

The Gospel in Transition – A Year of Weekly Reflections on Facing Climate Change, Finding Hope, and the Alchemy of Christian Community. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**
David R. Weiss – December 3, 2018

It was just an innocent-looking list of years, but it turned my life upside down.

Sitting on the sofa or at the dining table, flipping through the newspaper, I'd seen plenty of headlines about climate change. I'd scan the stories. Catch an unsettling scenario here ... a frightening-looking chart there. I suppose I *knew* just enough to know I didn't really *want* to know more.

Full disclosure: twenty-two years ago (in November 1996, to be exact) I actually made my *first* academic presentation¹ as a Ph.D. student—on the fragility of our eco-system. A year-and-a-half later (April 1998) I gave a public talk² at Notre Dame's Earth Day celebration in which I first addressed global warming. So climate change has been on my radar for a couple decades. However, alongside that interest, I was also finding my voice in support of a faith-based welcome to LGBTQ persons, and, in the Fall of 1998, a whole cascade of circumstances led me to focus—in my teaching, writing, and activism—on LGBTQ theology and welcome for nearly the next twenty years. Ecology was present in my personal ethics and climate change was there in the background of my awareness. But my best energy (fruitfully so) was invested elsewhere.

But about this list of years. Sparked by some news article in the spring of 2016 I googled “hottest years on record” and up popped a list that showed the 16 warmest years since 1880.³ The list used 1880 as its starting point because that's the first year we had enough accurate temperate records from across the globe to calculate an accurate global surface temperature. And since then we've been keeping really precise records. They were listed—these sixteen hottest years—in order of heat, so they looked like a pretty random set of years.

But when I looked closer I saw that, from 1880-2015, out of the last 136 years—*all sixteen* of the hottest ones occurred *during my daughter's lifetime*—in fact, since she was just a toddler. Today she's 22, and *all eighteen* of the hottest years on record have been since she turned two. *She's growing up on an altogether different planet than I did.*

Now: not knowing ... not acting ... is NOT AN OPTION. Now Susanna's face—is the face of climate change for me. Susanna's future—is the shape of my work for the coming years. And I wrestle, like Jacob with the angel, determined that *I will not let go* until I receive a blessing of some sort that I can pass on ... to help Susanna—and so many others—find a way forward on this strange new planet.

Hence, this blog. It's only one small piece of that work, but it's a place where I can offer others (that's you!) a weekly glimpse at my thinking as it unfolds.

Addressing climate change will require responses from multiple arenas. Science, technology, public policy, news media, industry-business, arts, local communities, individuals—acting as both consumers and citizens, and more. My particular entry point is theology. That might seem far removed from the dynamics of a warming planet, but I suggest otherwise. The way we think about God impacts—often decisively—the way we think about ourselves. It establishes the points on our moral compass and grounds our conviction in making hard choices. Theology (and faith) tethers us to Something Bigger than ourselves as we plumb the coming tumult.

¹ “Beyond Ecological Security: Intimacy and Risk. *Imago Dei* as a Theological Resource for a More Creative Encounter with the Earth,” David R. Weiss. Presented at The Wisconsin Institute, Ripon College, November 1, 1996

² “Consuming the Earth In Search of Our Worth,” David R. Weiss. Earth Day Talk at the University of Notre Dame, April 18, 1998

³ <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/201513>

Tumult. I do not choose the word lightly. As I have read more and more about climate change over the past three years my alarm has grown and my hope has been schooled in humility. The news reports⁴ this fall are perhaps most sobering because they represent “committee voices,” which, by their nature tend to be moderate in their tone, and even these moderate voices now report predictions and conclusions that sit at the edge of panic.

We may well *survive* this tumult. *But we aren't going to escape it.* And the longer we focus on the most optimistic possibilities—as though we can still avert what *will* be the unmaking of the world as we know it, the more likely we are to be entirely unprepared when the worst of climate change hits. *I am not without hope.* But this blog and my work are rooted in my dawning awareness that only by acknowledging the depth of the crisis upon us can we take measure of the means that will serve us well in the days ahead.

For me, one source of hope is the Transition Town Movement.⁵ Born a little over a decade ago in Ireland, Transition Towns use permaculture principles,⁶ coupled with clear contextual commitment to dramatically reduce carbon emissions and simultaneously restore the strength of local communities: both economically and socially (and, I would add, spiritually). That's an overly broad sweep, but over the coming year I'll unpack these ideas further.

Right now it's sufficient to say **I find “gospel in transition”**—and moving in both directions. I believe there is “good news” for this present moment in the Transition Town Movement. But I also believe that a host of fundamental principles and practices of transition resonate deeply with of the roots of vital Christian community. In other words, there is also Gospel hiding, as it were, in transition. Which is why I want to use this blog as a place to explore these resonances.⁷ If the church aspires to *be* the church—the called and faithful people of God—in the midst of climate change, then listening to, learning from, and *contributing toward* the Transition Town Movement is an exercise of discipleship.

