific Northwest. The last seven years I have worked for a regional government called Oregon Metro as a waste reduction outreach specialist for grade 6–12. The majority of my 2,000 or so presentations were focused on engaging youth with issues related to climate change. I have noticed a shift in perspective of viewing our state first as a place people will move to get away from climate change, to being one that is experiencing some of its worst impacts. Meredith Connally, Oregon director of Climate Solutions, stated it this way, “A few years ago we thought Oregon was going to be a refuge from climate impacts, and now it’s the poster child.”

In my engagements with students concerning climate change pre-2020, I would say that “the good news about climate change is that you live in the best place in the United States to be over the next 50 years. The bad news

is that people from the Gulf States and the Southwest will increasingly move here to escape climate disasters.” That narrative changed when Oregon experienced historic and catastrophic wildfires, drought, heat waves, and ice storms just in the last several years.

As I write this lesson today in my Portland, Oregon home, we have just had the wettest April on record, the wettest May through early June since 1941, and the Columbia and Willamette rivers are at flood stage as the period’s 12 inches of rain is speeding the melting of the Cascade snowpack. Meanwhile, a major portion of the rest of the United States is baking from a heat dome and setting more record high temperatures for this early in the summer. Simultaneously “central and southern Oregon are entering a third consecutive year of drought, and the state saw its third driest period from October 2019 to September 2021 since records began in the late 1800s.” Residents of southern Oregon’s Klamath County are seeing their water wells run dry, and are experiencing “contentious fights” over Upper Klamath Lake’s precious water “which is desperately needed by farmers, ranchers and two species of endangered fish that are cultural mainstays of Indigenous people in the region.” This region was also host to the Bootleg fire, which was the largest fire in the United States during 2021. The drought contributed to its intensity and size.

While we know that weather extremes existed even before our climate system began responding to increases in man-made greenhouse gas emissions, their frequency is going up and wreaking havoc on growing our food, water supplies, power grids, tourism, and infrastructure; in other words, our lives! This variability from extreme weather is clearly explained in the video produced by PBS Terra called “Is this the REAL reason weather is getting wilder?”

Consider watching the personal climate stories in the alternatives section. As part of that, consider: what is your climate story?

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: Exodus 7 - 12

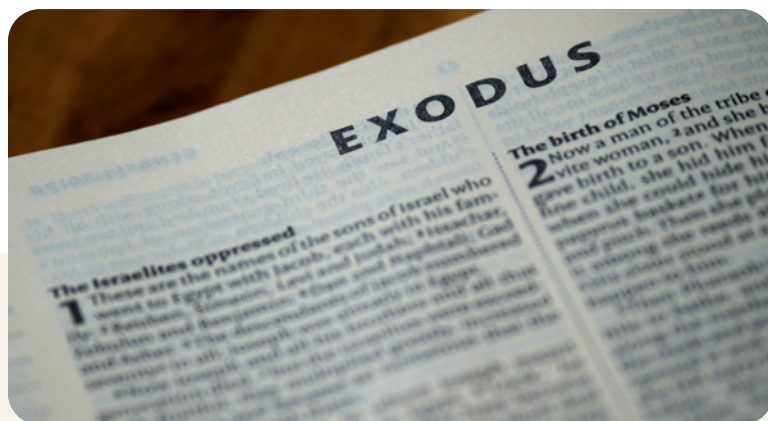
[URL for video Read or summarize the essay](#)
Watch the 4:09 video or read the transcript

As I consider the signals or signs Earth's systems are warning us with, I am reminded of the many times I heard the Exodus story of Pharaoh hardening his heart and not letting the Israelites go to the promised land (Exodus chapters 7-12 NRS, NIV). I thought as a child, "how could this man not get it? How could this man not heed the warnings and instead chose to endure eight plagues without consenting? Why did he cling to the way he was used to, having enslaved people building his amazing infrastructure for his Egyptian kingdom? Didn't he see where this was going?" I also felt a bit of moral superiority in thinking "Oh, I certainly would have heeded the warnings right away!"

The recurring pattern within the story is that Yahweh warns Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron of an impending plague, Pharaoh does not heed the warning, the plague occurs and is really bad (water to blood, frogs everywhere, swarms of gnats and then flies, diseased livestock, skin boils, pounding thunder and hail, and then clouds of crop consuming locusts), and next the shaken Pharaoh "hardens his heart" and again says "no" to their release. On several of the plagues, Pharaoh's magicians perform the illusion of also being able to cause the same type of unfortunate events. "But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them" (Exodus 7: 22 NRS).