Finally, alchemy. Climate change will require more character, more conviction, more courage than perhaps any other socio-historical event since the Black Death of medieval Europe and Asia. If we are not scared, we are foolish. BUT—by choosing to make a regular practice of intentional *communal* acts of practical kindness, self-education, skill-sharing, localized-rootedness, and resilience-building we *can* transform fear and isolation into courage and hope. That's the alchemy of Christian community. It is—absolutely—accessible in a host of other communities. It is *not* specifically Christian. But for those of us who express our faith through Christianity, there is an alchemy entirely ours. One that lifts up and embodies the best of Christian theology. And that's where we'll find hope.

My weekly blog posts will consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call “devotional”; my aim is to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I'd be delighted to have you join me on this journey. *In fact, I hope you'll subscribe.* See you next week!

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

* * *

The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing climate change, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. **Please subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com. drw59mn@gmail.com**

⁴ www.nymag.com/intelligencer/amp/2018/10/un-says-climate-genocide-coming-but-its-worse-than-that.html

⁵ <http://transitionus.org/home>

⁶ <https://permacultureprinciples.com>

⁷ My thinking will be plenty original, but these two texts have been a helpful entry point for me. *The Transition Movement for Churches: A Prophetic Imperative for Today*, Timothy Gorridge & Rosie Beckham. London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2013. *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith*, Ruah Swennerfelt. Quaker Institute for the Future, 2016.

Advent, Anticipation ... and Climate Change

David R. Weiss – December 11, 2018

The Gospel in Transition #2 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

As a child Advent taught me the meaning of anticipation.

Yes, presents were part of that—though far from the whole of it. I remember the excitement that my siblings and I shared when the Sears and Penney’s Christmas catalogs arrived. But more than this, Advent meant evening family devotions: with each child taking a turn reading the message, lighting the candles on our family Advent wreath, or extinguishing them afterwards. It meant Saturday practice for the Sunday school Christmas Eve pageant. Each year we went out to a local tree farm to find, then tag, our chosen Christmas tree, and—during Advent—we went back to cut it down, bring it home, and trim it with favorite ornaments, decorating the rest of the house as well.

I particularly recall Pastor Knappe explaining that, because several of the prayers of the day during Advent begin with the phrase “Stir up, O God ...”, these prayers always reminded him that Advent was time to stir up the batter for Christmas cookies. And, sure enough, my Advent *did* mean not just stirring the batter with my Mom but also smelling the Christmas cookies as they baked.

Years later in seminary—courtesy a talk by Jürgen Moltmann—I came to understand the full power intended in the word Advent: that *Christmas comes to us*. Although the calendar suggests *we* march toward Christmas, the theological truth of incarnation is that what happens in Christmas is not the sum of *our* actions but the sum of *God’s*.

Thus, Advent is less “preparation” (as though our deeds “make” Christmas happen) than holy waiting, reverent anticipation of what comes to us from beyond our reach.

It’s disorienting, counterintuitive, and uncomfortably insightful to consider climate change from the vantage of Advent. The climate change we’re currently experiencing unquestionably *has* been made by our deeds. Beginning around 1850 and accelerating dramatically since 1950, we’ve been loading the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses, largely through the use of fossil fuels. Unlike Christmas, then, the approach of climate change *IS* the direct result of human activity.

But, while the cause-effect link between human industrial activity, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate change is supremely clear at the scientific level, it’s much less clear on the experiential level. Sure, we occasionally see factories belching smoke, but the exhaust coming out of my car is barely visible and yet adds to the 28% of emissions that come from transportation. The CD player filling my home with Christmas music, the LED Christmas lights on my tree, the street lights lining my street, and the brightly lit malls and skyscrapers give off no greenhouse gases at all ... except that generating the electricity needed to power them all accounts for another 28% of emissions. Unlike cookie-baking, present-wrapping, or tree-decorating, there is no obvious and immediate link between our daily choices and our warming planet.

Moreover, the time lag between what we put in the atmosphere by way of emissions and when we experience those emissions *as* changing climate is large enough that it escapes our logic. How can gasses given off when I was a child be impacting the weather events I experience today? Perhaps most unsettling of all, we can barely imagine the cascading consequences as changing climate impacts multiply each other, creating feedback loops that drive both the speed and the extent of climate change. Admittedly, the models here are uncertain—testament to the complexity of these relationships, but not to the consensus that feedback loop will escalate the stakes considerably.

This is where we are today. An atmosphere recklessly and relentlessly loaded with carbon for more than a century. Wound up like a tightly coiled spring. The extreme weather events we notice today—storms, heat waves, droughts, floods, wildfires—are noteworthy not because we have them, but because

we're having them *so frequently and so fiercely*. But this is hardly "Christmas" yet as far as climate change goes. The full force of the carbon *already* loaded ... *hasn't even begun to be felt*.

And this is where climate change becomes *too much* like Christmas. Because even if we stopped adding more emissions *tomorrow*—both a technological and political impossibility—there is very little we can do to unwind the spring. (Yes, there are nascent—not yet practical—technologies for pulling carbon out of the atmosphere, but to imagine they'll come on line in a cost effective way in time to significantly lessen the tension in a spring more tightly coiled each and every day, well, hopeful as that sounds, it'll be about as effective as Scrooge's "Bah Humbug" was in delaying the coming of Christmas.)

We are in Advent for climate change. There is indeed *plenty* we can do to "brace" ourselves, to increase our resilience: break habits, learn skills, link arms and weave the communal networks that can support us as climate change unravels many of the networks we've come to take for granted. Still, just like Christmas, there is *nothing* we can do to actually prevent its arrival.

I don't "celebrate" that. Not by a long shot. Nonetheless, it's time to embrace a long season of Advent for climate change. For there is a manner of anticipation that can seed hope in this unfamiliar season. Advent is a season that reminds us: we *know* (or we *used* to know—and can remember if we set ourselves to the task) what it is like to *prepare-by-waiting* for the arrival of something that comes unbidden to our world. And that posture—if we can reclaim it—may be a life-saving posture for ourselves and for our children.

The images coexist uneasily. Climate change as a type of Christmas? Advent as holy longing; now Advent as near-holy dread? On this one point they coalesce: central (for Christians) to both Christmas and climate change is the whispered presence of Emmanuel—*God with us*.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaitb

* * *

The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing climate change, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call "devotional," I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I'd be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**. Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn@gmail.com**

Advent as Ending: Apocalypse as *Good News*

David R. Weiss – December 16, 2018

The Gospel in Transition #3 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Advent typically begins with an image of ending. Each year of its three-year cycle churches following the Revised Common Lectionary find an apocalyptic Gospel text appointed for the first Sunday of Advent. These texts add an unabashed edge of apocalyptic energy to the too often domesticated pageantry of Christmas.

Climate change has its own apocalyptic energy—as looming world-crashing threat. Yet one of the paradoxes of the Transition Movement is its determination to *lean into* this impending crisis as opportunity to re-center ourselves on what really matters: living lightly on the earth, locally in community, and deeply in our humanity. It's a challenging paradox to sustain. Perhaps it's helpful to recall that in the Bible apocalyptic literature is actually rooted in *radical hope*. Such a perspective offers some discomfiting but provocative connections.

Although there are a variety of biblical passages (like the Advent gospels readings) where an apocalyptic tone surfaces, there are two great instances of apocalyptic literature in the Bible: Daniel and Revelation. Both feature near-psychedelic imagery in which harrowing portraits of a collapsing world are presented. Reading them from our vantage point—and projecting their message into the future as a prediction of world-ending events—it's easy to find them unsettling. But, in fact, both books were written for people living in such a *harrowing present* that they were actually offered (and received!) as good news—*gospel*—breaking into this world in its most extreme moments.

In both cases the authors were writing for people living under harsh societal oppression and brutal persecution by imperial powers.⁸In this context, apocalyptic cataclysm—overwhelming as the imagery is—*was a message of radical hope*. The present insufferable world was about to be swept away. As it *needed* to be if there was to be a path forward.

The less all-out visionary but unmistakably apocalyptic tone of the Advent readings in the lectionary is a stark reminder to us that all three of the synoptic gospels (many scholars question whether these words go all the way back to Jesus himself) place an apocalyptic exclamation point on Jesus' ministry.⁹ One way to read this is that the manner of life presented by Jesus—grounded I would argue in a radical praxis of inclusive compassion—unleashes its own world-transforming energy.

It's an energy we tend to keep boxed up in all manner of ways ranging from “right doctrine” to “personal piety” to “cute Christmas pageantry.” Almost as though we want to ensure it *can't* effect world transformation. Mary's *Magnificat* (also appointed for the Advent lectionary) is more open in its longing. Trading apocalyptic imagery for straight forward social and political reversal, Mary's song suggests that somehow in the promised life of Jesus the proud will be scattered, the mighty cast down, the rich left empty, the lowly exalted, and the hungry fed. Taken seriously, her words intimate a gospel nothing less than apocalyptic in impact.¹⁰

⁸ The Book of Daniel, while fictionally set in sixth century BCE (“Before the Common Era”), was authored in the second century BCE under the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Hellenistic Greek ruler who viciously attacked both Jewish faith and culture. The Book of Revelation was written near the end of the first century CE (“in the Common Era”) under the reign of Emperor Domitian who demanded imperial idolatry from Christians under pain of death. In both contexts the community of the faithful found their faith pushed to the extreme, as though nothing less than the rending of one world and the appearance of another would open a way forward.