Unfortunately for Pharaoh and Egypt, it took the loss of every family's firstborn to get him to yield to the relentless power of Yahweh. But even after letting the Israelites move toward the promised land, he had his army pursue them in chariots, only again to lose even more of his best officers.

"**21** Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. **22** The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. **23** The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and their drivers" (Exodus 14: 21-23). Then the Bible story reveals the fate of Pharaoh's army. "**27** So Moses



stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. **28** The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained" (Exodus 14: 27-28).

This story can both be haunting and instructive when one considers its parallels to our climate situation. Scientists have warned us of every intensifying "plagues" that have already begun making life more difficult. There is scientific consensus about the trajectory of climate change and the need to hold future warming below 1.5 - 2.0 degrees Celsius to keep this planet survivable, but our response has been more like Pharaoh's than the response I hoped to get right onto as a child!

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



1) As you listened to the Pharaoh story, what were thoughts you had related to our situation with climate change?

This question opens the room for people to share their thoughts about the story before guiding them down the channels of the following questions. This question could be optional if the leader is concerned participants will go off topic.

Questions in the video

2) What parallels do you see in this story with your own response to climate change?

Participant responses will vary, but may include:

We, like Pharaoh, are reluctant to give up immediate luxuries like our gas guzzling vehicles, shipping materials all over the planet, eating food from anywhere in the world, and using as much energy as we can afford.

3) What are the “plagues” that are climate warning signs that have most caught your attention?

Answers will vary according to your local region and the experience of participants, but may include:

drought, misery from heat waves, water shortages, loss of crops, economic impacts, worsening health, migration of people putting pressure on local resources, or landscaping in their yards being stressed by the unpredictable weather

4) Who is (are) the “Pharaoh” (“Pharaohs”) in your story? Why?

Participant answers will vary according to their own experiences but might include:

The Pharaohs might be government officials who are unwilling to acknowledge the realities of climate change and deal reasonably with their impacts because they fear not getting re-elected and loss of power.

Pharaohs could be themselves and/or people in their community who are afraid they might not be able to continue living their current lifestyle if they acknowledge climate realities and make life changes.

5) Who are the “Hebrews” in your story? Why?

Participant answers will vary according to their own

experiences but might include:

The Hebrews might be those most impacted by climate disasters, often those living in poverty, black, indigenous and people of color, who often live in places with poor infrastructure to withstand floods, heat waver and other climate-related disasters.

Hebrews could be themselves and/or people in their community or across the globe who are greatly affected by climate disasters but hold little responsibility for the crisis, since their lifestyle emits few greenhouse gas emissions.

6) Who are the “magicians” in our situation with climate? What is their role in delaying meaningful climate response?

Participant answers might include:

Oil companies and car companies who lobbied government officials to continue to use petroleum products and hired people with a science background to create false studies used to deny the realities of climate change.

Politicians whose campaigns relied on funding from the fossil fuel industry who repeated misleading statements about climate change.

7) Will, or can, the “Pharaoh” or “Pharaohs” in our story respond in time to eliminate the loss “of the firstborn?”

This may get into, “What do the participants see as the best case scenario for them and the future of life on earth with the realities of climate change?”

Scientists tell us we have until 2030 to get a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and until 2050 to get to “net zero,” where we take in as much as we put out. Answering the question should address the reality of making that scale of change in order to keep our planet livable.

⁴ Kari Norgaard, Location 2639–2642.

⁵ Kari Norgaard, Location 2721–2722.

Changing Our Lives, Engaging Our Emotions

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

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.”

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

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>

Douglas Kaufman. “Caring About Climate Change: An Anabaptist Cruciform Response” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 94, no. 1 (January 2020): 83-102.

Anthony Leiserowitz and Nicholas Smith. “The Role of Emotion in Global Warming Policy Support and Opposition.” *Risk Analysis* 34, no. 5 (2014): 937-948.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy.* Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012.

Kari Marie Norgaard. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011, Kindle Edition.

Maria Ojala. How do children cope with global climate change? Coping strategies, engagement, and well-being.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 32 (2012) 225-233.

Panu Pihkala. “Eco-anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change.” *Zygon* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 545-569.

Sarah Jaquette Ray. *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020.

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>

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.