⁹ The texts (for Years A, B, C) are: Matthew 24: 36-44; Mark 13:24-37; Luke 21:25-36. While Jesus himself was active in a context of significant multifaceted social-political-religious oppression, by the time the synoptic gospels themselves were authored (usually dated 40-60 years later), the stakes seemed even higher. The Jewish Revolt, the Fall of Jerusalem and the early years of Roman persecution of Christians all made the idea of Jesus' return a powerful source of radical hope.

¹⁰ Luke 1:46-55. It's noteworthy that Mary's song of praise is *sparked* by the words her cousin Elizabeth uses to greet her by, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” These are fighting words. Really. For Elizabeth and Mary, who surely knew their Jewish heroines, these words were *dangerously* evocative. In oral cultures, phrases matter. Only twice in the Hebrew Scripture were women told, “Blessed are you among

If it's hard for *us* to feel radical hope in the face of cataclysmic change, that may have something to do with where we stand in the world today. Years ago, when teaching the story of the Exodus to college students I suggested “we would be wise to feel a bit of fear as we read these passages, in the uncomfortable honesty that we today stand closer to the Egyptians than the Hebrews. In a world where many live like slaves so that a relative few can live like kings, we are among those who wear purple.”¹¹ The plagues—themselves a mini apocalyptic narrative—upend the worlds of *both* the Egyptians *and* the Hebrews, but that upending is *good news* for those who had been enslaved (although there is no lacking of murmuring among the Hebrews as they wander the wilderness in the coming years).

So where do we stand in the story of climate change? Well, most of us stand in places where the upending of the world as it is, *is not good news*. But the truth is that for most of the world's inhabitants—more viscerally acquainted than we are with the costs of our addiction to petroleum, our exploitation of animals and ecosystems, our racist objectification of our fellow humanity, and our unrelenting consumption of the planet—for most of the world's inhabitants *the continuation of the world as it is, is precisely the threat*. And the apocalyptic disruption of the status quo might well count as good news.

Unfortunately, because of how interconnected our world is, the level of disruption coming with climate change will take a steep toll on the entire web of creation. And, in many cases, the greatest toll will be exacted on those least responsible and least able to respond.

Nevertheless—and I'm being intentionally provocative here—the [Transition Movement](#)¹² dares to suggest that it's possible to *move into* the impending upending of the world that is ... as a step *toward* good news. To choose to radically simplify our lives, to break our addictions to both fossil fuel and needless material stuff, to reclaim skills needed to live lightly on Earth, to dramatically localize our lives, and to deepen bonds of genuine community—all such choices, which we can begin to make *now*, are ways to embrace apocalypse—even as our lives are upended—as bearing good news.

This is *not* to make light of the damning losses that we have bartered for these past few decades (primarily by way of corporate agendas and political inaction, but also by personal indifference and unexamined habits of greed). The losses, already underway but to be fully revealed in the decades ahead, *will* be apocalyptic: world-rending. But it is to say that, if this present world—insufferable for so much of creation—is about to be swept away, as it *needs* to be if there is to be a path forward for the whole of humanity and for the health of creation, then there *is* in that apocalypse a very severe sort of good news.

And our capacity to make the changes needed in our lives may well hinge on our ability to imagine, within the tumult of apocalypse, a whisper of good news. Not to domesticate its terror, but to taste the very real joy *that can yet be had* if we choose—in this Advent moment—to turn away (repent) from lives that trade almost entirely in death to prop up a façade of success that is coming quickly to its end.

PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

* * *

The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing climate change, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call “devotional,” I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I'd be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**. Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn(at)gmail.com**

women.” You couldn't hear the words and not have the memory of Jael and Judith come rushing at you. Jael earned them (Judges 5:24) for driving a tent peg through the head of a general who was oppressing the early Israelites. Later Judith received them (Judith 13:18) after beheading a general whose troops had besieged an Israelite town. *This phrase heralded women whose cunning and courage proved crucial in toppling oppressive power*. As a song in response to *that* greeting, the *Magnificat* is no mere wistful verse. *It is poetry promising to upend the world*.

¹¹ The imagery in these words came to me in 1996 the first time I taught this story to first-year students at Notre Dame; I've used the phrase “the ones who wear purple” to frame our entry into to the Exodus tale ever since.

¹² <http://transitionus.org/home>

Christmas: The Most Important Four Ounces in the Manger

David R. Weiss – December 26, 2018

The Gospel in Transition #4 – [Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com](http://www.davidrweiss.com)

The most important four ounces in the manger are the ones we *never* talk about. I might argue that they've *always* been most important, but in the face of climate change—and the deep transformation required in how we view the world if we hope to bequeath any semblance of functioning society to our children—these four ounces are ones we absolutely need to grapple with today.

Before I get there, though, let me make clear where I'm coming from. I regard theology as more concerned with *evocative* claims than *metaphysical* claims. I recognize many Christians think otherwise. They see the doctrine of Incarnation as a *metaphysical* truth claim: in Jesus, God became human. I don't. I see it as an *evocative* truth claim: in Jesus we see one instance (and with striking clarity) of what God's presence in our midst looks like. That will, no doubt, trouble some of my readers, while heartening others. I'm not interested in arguing which claim is more "right"—something I don't think is provable in any case. Besides, the connection I want to make with these four ounces remains powerful whether you treat it evocatively or metaphysically. But it seems important—as my blog byline suggests—that I, at least, "err on the edge of honest."

So, these four ounces. They're microbes. Itsy bitsy creepy crawlies, if you like. Point is, *without them there is no incarnation*, metaphysical, evocative, or otherwise. And I'm betting they vastly outnumber the host of angels that serenaded the shepherds on that hillside on Christmas Eve. Science tells us the average adult human is home to about *100 trillion microbes* that are *essential to our being alive*. It's a package deal: there is no such thing as a human being whose "aliveness" is not fully interwoven with these trillion-fold tiny creatures. They aid in our digestion, play key roles in our immune system, and carry out other duties essential to keeping a person alive. Jesus could not have been fully human, fully alive, without these 100 trillion microbes. As an adult, these microbes constituted about six pounds of his body weight. As a newborn, they would've already numbered in the trillions and comprised about four ounces of his six pounds of holy babyhood.¹³

Whether you prefer your incarnation metaphysical or evocative, this is a pretty astounding insight: whatever we mean when we say God became incarnate, *microbes are part of that*. Of course, the gospel writer John didn't know that science, but he captures it well when he writes: "And the Word became flesh ..." (John 1:14) The Greek word here (*sarx*/flesh) means just that: the soft fleshly substance of a living body—*whether human or animal*. True, John is thinking specifically about Jesus, but his choice of *sarx*/flesh beckons us to hear God choosing an intimacy and solidarity that is much more radical than "merely" becoming human ... more theologically evocative as well as more scientifically accurate.

Ironically, then, John's prologue (John 1:1-18) not only provides some of the key theological infrastructure for the highest reaches of the doctrine of Incarnation, identifying Jesus with the pre-existent Word and that pre-existent Word with God,¹⁴ it *also* opens up to the most expansive—the *lowest and earthiest* notion of incarnation. Later John writes, in perhaps the most well known verse in the New

¹³ I'm guessing, of course. Here's the basic calculation per evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis: 10% of the *dry* body weight of humans is comprised of microbes. Adjusting for differences in water weight by sex (adult males are 60% water; adult females are 55% water), 4% male body weight is microbial; 4.5% female body weight is microbial. I'm presuming an adult Jesus weighed about 150 pounds and a newborn about six, but the exactness of those figures is irrelevant to the point I'm making. Rob Dunn, *Every Living Thing* (New York: Collins Books, 2009), pp. 138-143, cited in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." (John 1:1-3)

Testament, “For God so loved the *world* ...” (John 3:16). The Greek word is *kosmos*, from which we get our word, *cosmos*. It means just that: the *cosmos*, the universe, or, more casually, the earth and its inhabitants. In explaining the motive behind Incarnation, John says, God loved it *all*. And, if we allow our theology to converse with our science, Incarnation becomes the truth claim that God embraces *all creation* so thoroughly as to enlist even microbes in revealing God’s love.

I think this offers several salutary insights as we try to imagine how to reposition ourselves within the world in a more harmonious and sustainable way. First, it reminds us that the scope of God’s incarnating love includes critters we don’t even think about ... and surely the many that we do. We won’t work hard to save what we don’t love, and recognizing the reach of God’s love may help lengthen the reach of our own.

Second, if incarnation itself blurs the lines between the human and the non-human world, it challenges one of the fundamental binaries that has allowed us to recklessly and dangerously exploit the rest of creation. If divinity takes on not just human life but microbial life—in the service of love—then truly the entire “world is charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerard Manley Hopkins) in ways we had never quite imagined. Indeed, our transition away from a way of life that presumes to use the world *up* as a matter of convenience hinges on breaking down the falsehood that we’re somehow set off from the non-human creation. Recognizing that Jesus—whether evocatively or metaphysically—embodies *both* is one place to start.

Third, what’s true of Jesus in his incarnate mystery is equally true of us in our more mundane humanity. (But don’t get me started, because I think the lines between incarnate mystery and mundane humanity blur—not just in Jesus, but in us, too!) In any case, this is *good news*. There are a multitude of ecosystems that we desperately need to find—feel, enact—our *deep* connection with, but we can begin right here: by acknowledging that *each of us is our own ecosystem*.

Those four ounces in the manger say something profound about God, Jesus, creation, and our place in all of it: *interwoven*. It’s high time we see that as both sacred and mundane truth.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

* * *

The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing climate change, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call “devotional,” I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I’d be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**. Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn(at)gmail.com**

Christmas and the Holy Innocents: On Shouting “Fire” in Church

David R. Weiss – January 2, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #5 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Maybe your church, like mine, seized on the Sunday following Christmas to sing an extra dose of Christmas carols, sort of a communal self-reward for having delayed our gratification throughout the season of Advent. I appreciated the chance to air out my holiday lungs on some favorite (and a couple new-to-me) songs as much as the next person. But I did have to hold back on the impulse to stand up and holler, “Fire!” in the sanctuary. I succeeded. But I’m not sure that was the right choice.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents, which recalls the infant boys slaughtered by King Herod in his paranoid—and failed—attempt to remove the threat he believed Jesus posed to imperial power,¹⁵ falls on December 28, meaning it’s almost always elided by our preference for Christmas cheer. I consider this an instance of *systemic liturgical injustice*: an important feast gets squeezed out of our awareness because we’ve been so impatient (all Advent) to celebrate Christmas, and now we have only twelve days to do our celebrating (in song, sermon, liturgy) before the liturgical calendar rushes us on into Epiphany. This year, in fact, we only get ONE Christmas Sunday—how dare we spend it contemplating the Holy Innocents.

Perhaps there was a time past when church was so much part of our daily life that we could sufficiently celebrate Christmas on the other eleven days and set aside the fourth day to pause and contemplate the lives taken in effort to suppress Christmas itself. But today, between Christmas, New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day, and then “getting back to work,” we have no time to pause for lives lost. Which is why I was so tempted to holler, “Fire!” Because pause we must.

In Matthew’s Gospel the Holy Innocents are those targeted by empire in an attempt to protect imperial power and to prevent the rise of any person who might propose a different way of being in the world. The story makes Herod the villain (and I’m hardly defending him!), but the truth in Matthew’s tale is that the slaughter of innocents is, in fact, *business as usual for empire*. We see it today—most poignantly on our southern border, but no less in the way that mass incarceration targets black communities or the way that low-intensity warfare targets civilians around the globe. And on and on. Empire today (think multinational corporations as well as political leaders) hesitates no more than Herod at protecting its power and quashing even potential threats. There are a multitude of holy innocents in our world.

But in a season of climate change, no one is more innocent than the creatures whose fate it has been to share the planet ... with us. The animal kingdom has always taken its chances on continents drifting, climate shifting, and such. Even apart from human impact, no animal species is guaranteed a free ride. But between the speed to which we’ve accelerated climate change and the extent to which we’ve remade the planet to better consume it, animals are under threat today *as never before*. So much so that we Christians ought to be rising in our pews and hollering, “Fire!” in one holy chorus of anguish and alarm.

Consider the reports coming in from across the globe. In just the last 44 years (1970-2014) the worldwide population of animals plummeted by nearly 60%; in tropical regions the population loss reached almost 90%. During the same time period, freshwater fish populations fell by 83%.¹⁶ Another study found flying insects down by 76% in German nature preserves over 27 years.¹⁷ Another one charted a recent 10-year period in New Mexico during which bird populations fell by 73%. And another

¹⁵ Matthew 2:1-18. Many question the historicity of the slaughter; there is no independent record of it outside this single biblical passage. It’s possible Matthew fashioned the tale as one strategy among others to show Jesus as a “new Moses” (compare Exodus 1:15-2:10). However, the *symbolic importance* of the Holy Innocents does not hinge on their historicity but on their place in Matthew’s gospel narrative.

¹⁶ www.worldwildlife.org/pages/living-planet-report-2018.

¹⁷ www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/oct/18/warning-of-ecological-armageddon-after-dramatic-plunge-in-insect-numbers.

reported a 98%(!) loss of bugs in the Puerto Rican rainforest over 40 years.¹⁸ Some suggest we are perched precipitously at the beginning of “the Sixth Extinction”¹⁹—although this one would be the first to have human agency as the driving factor. But regardless of whether whole species go extinct or merely find themselves genetically maimed by sheer loss of numbers and diversity, it is minimally honest to speak of a wave of ‘biological annihilation’²⁰ sweeping the planet. Almost all of it due to human impacts (consumption, land use, climate change, pollution, etc.).

Still, on December 26, nearly every news source cheerfully reported U.S. holiday spending *up* by 5.1% in 2018²¹ If that doesn’t shout, “Joy to the World,” I don’t know what does. Except, on a finite planet, already stretched *past* the breaking point that *isn’t* good news. It’s the *bleak* affirmation that the slaughter of holy innocents—driven by a commitment to preserve one way of life at the expense of countless others—continues undeterred and on a scale even Herod could not hope to achieve. *We are empire.*

Those who see this, need to start crying “Fire!” in the sanctuary. We need to do *more*, of course. *But we cannot do less.* And the longer we insist on keeping our good decorum during worship the longer we render ourselves incapable of the deeper changes that are necessary if we wish even to blunt the brute force of climate change and planetary collapse now just decades away.

Lest we presume this is “on us” as individual consumers, the truth is that the changes most urgently needed to stop this slaughter of holy innocents are at the level of industrial agriculture, corporate boardrooms, and national and international politics. But change in those arenas can—and must—come rushing upward from below. And that upward rush will only come if and when we take charge of our own lives—personally and communally as Transition Movement thinking suggests.²² AND—as we lay claim to the emotional-psychic-spiritual energy that owns the depth of loss burgeoning around us ... even during the Christmas season—perhaps especially during the Christmas season.

I’m not taking cheap shots at Christmas. Before long the apocalyptic character of climate change will capture so much of our attention that any worship at all that does not acknowledge it will be simply irrelevant. It’s time that we look at every liturgical season, every lectionary text, every familiar worship theme and image, and ask ourselves how it might nurture the imagination to weep for creation, or to defend it, or to alter our lives so as live more nearly in balance, or to face down the powers and principalities that sell slaughter these days. And I simply think the Feast of the Holy Innocents is too powerful a moment to pass over in silence because we’d rather sing carols.

Earth’s creatures are dying. At an unfathomable rate. Because of human sin. And their deaths foreshadow the world we are preparing for our grandchildren. That world is *rushing at us*, starting yesterday. The very least we can do is holler, “Fire!” And we may be surprised at what more we’re capable of, once that word crosses our lips.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait

* * *

The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing climate change, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call “devotional,” I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I’d be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com.** Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn(at)gmail.com**

¹⁸ <https://truthout.org/articles/from-insects-to-starfish-were-edging-toward-biological-annihilation>.

¹⁹ *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert. www.pulitzer.org/winners/elizabeth-kolbert.

²⁰ The phrase appears to have been coined by Paul Ehrlich. www.pnas.org/content/pnas/114/30/E6089.full.pdf.

²¹ <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/press-releases/mastercard-spendingpulse-u-s-retail-sales-grew-5-1-percent-this-holiday-season>.

²² <https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/what-is-transition>.

After Epiphany: Home by Another Route

David R. Weiss – January 9, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #6 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

We celebrated Epiphany this past Sunday. You know, the journey of the magi, the star in the sky, the three gifts. And, of course, the palace encounter with King Herod who feigns reverence for this rumored child-king in hopes of tricking the magi to come back and reveal the infant's whereabouts. The tale is perhaps apocryphal: the resulting slaughter of the holy innocents is attested nowhere outside Matthew's Gospel. Indeed, it may be an evangelical fiction crafted by Matthew to evoke the memory of Moses' birth story in his Jewish readers. Either way, the account meshes with Herod's well-known paranoia. He routinely killed anyone he saw as a political rival—he ordered the political execution of *hundreds of persons*, including a brother-in-law, a mother-in-law, his second wife, and three of his own children. Whether his well-attested ruthless paranoia was, in fact, turned on Jesus, the tale is of a piece with Herod's character.²³

For a moment, then, Jesus' young life hangs in the balance. Thankfully the magi, having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, *journeyed home by another route*. There are a thousand points on which history turns. In Matthew's Gospel the magi's decision to go home by another route is one of those points. *For us, too*. Which is why I'm spending the year thinking, writing, talking about climate change and Christian faith. Following any of the familiar routes forward will end catastrophically ... if not for us, then for generations to come and for countless companion creatures on the planet. *History will turn on the route we choose*. I think the Transition Movement²⁴ offers a promising way to go "home by another route"—and one in deep alignment with core Christian values.

The Transition Movement begins by acknowledging three daunting problems we face. (1) Our lives—our desires-expectations-cultural worldview—presume an unsustainable rate of consumption of a finite resource, fossil fuel. Whether because we'll eventually exhaust the resource itself, or exhaust the easily accessible sources, leading to *steep* increases in cost, our fossil fuel-fed lives are about to become fossils themselves. (2) Even if oil weren't finite, the atmosphere's capacity to preserve a livable planet for us *is*. Climate change is the result of industrial, transportation-heavy, convenience-and-consumption-driven lives that ignore the impact of our choices on the planet. (3) Our lives are also entangled in a global financial system that banks on unending growth (excluding the environmental costs of doing business on a finite planet from its market calculus). It trades on an increasingly "magical" notion of money—even as it heightens the gap between rich and poor. All three of these out-of-balance relationships are evidence of human indifference to finitude—and they are about to have a catastrophic collision with reality.

These crises are interwoven and together they "make sense" as manifestations of human sin: our readiness to break relationship with God, others, world, and self in pursuit of a false notion of reality in which we are "godlike": disconnected from each other and the world, able to pursue "abundance" for ourselves (or our in-groups) without need of others.²⁵ Moreover each crisis now runs on a decidedly structural inertia that requires little more than passive human complicity to keep churning away. In this sense each crisis is now upheld by what Paul referred to as "powers and principalities" (Eph. 6:12)—not supernatural demonic forces,

²³ Matthew 2:1-18. For one view of how this tale fits into Herod's larger story (and a view sympathetic to its plausible historicity) see here: www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2009/12/08/The-Slaughter-of-the-Innocents-Historical-Fact-or-Legendary-Fiction.aspx.

²⁴ My discussion of Transition here is drawn primarily from the Transition U.S. website. See the links to peak oil, climate change, and the economic crisis here: www.transitionus.org/why-transition and the description of its Guiding Principles here: www.transitionus.org/initiatives/7-principles. Also, Timothy Gorrige & Rosie Beckham, *The Transition Movement for Churches: A Prophetic Imperative for Today*, London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2013, pp. 1-13; and Ruah Swennerfelt, *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith*, Quaker Institute for the Future, 2016, pp. 45-49.

²⁵ I mean "godlike" in an entirely wrong-headed and wrong-hearted way, imaging "god" on our terms, rather than God's. Similarly, any pursuit of "abundance" in isolation from the web of being—from genuine relationships with fellow humans-creatures-ecosystems—is "abundance" only in an illusory and ultimately self-contradicting manner.

but rather the mundane, social-systemic, supra-human forces that get embedded in social arrangements, cultures, industrialized systems and so forth.²⁶

The Transition Movement’s response is also in line with Christian convictions—albeit ones that have often atrophied for lack of exercise in our Christian lives, both personally and communally. Recognizing that the three-fold crisis noted above *demand*s our transition to a life that uses far less energy, depends far less on an extractive economy, and is resilient enough to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions on a climate-changed planet, Transition invites us, as it were, *to be of good cheer*. It asserts:

(1) Since these transitions are really non-negotiable on a finite planet, let’s embrace them thoughtfully rather than ignore them until they’re thrust upon us by crashing systems. Transition holds that a different world *is* possible—and that there are tangible, practical steps that can begin the journey there.

(2) Let’s fashion more resilient communities—specifically working to establish systems/services that can withstand the inevitable shock of planetary systems that *will* be rocked by rapid change in the decades ahead. Such changes will include weather patterns, growing seasons, land use, and population movements. Globalized/centralized systems will be less able to respond than localized systems that are cooperatively networked together. Thus, resilience includes re-localizing our economy whenever possible, building deeper relationships with those who produce the goods we need, and sharing skills that can empower us to live simpler and more sustainable lives. (Re-localizing also involves re-localizing our sources of fun/entertainment.)

(3) Most fundamentally, Transition says, *pursuing these goals will lead to lives that are richer in both meaning and joy*. Lives that reflect what Jesus promises as “life abundant.” (John 10:10) Some of this happens “naturally”: the by-product of community-building activities. Some of it involves an “Inner Transition”: intentionally re-fashioning a worldview in which we are AT HOME on a finite planet, joyfully knit into community across diversity, and happy to pursue meaning and purpose through art, knowledge, and relationship rather than material consumption. Given that our inner worldview is the terrain in question, this re-fashioning is minimally psychological-philosophical in nature, though I think it is most effectively accomplished on a spiritual level. Not that it must be Christian or even explicitly religious, but such a transformation in worldview—as needed for sustained and abundant life on a finite planet—*requires roots in awe and wonder*. And those roots grow deep in psychic soil that is fluent in a sense of the sacred.

“Tomorrow” is the country to which we (and our children’s children) are heading home. We have long needed (for numerous generations!) a path forward far different than the one we’ve been on. Transition can take us home by another route. It’s time we begin that journey.

PS: I’ve set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in this area. I hope you’ll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith

* * *

The Gospel in Transition by David R. Weiss is a year of reflections on facing climate change, finding hope, and the alchemy of Christian community. My weekly essays consider climate change, Transition, and faith—using biblical images, liturgical seasons, science, and theology, as conversation partners. Writing in a voice a bit too restless to call “devotional,” I aim to be insightfully evocative and usefully provocative. I’d be delighted to have you join me on this journey. **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**. Thanks for reading and see you next week! **drw59mn(at)gmail.com**

²⁶ Paul declares that in our struggle to be faithful, we contend not merely with flesh and blood—the frailties and temptations of our own humanity and the obstructions of others—but against “principalities and powers.” Though his words were originally read to reflect a worldview that saw human activity beset by demonic influences, a number of twentieth century scholars (Jaques Ellul, William Stringfellow, John Howard Yoder, and Walter Wink) argued Paul was making a much more sophisticated and insightful observation: calling out our capacity to set up empires, societies, cultures, that establish whole systems with an inertia that is greater than any individual person—an inertia that *seemingly takes on a life of its own*. Not a consciousness, per se, but an *institutionalized energy* that can *will* forward a set of assumptions that carry destructive consequences.